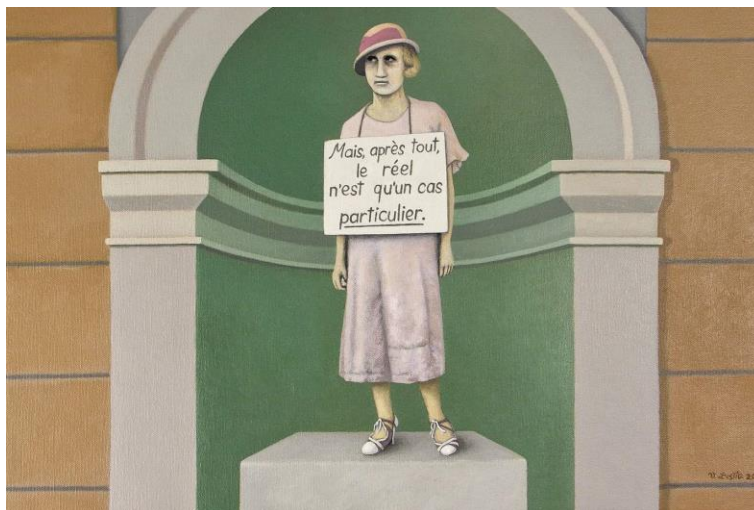


Valentin Lustig

THE TRIPTYCH "LE RÉEL"



It was in the spring of 2020 that I started to paint this triptych called "Le Réel", i.e. in a period which due to the pandemic we are not going to forget too soon. Those first days after the lockdown above all had an unreal, apocalyptic atmosphere, since we were carefully looking around us and could not notice the slightest change – while they, the viruses, were lurking everywhere...

Well well, said I, after all the end of time might look as well like this!

Or at least the beginning of its end...

But then I had to behave and confine myself in my room, and there in the room I read in the feature pages of the newspaper about a small incident that, unlike the lockdown, will be for sure forgotten long before I'll have finished my triptych. I'm namely still working on it while I write these lines...

Slowness is important!

In one of his last books Imre Kertesz rightly regrets the fact that humor has lost its seriousness.

With slowness I try to save back at least some of it.

The three barren paintings are rather small: each canvas is 50 x 75cm and contains a short quotation.

## FIRST PART



**“Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehn ist alles.”**

**(Who talks about victory? Everything is surviving.)**

The apocalypse as promise or as threat has always been a mighty tool to bring about changes in human behavior. Nowadays however we experience an excessive accumulation of often contradictory apocalyptic offers that tend to lead to general helplessness. How well can I understand the prophet Jonah, who didn't want to have anything to do with this business and, instead of going to Nineveh, fled in the opposite direction, to Tharshish ! This was by the way the best proof of the authenticity of his prophecy.

In my room, in this Zürich which because of the Covid-19 has become so calm and quiet, I suddenly hear the voice of my mother, who died long ago. She recites for me the story of Jonah. Not the biblical version, but the one retold in beautiful Hungarian verses by Mihály Babits. It was her favorite poem.

By Babits Jonah flees from God like the robber from the executioner. In the darkness of the belly of that fish which swallowed him, Jonah realizes the impossibility of evading his destiny and that he who does not want to suffer suffers twice.

“But, God, thou cannot flee from me either”, he says, “although in this fish I’m not more than a piece of salty flesh”.

De te se futhatsz, Isten, énelőlem,

habár e halban sós hús lett belőlem!

In Nineveh Jonah is downright laughed at by the city’s residents. His dismay, mortification and disappointment are all the greater when God, out of pity, changes his mind and decides not to destroy Nineveh after all.

God’s closing word: “Just keep on preaching, Jonah, I’ll take over the action. Nineveh will not live forever, and neither will you, Jonah. New Ninevehs will still arise and new Jonahses will come, and forty days, forty years, or a thousand times as many – are all the same in my mouth”...

