

Translated extract from

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I'm Proposing that We Kiss

Translated by Isabel Cole

8.

There's no way back, they say? If I'm not mistaken, that's all there is. What lies before us, the future, is so uncertain, so indefinite. A nail-biter with endless possibilities. No one knows what will come. But anyone can win the jackpot in last week's lottery. The past is paradise. Whatever was, at least it no longer *is*, and what happened yesterday can't do much harm. At the same time, it gives everyone free rein for little embellishments, interpretations that put everything in a better light, rereadings, omissions, abridgements, elaborations – the world is your oyster. If you want to change it, stick to your past and keep your hands off the future.

That, if you like, was the gist of my friend Moses' philosophy, which I found quite enlightening at the time. Moses' real name was Jan – Jan Breuer – and like me he was a first-year philosophy student at the Humboldt University in Berlin. A guy who didn't exactly make things easy for his professors. He was, oddly enough, a passionate mini-golfer, but he made up his own rules; he filmed little home movies which he always ran backwards; and he wore his clothes inside-out as a matter of principle, aesthetic rather than political, he insisted. As opposed to Ernst Bloch's "The Principle of Hope", which he found unproductive, he called his philosophy "The Principle of Ex Post Facto". The often underhanded use of the ex post facto was, he believed, the dominant philosophy of all times.

He could cite examples endlessly. The most banal events were touted ex post facto as mankind's hours of glory, turning points of history or life's fateful moments. Be it the ex post facto recasting of a soapbox orator and deadbeat named Jesus as the son of God; be it the ex post facto non-destruction of Kafka's works; be it the ex post facto consignment of a recently-beloved girlfriend to the ranks of the insufferable; be it the discovery of America, when Columbus' navigation error caused the indigenous people to be known ex post facto and to this day as Indians; be it Stalin's positively exemplary *modus operandi* of airbrushing, ex post facto, former comrades-in-arms out of group photos, until, ex post facto, he himself was airbrushed away.

Everything happened ex post facto. Death, of course, which always occurs ex post facto. Life, which can only be looked back on ex post facto. Happiness, perceived only ex post facto as happiness. Love, which exists solely for its ex post facto idealization.

"And sex?" I asked one time. "That's not so great ex post facto."

"That," Moses admitted, "is completely incomprehensible ex post facto – and thus no subject for my philosophy."

When we started university in 1987, the study of philosophy in the GDR, Marxist-Leninist philosophy, was little more than the usual rickety, pious phrase-mongering: completely regimented, politically suspect, micromanaged by narrow minds, basically a degree course for aspiring apparatchiks, but infiltrated now and again by stray oddballs like Moses and me. The seminars were often as comical as they were depressing.

Monday mornings at 7 there was an honest-to-goodness “Dia-Mat” seminar, dialectical materialism – this at an hour when I couldn’t do more than breathe. Professor Scheel was a grey-haired gnome who read every sentence from his notes in a droning voice that put everyone to sleep (in the fatal sense, I sometimes feared) except, unfortunately, himself. The laws of historical development, the progress from a lower social order to a higher one, the development of the productive forces, the unity and conflict of opposites, quantities constantly transforming into new qualities, the character of the epoch, being determining consciousness, the necessary transition from capitalism to socialism – a shilly-shally of shapeless terms that I much appreciated for letting the mind drift up and away into fabulous realms.

“The whole approach is wrong,” said Moses.

A lot of people were saying that. But I knew Moses wasn’t just saying it, he meant it.

“You have a question?” Scheel interrupted himself and my meditation in the nimbus of Nirvana.

“I have a comment,” said Moses. “The laws of historical development and the character of the epoch are all very well and good. But no one has a clue what tomorrow will bring.”

The professor looked up. “Is that so, Herr Breuer? How nice that you obviously know something no one else does. But without a future, you’re dead. Or do you get on a train without expecting to arrive at a certain place in a certain future? Have you stopped drinking because it’s not guaranteed to quench your thirst? Do you speak without expecting to be heard?”

“How’s that? What?” asked Moses.

We all laughed; the professor chuckled briefly. Then he explained in a weary voice that dialectics naturally couldn’t concern themselves with all chance occurrences and contingencies, but only with the essential laws of development. Once the great philosopher Hegel was challenged by a colleague named Wilhelm Traugott Krug to deduce the nature of his, Krug’s, quill pen from the general speculative concepts. Hegel replied that first he’d

determine the laws of the cosmos, history and the mind. If there was time later on, he might take on Krug's pen as well. That, said Scheel, said Hegel, is foolish thinking, far below philosophy's horizon.

