

Seeing Things As They Return to Themselves

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What are the themes of Jaroslav Alt's paintings? What kind of experience can we get from this exhibition? We can see a wave, an islet, a cloud, a horizon, the Czech volcano 'Železná hůrka' (Little Iron Mountain) – almost unknown due to our troubled past. But also that which "seeped out" of closed and half-opened letters, and after all maybe even divinity – "I am that I am".

When hearing the word "thing" in its broadest sense, in the sense in which "things" also refer to the "first and last things", we daresay: Jaroslav Alt paints *things*. Or not so? There are an array of clouds, islets, even horizons, often portrayed using various techniques. Are they different from one another, or do they simply represent a few things painted multiple times? What then would he paint into them? I suppose, Jaroslav Alt paints *things as they return to themselves*.

However, how is this to be understood? How can things "return to themselves"? How can we catch them in the midst of the action, treasure them and subsequently represent them in this very character of theirs? What kind of specific "attitude" does the painter adopt?

After having gone a long way in his life, this kind of "attitude" representing not just the basic principal of his work, but also of human life in general, was adopted by J. W. *Goethe*. He described it as "Frömmigkeit", which is an expression from within the context of German protestantism and in that respect it is rightly translated as "piety". But that this translation captures little of what *Goethe* means will be manifested through this elementary reasoning of mine.

Goethe made this "attitude" the basis for his late "Entsagungslehre" – *teaching on renunciation*, which stands in the sharpest possible opposition to the conviction, increasingly vigorously promoted by modernity and now clearly prevailing, that true humanity is realized only through an all-transforming and most effective technological self-provision of man.

Goethe "expressed" this "Frömmigkeit" – piety – by a remarkable and in this simplified form hardly comprehensible maxim: *wanting without succeeding, succeeding through one's not-wanting*.¹

¹ Cp: „Das ganze Leben besteht aus Wollen und Nicht-Vollbringen, Vollbringen und Nicht-Wollen.“

Goethe, J. W., *Maximen und Reflexionen*, Hrsg. G. Müller, Alfred Kröner Verlag, Stuttgart 1943, p. 23, maxima 126. (hereinafter referred to as *Maxims and Reflections*)

Translator's Note: Whenever appropriate, the translator used the English version of Goethe's 'Maxims and Reflections' by Elisabeth Stopp, Penguin Books Ltd., London 1998.

It may be understood, from the character of the *maxim*, that this peculiar *wanting notwanting* – if I may say so temporarily – is not a single act among other acts. It is rather an *element* which, despite being constantly threatened and concealed by the *arrogance* (hybris) of the human pursuit of self-provision, which lusts for control over everything, permeates and embraces all human "activities" as their original and general purpose, for which they are yet always happening, and which the author must respect – no matter how laborious that might be – should his work be *genuine*, therefore *justified*. Let us try to approach this element a little further:

As a whole, Goethe's maxim testifies about *wanting* – Wollen – about striving, the clash of forces, desire and aggrandizement. However, it does not mean striving *for this and that*; by doing so, after all, we would self-willingly *consummate the meaning* of the word, by providing it with concreteness from within ourselves. Did not *Goethe* admonish us: "Nicht-Vollbringen" – not to succeed! On the contrary, in the midst of what we encounter – forgetting about ourselves, so to speak – we should "just" *open* ourselves, and *by and in* this openness *devote* ourselves vigilantly to what we encounter and *abide in this vigilant devotion* – "Nicht-Wollen", *wanting nothing*. That is why he describes elsewhere – in maxim 77 – this *not-wanting wanting as the* "greatest peace of mind".²

It may not, perhaps, be difficult to see that *Gelassenheit* is an *inherent feature* of *Goethe's wanting not-wanting*, pervading the German way of thinking since *Master Eckhart*, *Gelassenheit* – meekness or resignation – through which, as the most *gentle indigency* (Armut), one matures while diverting oneself from the animal world to unity with God, who is seen – corresponding to such a diversion – as *nothingness* (Nichts), *wasteland* (Wüste), or *abyss* (Abgrund). Certainly. Goethe's *wanting not-wanting*, indeed, comprises the feature of *surrender*. However, the "outcome", so to speak, of such *resignation* (*Gelassenheit*) is to be understood differently in Goethe. In maxim 77, he says of *piety* (Frömmigkeit), of this *wanting not-wanting*, that it is a *means* (Mittel) and not an *end* (Zweck),³ which is in harmony with the fact that he often referred to it as "*Naturfrömmigkeit*" – *respect for nature in semantic accord with deity* – which none of the German mystics would ever say, but also that it concerns the "greatest peace of mind", which is not that it would be the goal in itself, but rather a kind of peace "to (at last; LB) *attain the highest degree of culture*".⁴ Therefore, since our ultimate entity is not the all-transforming

² Cp: „Frommigkeit ist kein Zweck, sondern ein Mittel, um durch die reinste Gemütsruhe zur höchsten Kultur zu gelangen.“ Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, p. 15, maxim 77.

³ The following maxim 78 (Ibid), actually, abruptly remarks that: "This is why we may say that those who parade piety as a purpose and an aim mostly turn into hypocrites."

⁴ Cp: note 2.

self-provision, but this very *wanting not-wanting*, if we abandon ourselves to it, we do not find ourselves in a worldless nothingness but, on the contrary, we are addressed – as if by a *gift*, because then we suddenly happen to be in accord with our character – by things of this world in the meaning they (originally) used to bear, *when they simply were here with us*. In the meaning they bear not *for* us, or *on their own*, but *with us*. They speak to us *intimately*. If they speak to us *intimately*, if they speak to us *through being here with us*, they have *returned to themselves*.

Today, there is a fury all around the world, whether on a small or a bigger scale, urging people towards self-affirmation and self-provision. Everything is being transformed by it, resulting in confusing disarrangement. It makes it impossible to perceive things in their *intimacy*, in their *return to themselves*. However, there are cracks through which they radiate....

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Translated by Jan Fér