One of these Ninevehs of modern times and of the North, which in contrast to the ancient one was really destroyed, should carry with itself the story of the futility of the apocalypse as a method of punishment.

Hamburg was almost completely destroyed by the Royal Air Force on the night of July 28, 1943. The operation was called “Gomorah”.

In his book “Luftkrieg und Literatur” (Aerial Warfare and Literature), W. G. Sebald quotes the case of Stig Dagerman, who wrote in 1946 for the newspaper “Espressen” from Hamburg that he took the train “at normal speed for a quarter of an hour through a lunar landscape between Hasselbrock and Landwehr and did not see a single person in (...) perhaps the most gruesome field of ruins in the whole of Europe... The train, wrote Dagerman, was, like all trains in Germany, very crowded, but nobody looked out. And since he did look out, they recognized him as a stranger”.

Well, this was in 1946, immediatly after the war. But did the residents of the city learn at least later something from this ?

Oh yes, they did, and how!

And thus we already got to that small incident mentioned in the beginning which served me as an inspiration for the triptych. A young lady, a humorous Austrian cabaret artist, was invited by an institution to a literary podium in Hamburg. The extreme leftists of the city threatened with violence. This artist, they alleged, was an antisemite. Others say it was the friend of the aunt of a neighbor the one who got wind of the extreme leftists’ intention to threaten with violence. The Hamburg authorities promptly cancelled the invitation.

That’s it.

I quote from memory the incriminated statement of the lady : “ We have always defended the Jews against the accusation that they are constantly chasing after the money. Now we have the gentlemen Polanski, Weinstein, Epstein and know: They, the Jews, are indeed not chasing after the money, but after the women. They need the money only in order to get them...”

I am distracted from my thoughts by the silence penetrating my room from outside. I observe through the window the street, so thoroughly emptied of people and cars. It was only few days ago that youngsters on strike for the climate were demonstrating there, around the corner. “Why should we continue to go to school”, they cried, “there is no future anyway!”