Halfway awake, I took a different view.

"Sometimes it's a pen, sometimes it's an electric razor, a stroll, a train car that plays a crucial role," I said. "Did Lenin know he'd be shipped through Germany to Russia in a sealed train car to proclaim the Revolution? Strolling along the Landwehrkanal, did Rosa Luxemburg dream it would be her grave? Would Marx have prophesied that people would carry photos of his beard through the streets one day?"

"Of course not," Moses piped up again, "otherwise he would have shaved!"

Ten or twenty years earlier this little debate might have had unpleasant consequences. But in the late eighties, at least in Berlin, things were lax, no big deal, sometimes it all had a certain charm. Even the Stasi let things go in one ear and out the other. While my letters and poems were intercepted like missile blueprints or secret papers from Honecker's nightstand, their interest flagged when it came to philosophy – though suspicious characters like Democritus and Sextus Empiricus, potential code names for counterrevolutionary plans and libertinism, practically cried out to be investigated by the Stasi. In the entire file there's just one memo on the subject, provided by a certain Unofficial Collaborator "Klaus Berger". It is, however, enlightening:

"At seminars W. and (name blacked out) are conspicuous for their arrogant behavior and provocative questions, repeatedly casting a derisory and absurd light on the foundations of the Marxist-Leninist world view. For instance (name blacked out) declared publicly that our entire approach does not suit him, and claimed that Marx ought to have shaved if he had known that his portraits would be displayed at the demonstrations of the working people. On the part of the teaching staff insufficient influence is exerted upon the two men's destructive behavior. They are said to be planning a philosophical action next week to vindicate the honor of dialectics. They intend to publicly deduce a fountain pen directly from the character of the epoch. I have not yet been able to ascertain the exact place and time of this action."

First Lieutenant Schnatz notes soberly: "Report can be presumed objective. Info. oper. signif.: vilification of the founder of the Comm. world movement. Planned measures: process info. in operational ref. file, further deployment of Unoff. Collab. 'Klaus Berger'. Mission and conduct guidelines: obtain info. on loc. and time of planned action through confid. conversations with W."

Hegel's or rather Krug's quill pen anecdote had immediately captivated both Moses and me. It seemed like a real task for once, a challenge: to deduce a banal everyday implement from the universal principles of philosophy. Of course we realized we'd never materialize a pen out of nowhere by sheer force of rumination. But that was no reason to leave the problem to solve itself. We decided we'd have to tweak it somehow.

"Starting with the character of the epoch," Moses summed up the problem, "and just deducing something to write with – that ought to be doable."

I don't remember exactly how we came up with the idea. First we thought of drawing a portrait of Hegel with a GDR "Heiko"-brand fountain pen, or at least burying one such writing utensil at Hegel's resting place in the Dorotheenstädtisches Cemetery. But then we decided it would be best to take one of those murals with scenes from socialist life and unobtrusively add a quill pen – Wilhelm Traugott Krug's – or even better, more contemporary and unpretentious, a pencil.

"Ex post facto, so to speak," said Moses, "but that goes without saying."

A grand idea. The GDR boasted countless murals, generally depicting symbols of work, tools, technical drawings, compasses, sunrises over tractors, flags flapping in the wind, the masses surging onward from lower left to upper right and lots of workers standing around significantly. Most of these paintings were mounted rather high up on building facades or in the inaccessible foyers of factories, barracks and hospitals. There was a picture like that on the "House of the Teacher", in the Foreign Ministry and in the Congress Center on Alexanderplatz. Tractor drivers and steelworkers, woman with baby under apple tree in blossom, doves resting on workers' fists – it would definitely have been possible to work in a quill or a pencil, but not without considerable difficulties.

Then I recalled a painting we should have no trouble getting at: in the canteen of the television electronics plant where I'd done my apprenticeship following high school. That was the breakthrough. And a few days after the little debate in the "Dia-Mat" seminar, as the night shift began, we set out on our way, Moses and I, armed with paint and paintbrushes.

I had first come here in early September, 1981. Work started at 6:40 and ended at 16:10. At the time Berlin-Oberschöneweide was one colossal human toilet. When the shift started, thousands, tens of thousands of workers were flushed into the underworld, the machine halls arrayed on the bank of the Spree River. The street was black with people. Cars

honked, trams screeched, freight train locomotives whistled as they made their way through the crowds. Black and grey smoke clouds drifted around the corners.

