



# The Purr-Loined Letter: Another Case of Feline Absence

by Kári Driscoll

## 14.

It seems everywhere you look cats are not there. No doubt it was always thus, but clearly there are moments in history when the problem of feline absence is felt more acutely than in others. One such is the interwar period in Europe, when the ontological and epistemological status of cats becomes a matter of great concern for writers and thinkers. Hence, when, in November 1920, Rilke boldly declared that “il n’y a pas de chats” [*there are no cats*],<sup>1</sup> he was merely channelling a more general sense that the existence and whereabouts of felines were becoming increasingly uncertain.

Some sixteen years later (roughly eighty in cat years), Rilke’s dictum would be given a more geographically specific, or some might say incoherent, twist by none other than James Joyce, who, during a sojourn in Denmark in 1936, wrote to his grandson Stephen to say that “there are no cats in Copenhagen.”<sup>2</sup> What might have brought about this Scandinavian brand of feline absence? This was

not the first cat-themed letter Joyce had sent Stephen. A few weeks earlier, while still in the north of France, Joyce had sent him a story about the wily mayor of Beaugency, who tricks the devil into building a bridge across the Loire by sacrificing a cat. Apparently, Joyce had also sent his grandson a “small cat filled with sweets” and was evidently hoping to repeat the gesture upon his arrival in Denmark but this plan was thwarted by the lack of suitably hollow cats. This, at least, is the explanation given in the preface to the illustrated edition of the letter, which was recently published under somewhat dubious circumstances. The Zurich James Joyce Archive, where the letter is housed, issued a statement saying the text had been published without their knowledge or consent, and that the publisher had effectively purloined the letter; the publisher, in turn, insisted that the text was in the public domain, calling the Archive’s meddling “unlawful” and “morally reprehensible.”<sup>3</sup> Be that as it may, the preface ventures an interpretation of the story, such as it is, namely that it presents a criticism of capitalist “fat cats.” Elsewhere, the book’s publisher, Anastasia Herbert, is quoted as saying that Joyce is “commenting on fascism, even in its guise as communism, with the ‘red boys’ carrying out the orders of the Politburo.”<sup>4</sup> Maybe so, but this still doesn’t explain the lack of cats in Copenhagen in 1936. I wonder if perhaps it doesn’t have something to do Erwin Schrödinger, whose infamous thought experiment had been published the year before and was designed to highlight some of the apparent absurdities of the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics.<sup>5</sup>

Schrödinger’s cat is simultaneously the most famous and most frequently misconstrued thought experiment in modern physics. The setup is as simple as

it is perverse: A cat is placed inside a steel box, along with “diabolical” device [Höllmaschine] consisting of a Geiger counter, a small amount of radioactive substance, and a flask of hydrocyanic acid. There is a fifty-fifty chance of one of the atoms decaying over the course of an hour. If that happens, the device is rigged to break the flask, thus killing the cat. In the event that no atom decays within an hour, the cat lives to die another day. According to quantum mechanics, the variables of the system (in this case, decayed/dead vs. not decayed/alive) are indeterminate or “blurred” [verschmiert] up until the moment of measurement, at which point one of the possible outcomes will turn out to have been the case. Karen Barad has helpfully outlined some of the popular misconceptions of Schrödinger’s paradox, e.g. that the cat is *both* alive *and* dead at the same time, or that it is *either* alive *or* dead but we just don’t know which (i.e. that it is a purely epistemological problem), or what she calls “the bizarre, metaphysically hyperschizophrenic ‘many worlds’ interpretation in which each measurement that is performed splits the world into multiple parallel universes that are realizations of each possibility and are entirely inaccessible to one another (in which case the cat in question is alive in some worlds and not in others).”<sup>6</sup> Schrödinger’s concern is that while this is all well and good at the microscopic level, if quantum behaviors “leak” into the macroscopic domain we end up with a cat “smeared out” [verschmiert] in all directions, and that can’t be right. Hence, Barad writes, “the correct way to understand what this superposition (or ‘blurring’) stands for, is to understand that *the cat’s fate is entangled with the radioactive source*—and not merely epistemically, as Schrödinger and others suggest, but *ontically*; that is, the cat and the atom do not *have* separately determinate states of *existence*,

and, indeed, there is no determinately bounded and propertied entity that we normally identify with the word ‘cat,’ independently of some measurement that resolves the indeterminacy and specifies the appropriate referents for the concepts of ‘cat’ and ‘life state’.”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, unless you can figure out how to measure them, there are no cats in the Copenhagen Interpretation. Perhaps Joyce just wasn’t looking hard enough. But then, as Carlo Rovelli says, “at an elementary level there are no cats [...], but we do not for this reason cease to bother with cats.”<sup>8</sup> The same, of course, is true of Copenhagen and all the other places where cats confront us with their absence.



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- 1 Rainer Maria Rilke, preface to *Mitsou: Forty Images*, by Balthus, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984), 9–13, here: 13. On this dictum, see Dominic Pettman, “Electric Caresses,” *Cabinet: A Quarterly of Art and Culture*, no. 59 (Fall 2015), 34–38; and Kári Driscoll, “‘Il n’y a pas de chats’: Feline Absence and/as the Space of Zoopoetics,” in *Texts, Animals, Environments: Zoopoetics and Ecopoetics*, ed. Frederike Middelhoff et al. (Freiburg i.Br.: Rombach, 2019), 159–74.
- 2 James Joyce, *The Cats of Copenhagen*, illus. Casey Sorrow (New York: Scribner, 2012).
- 3 “James Joyce children’s book sparks feud.” *BBC News*, February 10, 2012.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Erwin Schrödinger, “Die gegenwärtige Situation in der Quantenmechanik,” *Die Naturwissenschaften* 23, no. 48 (1935), 807–12.
- 6 Karen Barad, Living in a Posthumanist Material World: Lessons from Schrödinger’s Cat,” in *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology*, ed. Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 165–76, here: 169.
- 7 Ibid., 170; original emphasis.
- 8 Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, trans. Erica Segre and Simon Carnell (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 147.