

## *Nominalist things*

HENRY FITZGERALD

*Scene: bedroom in an Austrian mansion, c.1937*

*Gretel.* I don't like his manner.

*Kurt.* His attitude worries me.

*Lisel.* I am troubled by a general air of foreboding.

*Maria.* Yes, children: my life is also, on occasion, clouded by manners, attitudes and airs of foreboding.

*Brigita.* So what do you do about it?

*Maria.* Why, I simply think of nominalistically respectable things instead.

*Von Trapp children (together).* Nominalistically respectable things? What are they?

*Maria.* Well, let me explain ...

Properties, counterparts, tropes and relations,  
Promises, lies and confused explanations,  
Numbers and rhomboids, and this very list:  
These are all items which do not exist.

Space-time and classes and Beethoven's seventh,  
Earthquakes and sets and July the eleventh,  
Are, like the flutter of butterflies' wings,  
Nominalistically dubious things ...

In my calm and  
Lucid moments,  
When I'm feeling fine,  
I scorn the existence of all of this stuff,  
I talk about all the time.

*Maria.* Come on children, tell me some nominalistically respectable things.

*Kurt (doubtfully).* Er ... stones? Concrete?

*Lisel (even more doubtfully).* Electrons?

*Maria.* Well – uh – yes, but there's much more to it than that ...

Raindrops and temporal slices of kittens,  
 Every third stitch in a pair of red mittens,  
 Mereological bundles of string:  
 These are all perfectly reasonable things.

Barmaids and walnuts and sand that's been hosed off,  
 Silver and gold and the fusion composed of  
 Alpha Centauri and Hitler's left knee:  
 All of these objects are okay by me ...

Things substantial,  
 Made of matter:  
 They are better, far,  
 Than some abstract nonsense but one step removed  
 From Rorty and Derrida.

*Frideric.* Exoskeletons!

*Kurt.* Time-slices of undetached heads!

*Lisel* (getting carried away): Statues of Rottweilers! Dragons!

Remaining von Trapp children (together). Dragons??

*Maria.* It's all right, children! One need have no quarrel with dragons, qua nominalist! The number two would be a far greater stain on the world's ontological purity than a mere dragon!

Hobbits and wizards and weapons enchanted:  
 Towering trees which Galadriel planted,  
 Rhine maidens, giants and Nibelung rings:  
 These are a few of my favourite things.

Underground kingdoms and magical potions,  
 Atomless matter and bottomless oceans:  
 Though they're not terribly easy to find,  
 Nominalistically, no one should mind.

Can you touch it?  
 When you hit it,  
 Does it make a 'ping'?  
 If you answered 'yes', then, by golly, it's real:  
 It gets to be called a THING.

*Research School of Social Sciences  
 Australian National University  
 Canberra ACT 0200, Australia*