On the first day, as I vividly recall, there was a tour of all the facilities. We, the new apprentices, shuffled through the halls, corridors, basements, storerooms – a gigantic galley filled with people at conveyor belts, people at screeching machines, people with sheets of metal, people with tubes, people with rods, people in smocks, people in overalls, people with skin smeared black, people with skin turned grey, surrounded by an oily exhalation, a smell of old iron and sweat.

“Morning” in the morning, “Here’s to lunch” at noon, “Let’s call it a day” in the evening.

The folding ruler clacking in the side pocket of the trousers.

The rumble of the machines, the hiss and stomp of the conveyor belt contraptions winding from floor to floor, the dirty windows, the wall newspapers with the portraits of the best workers and next to them, tattered and begrimed, the pinup posters.

The apprenticeship, the work, the factory, this tumult of tens of thousands of people could, under different circumstances, have been an exciting new adventure. But I was sixteen. And I hadn’t exactly leaped at the chance to take up this profession, or any profession for that matter. At the time I leaned toward the Peripatetics and the *Neopathetiker*. I took a dimmer view of pottery and carpentry. I didn’t want to heal the sick or become a clerk, chemist or cook. Reality was foreign to me, and if you asked me, it could stay that way. Auto mechanic, mason, dental technician, cutting machine operator – however odd the jobs, they all stood for a life unimaginable to me. But no one asked me. For the time being I couldn’t study. The universities had hardly any openings, certainly not for philosophers. In the GDR, the land of very limited opportunity, idleness was prohibited, condemned as anti-social. So after finishing school I had to start an apprenticeship of some kind.

The decision to become what I didn’t want to become took me fewer than five minutes at a so-called “Vocational Counseling Center” which happened to be looking for electricians.

“Hm, well, what could you do for us?” the vocational counselor mused, “how about being an electrician?”

“Why not?” I said. That was all, that was it, that was the hiring interview.

For the first half a year we stood in a row at our vises and filed. During this period I had prolonged somnambulistic phases. While my hands moved back and forth and I stood at the workbench in body alone, my thoughts wandered far afield for hours, for days. It was the

time when I had just met Liane and filed away at poems and letters for her. My dossier reports on it live.

*berlin, 12/14/82
my dearest darling,
in the general thaw impassable puddles collect here
and i'm ready for the leap
but i no longer know the way
there is no way
rilke's longing was: to live in tumult and have no home in time
my longing is: beyond tumult but in time
or with you
with apologies to rainer maria
i've been standing at the vise for three months now, filing
i feel i'm filing away at losing my mind
today, doggedly, i worked this poem into a thing of iron:*

AT THE VISE

*failed by time and failed by space,
i see i'm failing,
i'm filing, filing*

*wish i were with you, wish i could go
with you of course, my lovely
i'm filing, filing*

*filing because we're forced to file
filing off into the darkness
i'm filing, filing
i'm proposing that we kiss
alone for once in the darkness
i'm filing, filing*

*dearest liane, at the moment i'm just looking for the off-switch for my life
but if it's around somewhere, like everything else here it wouldn't even work
if by chance there's a jagged edge in that munich of yours
if the stachus is blocked by a sharp-cornered piece of steel, if a roughly sawed-off length of
pipe juts precariously over the english garden – let me know.*

missing you like crazy,

w.

“W. is an intellig. person,” First Lieutenant Schnatz notes in the *Introductory Report Initiating the Individual Surveillance Operation – Code Name ‘Mirror’*. That’s a risk assessment, not a compliment. “However, contradictions between his behavior at the

workplace and in the leisure sphere are observable. Intercepted poems for female friend in Non-Soc. Bloc indicate doubts as to meaning of life. Cf. poem 'At the Vise' with clear neg. attitude toward aspects of Soc. society. As establ. by Surveillance Op. 'M', W.'s letters often express, in an iron. tone, concrete intent to defect from the Republ.. F. i. in letter from 12/14/82, see attach. Document 000159, W. indirectly informs correspondent of plans to relocate to Non-Soc. Bloc. Planned measures: ensure active formative inflnc., implement further backgr. checks, evaluate material, maintain post. surveillance, investig. known associates, conduct special research if oper. necess.."

