

Tractatus Fuselagico-Umbilicus

Louis Witteringswine

1. The world is full of stuff.

Die Welt is voller Zeug.

2. Stuff comes in different shapes and sizes.

Zeug gibt es in verschiedenen Groessen und Formen.

3. Whacking great chunks of stuff are made from itty bits of stuff. Itty bits come in different shapes and sizes.

Motzegrosse Klumpen von Zeug werden von Minizeugs erzeugt. Minizeugs gibt es in verschiedenen Groessen und Formen.

4. *Possibility* consists in the fact that a rhinoceros can be stuffed under the table. Russell can stuff it.

Die Moeglichkeit besteht darin, dass ein Rhinoceros unterm Tisch erzeugt werden kann. Russell packt es.

4.1 Nobody ever saw an itty bit.

Keiner hat je ein Minizeug gesehen.

4.2 Stuff is all over. Everything comes in different shapes and sizes.

Zeug ist ueberzeugend. Alles gibt es in verschiedenen Groessen und Formen.

4.3 The present King of France isn't stuffy.

Der Koenig von Frankreich hat nicht das Zeug dazu.

4.31 (Psychology is really just a lot of crap.)

(Die Psychologie ist in Wirklichkeit nur dummes Zeug.)

5. 2 B V 0 2 B: that is the question.

2 B V 0 2 B: das ist hier die Frage.

5.1 Logic is whacking great.

Die Logik macht geil.

6. A wet bird does not fly at night. (This is the meaning of life.)

Ein nasser Vogel fliegt nicht bei Nacht. (Das ist der Sinn des Lebens.)

7.

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see also Witteringswine's **Philosophical Tribulations** at <http://www.flashq.org/pt-01.pdf>

A note on the translations.

The common title is not Witteringswine's own. The original *Unlogisch-Politisches Doppelbesteuerungsabkommen* was rejected by the first translator as impossibly cumbersome. The first translation [presented on the previous page], by Ogden Nash, is generally acknowledged to be the more literary of the two; the greatest tribute to it being that the work came to be referred to, even by the author himself, simply as *The Umbilicus*. However, with the passage of time, several grammatical ineptitudes in the original translation became apparent. A collaborative effort by two noted scholars resulted in a revised translation, now widely referred to as Peaches & Guinness. Received opinion is that Peaches & Guinness is technically accurate but less savory. I fondly recall Elizabeth herself once remarking that the newer translation failed to render the quintessentially teutonic *je ne sais quois* of Witteringswine's prose.

One of the most important Witteringswinery doctrines--the nature of possibility--as well as Russell's now-famous response to it, has been the subject of intense and on-going philosophical debate. It is a contentious formulation in the original, and no other passage of the *Umbilicus* gave the translators as much difficulty as this one. The original runs: 4. *Die Moeglichkeit besteht darin, dass ein Rhinoceros unterm Tisch erzeugt werden kann. Russell packt es.* From posthumously published memoirs, letters, and notebooks, we know that the rhinoceros under the table was the stuff of intense discussion between the two philosophers, and especially whether it could be deduced from the rest of the stuff in Witteringswine's rooms in Trinity, Witteringswine maintaining to the end that it could not.

The verb *erzeugen* would usually be translated by the English verb "produce;" the same verb appears in proposition 3 where it is rendered 'made from': "Whacking great chunks of stuff are made from itty bits of stuff." Peaches & Guinness rendered this '...made up of itty bits...' As was clear even in the first translation, this ordinary use was not what Witteringswine intended in proposition 4: one does not 'produce' a rhinoceros, much less 'make one up'. Odgen Nash drew the obvious inference that *erzeugen* is etymologically related to *Zeug*, the stuff of which the world is made, and thus arrived at the translation "... a rhinoceros can be stuffed under the table."

By the time Peaches & Guinness came together, it was becoming apparent that many *Umbilical* pronouncements have not only a logical but also a theological significance. While Ogden Nash captured the rhinoceros in substance [viz. *Zeug* or stuff], it was left to later commentators to make explicit the other dimension latent in Witteringswine's oracular statements.

Peaches & Guinness substantially differed from Ogden Nash in proposition 4 and thereby touched off a brushfire of further academic debate. "*Possibility* consists in the fact that a rhinoceros can be *conceived* under the table," was the new version. While admittedly less literally faithful to the exact wording of the original, it has the virtue of drawing out the connection, obvious to English-speakers, between "conception" as the logical structure of the Concept, on the one hand, and, on the other, "conception" as the infusion of the Divine into a mundane vessel--e.g., the Mother of Christ, immaculate conception, and so on.

Thus, "a rhinoceros can be *conceived* under the table" was Witteringswine's poetic way of saying that, while God does not appear in the world, the Divine is nonetheless unspeakably manifest in stuff. That this insight would have been lost on Russell, atheist and digamist that he was, was not lost on Witteringswine. The remarkable thing is the manner in which Witteringswine was able to stuff both insights, the logical and the theological, into a rhinoceros. As Witteringswine himself would later say, "my work is to be understood as bad poetry."

How now to render Witteringswine's terse comment on Russell's relationship with the rhinoceros? In the original, *Russell packt es*. The newer translation, "... a rhinoceros can be conceived under the table. *Russell can pull it off*," is certainly the more exact of the two, grammatically considered. In the event, Russell did induce the rhinoceros to come out from under the table. The earlier translation, "Russell can stuff it," was challenged by earlier commentators as having read too much into it, but in a paper subsequently published under the title "*You Blockheads Missed the Point*", Witteringswine made the following additional assertions: 1) The point of the *Umbilicus* was ethical; 2) there are no propositions of ethics; 3) ethics manifests itself in propositions of the form "Russell is a randy bugger"; and 4) the previous three propositions were clearly shown, not said, by their conspicuous absence from the *Umbilicus*. Witteringswine concluded by reading the Bible to them: "Yes, Russell can do it, but what would it avail him? 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity' --Eccles."