About the Verb "To Want"

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I was watching masons build a wall of solid stone; naturally I gave them some advice, and I inquired as to how many children they had, what their opinions were on world affairs and similar matters, but mainly I hoped to sniff out information on the building of stone walls and how one goes about it.

"Hell," the younger and more skillful one said, as with the help of an old uncle of a hod carrier he placed a new stone on top, "that don't want to go there."

"Must be a different one wants to go there," the old uncle with a pipe said, and he did a little hard thinking abut it over the heap of rough stones. "Maybe this one wants to." And he hoisted that stone, accommodating its wish, and set it in its proper place.

"That one wants to go there, all right," the first man said, "but it's got its butt in the wrong place. Turn it around, it wants to sit on its butt."

This was done, and the stone sat on its butt, in accordance with its secret wish.

"Right," the mason said, "but this here potbelly wants to come off." And he took a chisel and struck the potbelly which wanted to come off. And then this stone fell into the place to which it had felt summoned, firmly, easily, and with an obviously satisfied expression. And so it went, stone after stone, until each ashlar sat in its proper place, just where it wanted to be, to last forever with, as we say, stony inflexibility; and that's when I discovered that in order to build a stone wall, it is necessary to fulfill thousands of wishes of stones that want to become part of a firm and indestructible wall.

This verb "to want" is not, of course, peculiar to masonry; people who work with wood find that this lath wants to be a bi shorter, and that board over there wants to be planed; in the timber business, a tree will want to fall on this side and not over there, where it could damage the undergrowth; in tailoring, this jacket wants to be taken in just a bit, and so on. For in every occupation involving matter, things not only have their own independent existence, but also their own desires, which it is advisable to

satisfy; for let it be known that only then will a good, solid piece of work ensue, serving its purpose as it should.

You can explain this expression in a variety of ways, a philosophical voluntarism, if necessary, or as old-fashioned animism; but I think it bears witness to something else, to a certain optimism that blossoms in our midst despite all our difficulties and misery. It is the belief that a stone has a desire to be set in place so as to become a worthwhile, contributing part of a wall; belief in the stone's not being imbued with a malicious desire to shake itself loose or to protrude out of line or to otherwise resist the human's attempt to make a piece of wall out of it. If a jacket wants, as a tailor says, to be taken n just a bit, this means that said jacket has absolutely no intention of choking the man at the armholes or of in any way embittering him towards life, but rather that the jacket wants to fit like a shell and to add beauty to the man's form. A jacket has a good and amenable will towards man. A fallen tree doesn't want to crush the undergrowth, for it wants to fall smartly and harmlessly; there would be a terrible pessimism in the thought of lumberjacks presupposing that a tree would want to fall right on top of smaller trees, on purpose. There is a tacit assumption, in all human endeavor, that matter truly wants to be what can be made of it, fully and insofar as is reasonably possible.

It is only in human affairs that we don't have this optimistic faith in the objective good will of things; we don't say that import duties want to be lowered, for example, or that sugar wants to be cheaper. Only we ourselves do the quarreling over such things as these; they themselves say nothing to us.