

Pawel Althamer

'Wir brauchen noch einen Rattenfänger'

“For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,
Joining the town and just at hand,
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and new;
The sparrows were brighter then
 peacocks here,
And their dogs outran our fallow deer,
And honey-bees had lost their stings,
And horses were born with eagles' wings;
And just as I became assured
My lame foot would be speedily cured,
The music stopped and I stood still,
And found myself outside the hill,
Left alone against my will,
To go now limping as before,
And never hear of that country more!”

Robert Browning: *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*:
A Child's Story, first published 1849, England
www.ims.uni-stuttgart.de/~jonas/browning.html

Browning, like many before and after, uses a mediaeval folktale to talk about liberation, greed, fantasy and fear in his contemporary world. As Brecht, Apollinaire, Marina Tsvetaeva and others, he takes liberties with the Pied Piper/Rattenfänger tale in order to speak about something else. For this figure of the stranger, the classic outsider who arrives from nowhere and disappears just as mysteriously, is a deep-rooted trope for societal disturbance. He embodies both

the threat and the promise of the unknown, his skill as an artist and provider of public service (clearing out the rats) is balanced by his steadfast rejection of the burghers attempts to lower his payment and his elegant punishment of their deceit (leading the children into the mountain). As a metaphor, the Pied Piper cuts an uncertain figure. He can be understood as both Christ and The Devil, or the Sun and Death, at one and the same time. He seems to contain both life-giving and life-taking possibilities and even in his powerful rendition of the lame boy's sorrow, Browning does not clarify whether it is a delusion or not.

It is precisely this ambivalence of identity that secures a relationship between our piping hero or villain and the work of Pawel Althamer, one that I will expand on in this short text. Given the instability of the signifier “Pied Piper”, and also given that he performs the role of both outsider and popular leader (as charmer and avenger of injustice), he seems consummately appropriate to use as a way of imagining what Althamer does and could do. To start with, any close encounter with a work of Pawel Althamer is always slightly destabilising. We are never quite sure which side he is on, or which point he is making. When he climbs a tree and lives in his home-made arboreal shelter for hours, even days, we don't know if he is inviting us to join him