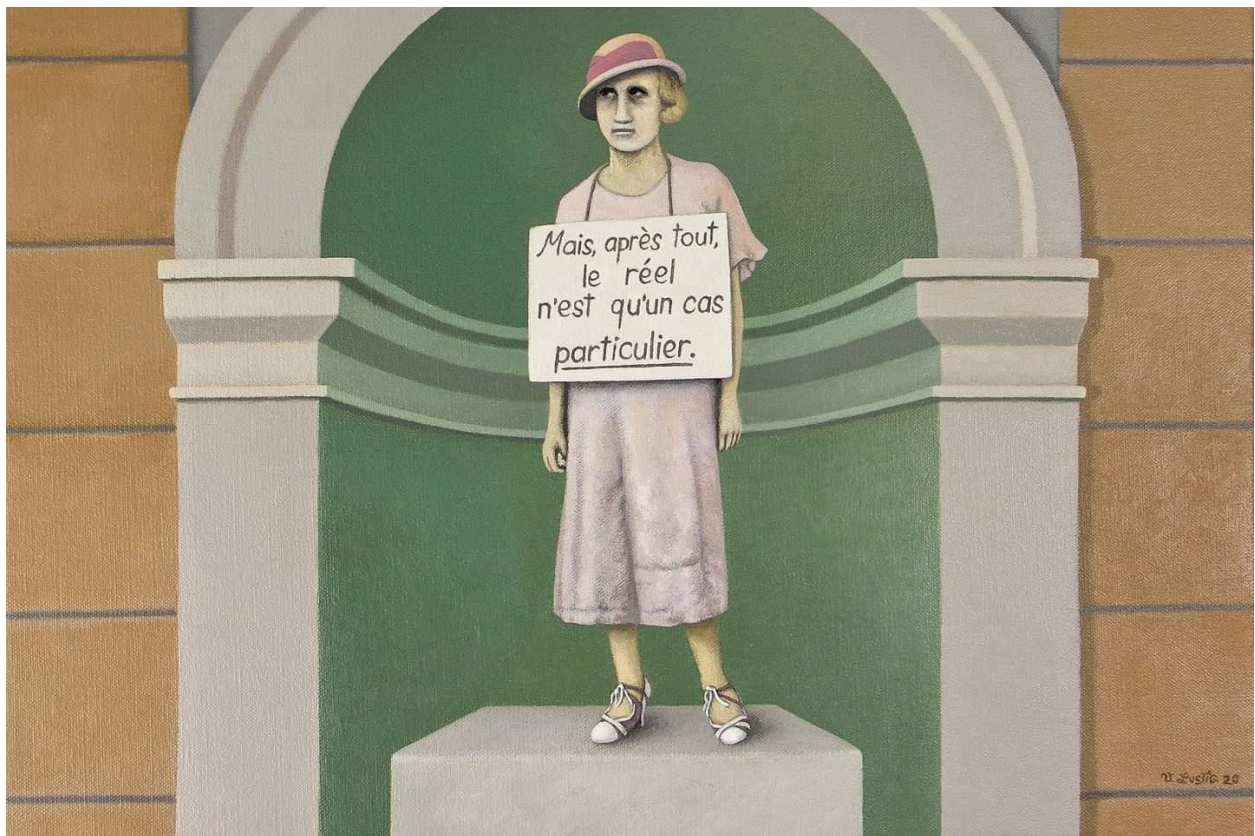


Perhaps the pandemic is going to accommodate those among their deeply concerned prophets, who have more empathy for the planet than for the people inhabiting it. Their vision about the end of time is after all not as bleak as it appears at first sight, because according to them someone is surely going to survive and get through it.

Not a human being to be sure, but someone, something.

I gladly imagine Bubu for this role. Bubu, who ran to us fourteen years ago out of the Sihlfeld Cemetery, thus becoming our tomcat ever since. Bubu is definitely not a human being, it doesn't understand anything, yes, it cannot even read that eloquent last line from Rainer Maria Rilke's "Requiem", which I push beneath his unsuspecting paws: "Who talks about victory? Everything is surviving."

## SECOND PART



**"Mais, après tout, le réel n'est qu'un cas particulier."**

**(But, after all, reality is no more than a particular case.)**

This sentence by Paul Valéry can be found in his book "Mauvaises pensées et autres" (Bad Thoughts and Others) and seems to be the paraphrase of a remark Blaise Pascal's I often heard during the lockdown, namely that all the misfortunes of mankind arise from its inability to stay quietly in a room.

A man, writes Valéry, imagined innumerable wonderful things revealing themselves to his fantasy: But then, from one spiritual adventure to the next, from dangers to amusements, from rage to tenderness, he ends up in a place

and among objects that astonish him as he realizes that they are the same ones which surround him... And so he finds his room, his walls, his hands, his whole reality again – as the last among all those transformations. Because, after all, reality is no more than a particular case.

The “Mauvaises pensées et autres” were published in 1941 and were probably created in 1940, when France collapsed. Valéry did not have a vocation for heroism, but very much one for decency. For this reason his field of activity had to restrict itself during the occupation to his room. Collaboration was out of question, unlike those numerous future loud-mouths from the Latin Quarter, many communists included, the well organized and disciplined, staunch anti-fascists, who in 1940 were following the then new Comintern line dictated by Moscow and valid since August 1939: Not Germany, no, the socialists and the French and English capitalists and the Jews anyway had provoked the war. All hostile activities against Nazi Germany should stop, the communists are pacifists, aren't they? (“...they all practice deceit and comfort my people in his misfortune and say: ‘Peace! Peace!’ And yet there is no peace.” Jeremiah 6, 13-14)

In another passage of his book writes Paul Valéry: Reality is always in the opposition.

This statement might explain why that incident from the feature pages of the newspaper had such an odd and somehow reassuring effect upon me: Wasn't it a perfect win-win situation? Everybody involved got well out of it.