The present of yore – it still haunts, ex post facto, the present of today, at once alien and familiar, as if traumatized. Everything here looks the same as thirty years ago, just deserted, devoid of humanity after the volcanic eruption that toppled the Wall. The masses that once surged through the complex are nowhere to be felt. The big factories, the transformer plant, the cable-manufacturing plant, the battery plant and the plant for television electronics are museums of their former selves, enormous exhibition halls drowsing in ghostly silence, gutted, ransacked and unsouled. A forgotten lunar landscape of the working world, mausoleums of nothingness, existing only to cast their facades' filthy shadows across the abandoned grounds.

Surprisingly, the entrance to the cathode ray tube facility is manned; I show the guard the stamp in my old national insurance card – last date: 6/15/1985 – he nods, and I step inside. The plant has claimed me back.

On the grounds: no one, not a soul.

The basement-level tunnels leading to the changing rooms, as unbelievably squalid as ever: empty.

The dented lockers: empty.

A grave without corpses. Halls like coffins. Time stands still. Bare walls, bare corridors leading nowhere. The canteen must have been around here somewhere. With an effort as if forcing my way into the dining hall of the Titanic on the ocean floor, I open a double door and enter an empty hall crosshatched by thousands of rays of sundust. Clearly a consecrated place, a historic one, a sacred site of philosophy on whose wall – last remnant, witness of a vanished epoch – the fateful mural still hangs resplendent. Every machine, every conveyor belt, every cabinet, every table, every chair, every screw – everything has been cleared out and stashed away. This picture, for which, evidently, no use was found, is all that remains.

A four-winged altar of the working world, its interior opened to the viewer, half puppet theater, half medieval panel painting, executed in a technique that must date long before the invention of central perspective. Everything plunked side by side, any old place, at the fore is at the back, small is large, and whoever makes the first move loses. The background is filled almost entirely by large windows that reveal a garden with an abundance of blithely burgeoning blossoms, flowers and trees. It has to be the Garden of Eden – or at least the garden next door.

At the center is the scene of a meeting, but without words – a kind of Last Supper, but without bread and wine. Six women, no spring chickens, arranged at a table like military monuments, have frozen in the oddly stiff postures they've assumed, their formidable gazes, how else to put it, aimed every which way except at each other. Their gathering exudes an imposing dynamic of lethargy. Their mouths are closed, no one says a word. With the best will in the world you couldn't claim to see anything remotely resembling optimism or a sense of renewal. What unfolds before us is a powerful Passion of bitterness. The women seem stopped on the job, flash frozen in motion, unoccupied somehow, aggressively apathetic, relaxed in a clenched, artificial way. This could, would, should be how a moment of silence looks – if it lasted for years.

To the left, with no transition whatsoever, is a children's scene. A girl and a boy, both lifeless as dolls, stand there in a sandbox with pail and shovel. The perspective of a smaller child at the edge seems completely skewed– she's not much bigger than a little finger. A woman watches over them, maybe their mother, the über-mother, with child number four in her arms.

On the right side of the picture, looking rather lost, is a vase with red tulips, next to it a bookcase and in front of it a table where a woman stands reading the newspaper. A woman seated beside her is also engrossed in the news. Are they poring over the weather or the new production indices? We'll never know.

Finally, the left quarter of the picture shows more women, younger now, sitting right up close to a blackboard on which the picture's only featured man, perhaps a teacher, is explaining a technical drawing with missile-like details. The role of an additional woman, standing by with apparent indifference but a disapproving look, is not immediately obvious. She looks like Miss Money Penny after her defection to the KGB.

The viewer's gaze drifts from one end to the other and back again, back and forth, producing nothing but a slow shake of the head.

Read from left to right, the picture could represent the life cycle ordained for women in socialism: school, childbearing, meetings where others do the talking, and, in old age, newspapers with nothing in them, not even obituaries. Oddly enough, the paper held by the lady on the far right has neither letters nor pictures.

The absent men are at war or in space, they've gone for cigarettes or been taken away – at any rate, they won't be back soon. The picture has no door for them to stroll through. Maybe this is where the Circle of Abandoned Socialist Wives meets, thus the gloomy mood. There's not a cup of coffee, not a glass of wine on the table. Those would just be distractions that don't do the trick, that don't help anymore. Conceivably, all the women gathered here fell for the same marriage swindler and now sit facing each other in shocked silence. And the man at the left of the picture? That's the police investigator, questioning the latest victims in order to produce a current facial composite of the perpetrator. Unfortunately the police could spare only an inexperienced beginner incapable of drawing a halfway-passable face freehand without a ruler.

All in all the composition implies that even socialism is far from solving all problems, especially for women, who are still much too apt to fall for false promises. The middle-class family idyll they yearn for has vanished, never to return.

