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:
Towerling 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.