The city authorities of Hamburg acted so as if they were defending the public order; the extreme leftists acted so as if they were saving Germany and the Jews, - more or less according to the motto: Beware of the beginnings! We have had already pretty bad experiences with a cabaretistically talented Austrian!; the newspaper feature page, which stood behind the young lady, held up the flag of the freedom of opinion; I myself got a nice theme for a triptych, good enough to keep my lockdown-melancholy away from me; and, last but not least, the Austrian cabaret artist acted so as if she or her stage character had discovered the direct connection between the permanent danger menacing women and girls everywhere in the world and the horniness of the Jews.

Of course her claim regarding this discovery is not entirely correct, there is nothing new under the sun.

I contemplate this famous black and white photo from 1935, showing a street in the city of Hamburg. The young woman turns embarrassed her head away from the camera. The young men in uniform next to her and behind her, on the other hand, look boldly and confidently directly into the camera. A placard with a four-line text hangs on the woman's neck:

I am the biggest

pig in town

and do it only

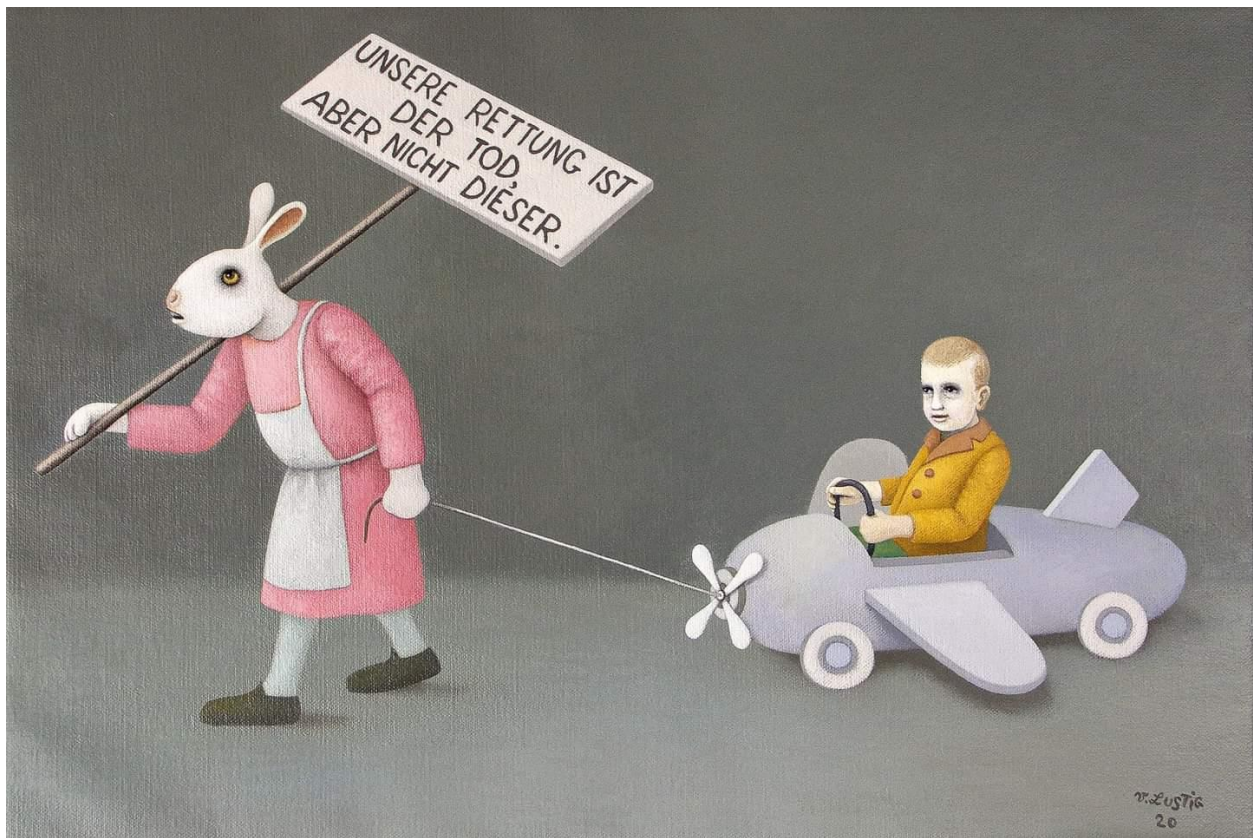
with the Jews!