On the other hand, of course, the blatant surplus of women could indicate that the artist channeled a horror of women's liberation into the work. After all, the sole man on the far left is also the only person who is working, acting, doing anything at all. All the other figures in the painting are women who wait passively, with no response to the world around them except to have children, lapse into bored silence or flip affectedly through the newspaper. Pointless attendance, the principle of just showing up – that's the result of policies that force women into production. This is how we end up, the artist tells us, when they're gratuitously admitted to the working world. Then again, though the woman in blue at the far right seems to be reading her newspaper passionlessly, at least she's doing it. Otherwise, you see, she'd have to read the two books lying unopened on the table in front of her, and she seems to feel that would be too much of a good thing.

Entranced, I walk back and forth in front of the picture that initially made such an empty and superficial impression on me. God knows it leaves plenty of open questions, though it seems to call nothing in question itself. No dead dog lies under the table, no bird soars past. Everything is self-enclosed, hermetically sealed.

And what that is the very theme of the picture? Namely: what happens once all problems are solved, all questions answered? Could the picture be pointing to a radical utopia,

a vision of the transition from capitalism to communism unfolding before our eyes? Half of the workforce is already liberated from the drudgery of gainful employment, but also released from the meaning which that implicitly provides. Clearly, along with exploitation quite a few other things have been abolished. The teacher in the red blouse, left to herself, left at leisure – she could listen to what her colleague is saying, but why? Isn't that just the white noise of redundancy? The girl in pink stands around in the sandbox, she's dug herself out. There's nothing more in it for her. The woman at the table has risen to her feet, she actually wants to go, or say something, but where and what? The lady in green across from her is no longer participating, no longer required to contribute to the discussion; she is – in a sense in which the communist vocabulary and the vocabulary of health insurance merge in astounding fashion – exempt from contributions. There's nothing more than simulation, As If. A fine example of that, once again, is the woman with the newspaper. You can tell by looking that it no longer plays any role in her life. She reads the newspaper like an actor in the Japanese Kabuki theater, as a mere ritual, get that newspaper up and glue your eyes there somewhere. It's this quasi-final, post-revolutionary, post-coital melancholy of meaninglessness, that is: a release into nothingness, that defined the GDR and is so scathingly depicted here.

This picture replaces entire history books. Everything is there. And nothing is prettified.

For another striking and remarkable thing is that none of the figures in this ensemble are left to themselves. Everything takes place inside a room, even that sandbox is in there, albeit tilted up in such a way that one fears it might fall from the frame. Everything stays inside, nothing makes it outside, everyone stands firmly in their places, at their posts, in a configuration that can be taken in at a glance. And everywhere there's someone keeping watch. Be it the bored Unofficial Collaborator in the red blouse on the left by the blackboard, be it the mother behind the sandbox, be it the Party Secretary standing at the table, making very sure that no one dozes off, or the woman by the bookcase with the so-called newspaper of white, unprinted paper which clearly serves only as camouflage. That would explain quite a lot, including the silence in the picture, the avoiding of eyes, the expressionless faces that mustn't let on to anything.

A Socialist Realist work, then? Anything but! The very shadows mystify, falling in all different directions. With the chairs the light seems to come from the front right, in the garden from straight above, at the partition in the middle of the picture from the back right, at the sandbox from the left. Some figures, like the children, don't cast a shadow at all, while others cast two. As for the woman in the yellow blouse at the head of the table, her body is lit from

the front, her arms from behind. Incompetence? Applied amateurism? Very confusing in any case, but not unusual. Paintings with double shadows have art history on their side. No less a figure than Goethe defended capricious shadows in the name of the freedom of the artist, the great artist, mind you. The famous early-19th-century shadow debate unfolded, unnoticed by the rest of the world, in the conversations of Goethe and Eckermann. On April 18, 1824, Goethe showed him an engraving, Rubens' "Return from the Harvest", a landscape at sundown with sheep, horses, a hay cart, peasants and laborers. Eckermann was surprised to discover: "But how... the figures cast their shadows into the picture. The group of trees, on the contrary, cast theirs toward the spectator. We have, thus, light from two different sides, which is quite contrary to Nature." And Goethe? What does he reply, and what would he have replied in view of the mural before me? "That is the point... It is by this that Rubens proves himself great, and shows to the world that he, with a free spirit, stands above Nature, and treats her conformably to his high purposes... But if it is contrary to nature, I still say it is higher than nature. I say it is the bold stroke of the master, which he, in a genial manner, proclaims to the world that art is not entirely subject to natural necessities, but has laws of its own."¹ The twofold shadows in Rubens' work and, let's say, the three-and-a-half-fold ones in the work for the television electronics plant – that can be no accident. This artist insists on his freedom and flouts all laws. And however bright the light of socialism shines: the more light, the more shadows.