What happened to her, I'm asking myself...

Did she survive the apocalypse of July 28, 1943? And what happened to the young men? Did they survive the war? In case they did survive I'm pretty sure they quickly replaced their “Sieg Heil!!!” shouting with Rilke's sigh: “Who talks about victory? Everything is surviving”...

And then they set about rebuilding Hamburg.

### THIRD PART



**“Unsere Rettung ist der Tod, aber nicht dieser.”**

**(Our salvation is Death, but not this one.)**

When I settled in Zürich at the beginning of the 1980s, women with an esoteric inclination were incredibly numerous in the city - ...men also, by the way, I almost forgot to mention them explicitly, but of course they were meant too!

They were all either returning from some Indian ashram or on their way to one. This fashion is long since over, but had I shown in those days this sentence about our salvation to such an esoteric enthusiast, she would have immediately approved it without hesitation and she would have interpreted it in a somehow Buddhist manner.

The problem is only that this dark feeling of irredeemability and the premonition of an irreparable apocalypse, so characteristic for many texts belonging to the author of this sentence, although interpretable as a statement regarding mankind in general, sound differently when we consider the fact that only this author's early death prevented him from experiencing the other one. “The clemency of early death”, would have said a famous German Chancellor.

What I mean is, of course, the continental European project of murdering all the Jews in Europe, so successfully carried out under German leadership.



All three of Franz Kafka's sisters, because it is Kafka that I'm talking about, were murdered in this way.

Hamburg was destroyed on July 28, 1943, but the other apocalypse, the industrially organized murder of the Jews, went on and on, for months, for almost two more years, methodically and efficiently, and just as in that train journey of 1946 described by Dagerman, nobody looked at it, apart from very few who for this reason were immediately recognized as strangers.

My mother, for example, was locked in the ghetto in Klausenburg, from where she was deported to Auschwitz, only on May 3, 1944, i.e. more than nine months after the bombardment of Hamburg. There were around 18,000 people in this ghetto alone, six long trains were needed to transport them quietly and safely to the gas chambers. My mother survived.

The Nineveh of the North has long since been rebuilt: the city of Hamburg is today more beautiful than ever!

Eretz Israel also exists today, although it is not situated in Europe and the willingness of its citizens to accept moral lessons from the inhabitants of Europe is quite understandably rather limited.

But never again will there be an European Judaism as it once was, as a relevant demographic, cultural, scientific, economic, artistic factor.

Terrific monuments, cemeteries and museums? Certainly.

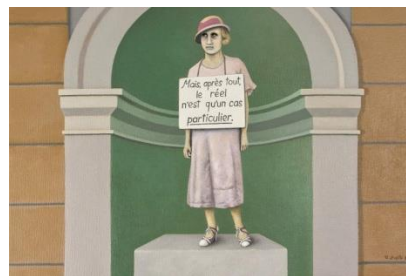
Synagogues and community houses, sharply protected by the police? Of course.

Just so Jews, more or less horny, clever and stupid, good and bad ones? Surely, I'm myself one and – for my part! – the gentlemen Polanski, Weinstein, Epstein too.

And it is naturally only right if the humorous Austrian cabaret artists knock their Jewish jokes.

There is however not much more to it.

That's the reality. Mais, apres tout, le réel n'est qu'un cas particulier.



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