But wait! Doesn't the garden take up by far the most space in this picture? Plants upon plants, blossoms upon blossoms – all in superabundance. Oddly enough, this exuberant growth strongly appears to be of Middle Eastern origin. The trees in the background could be fig or pomegranate trees, or perhaps laurel trees – but even in GDR socialism these didn't grow in front yards. Is this a forlorn little hint that paradise is elsewhere? Covert criticism of the nonexistent freedom to travel? An indictment, a rebellion of conscience, an appeal to the mighty not to confine their own people in the grey cage of the everyday world? One could look at it that way. One should look at it that way. Strange, though, that none of the women in the picture take notice of the splendor just outside the window, in arm's reach. All of them turn their backs to the garden, the flowers, the blue sky, gazing into emptiness, even preferring to read a newspaper with nothing in it – apart from one woman at the table, tellingly dressed all in black, whose posture seems to exude sorrow and hopelessness. A

¹ *Conversations of Goethe*, translated by John Oxenford, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1850). (Tr.)

mythic constellation looms: Are they forbidden to look around? Or don't they want to? Or don't they even know what's opened up behind them?

The garden, that much is clear, doesn't interest these people in the slightest. A closer look tells why: there are no paths, no inroads. The ground has seen such excessive cultivation with irises, tulips and daisies that there's no getting through. Everything has been thought of here, all scrupulously planned to the last detail, world-class cultivation, so to speak – but once again they forgot about the people. That, understandably, is why the women are so frustrated. A beautiful garden filled with flowers, but no getting at it.

Of course one can only speculate as to the reasons for such dense, almost jungle-like cultivation. The most probable would seem to be that in the chaos of the strictly planned economy no path-laying equipment was available at that time. Maybe the consignment of Bulgarian rollers or paving slab lifters had gotten held up yet again.

Or no, that's all wrong. If these are laurel trees, and it certainly looks that way – laurel trees for the laurel wreaths which, according to the wild plans of the late Ulbricht era, were to crown the heads of every activist – if these are the laurel trees of a laurel plantation, then we're looking at a work that takes an early ecological stand against monoculture, the message being: "Look what they're doing to our women!" Laurel, you see, has powerful essential oils and can, in excess, lead to sleepiness, even to stupor. Thus the women's dejected expressions could simply reflect wooziness, narcotic wooziness caused by the penetrating vapors of the high-density laurel monoculture. The teacher is already holding her stomach. One woman has gotten up from the table to head for the bathroom. The schoolgirls at the blackboard have lost all muscle tone in their arms, which hang down limply from the chairs – they've practically passed out. And the girl in the sandbox is wondering if the bucket in front of her is big enough to puke into.

At first glance an unsophisticated, almost clumsy work in impasto paints, faded over the years, produced by students, amateur artists or the Committee for the Hobby Painters of the Television Electronics Plant, presumably at some point in the sixties. But Delacroix' "Raft of the Medusa", Menzel's "Iron Rolling Mill" or Picasso's "Guernica" are hardly richer in allusions. Probably nowhere did the character of the epoch display its contours so strikingly as in this group picture with ladies.

Which, on the one hand, shouldn't be over-interpreted. After all, it hung on the wall of a canteen, not even the factory's main canteen, but the smaller one, the side canteen, if I remember correctly. No doubt the artist's stated task was to paint a thoroughly anodyne,

diffusely appetite-inducing picture, nothing too concrete, nothing to inspire one to linger, something to encourage not copious feasting but quick consumption, a rapid and willing return to the workplace. Thus there's nothing on the table, not even water. Thus no word is spoken. Thus the dejected, irritable waiting room atmosphere, demanding with each gesture: "Come on! Planning to finish your lunch any time soon?"

On the other hand, knowing the entire background, it's hard to over-interpret. Would anyone really be surprised to find, in this seemingly unremarkable, long-lost canteen frieze of the working world, on top of everything else, the solution to one of the fundamental philosophical problems of intellectual history? Approximately in the center of the picture, on the long table, in no danger whatsoever of easy removal, there it lies, unobtrusive but unmissable: the fountain-pen-turned-pencil of Wilhelm Traugott Krug.