

A Mordant Misanthrope

Ecce Homo, by George Grosz; introduction by Henry Miller, *New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966. 1v plates. \$15.00.*

EXCEPT FOR the introduction, this is a facsimile reproduction, containing 84 drawings and 16 water colors, of the original edition published in 1923 by Malik-Verlag, a politically radical press conducted by Grosz' friend Wieland Herzfeld. Grosz was then thirty years old; he had been an infantryman in the first World War and had been court-martialed for insubordination. What he depicted with such savage and shocking grotesquery in *Ecce Homo* is the socially and morally diseased postwar Germany in which Hitler and his Third Reich were already incubating. Nevertheless, so many were scandalized by his work that in 1924 Grosz was convicted of defamation of public morals and fined 6,000 marks; twenty-four of the plates of *Ecce Homo* were confiscated and presumably destroyed.

In rhetoric that seems to have been written with the same corrosive pen that Grosz employed for his drawings, Henry Miller tells us why this was so.

Most everything the sick mind of the censor revels in will be found in these pages. . . . family life, café scenes, sex orgies, puking drunkards, Daddy and Mommy, perverts and monsters of every description . . . dementia, a fillip of unadulterated sex, a sample of transmogrification, a reminder of the price war.

It's difficult to imagine that there ever were or could be creatures with faces more expressive of lust, despair and abandon than are here depicted . . . monstrous derelicts . . . thick criss-crossed necks . . . vegetable-shaped skulls . . . the ugly snouts, the blubber-like lips, the rat-like eyes, the bloated overstuffed bellies . . . diseased minds . . . hopeless dreams. . .

Even the dogs are malignant symbols of the Germany that Grosz despised—unkempt, misshapen dachshunds, snarling underfoot.

Small wonder then that Grosz was nominated to that Hall of Fame, "Degenerate Art," the celebrated exhibition held in Munich in 1937, and deprived of his German citizenship in consequence. But by that time he had been for five years a resident of the United States and was well established as a teacher at the Art Students League in New York. His once fierce and disturbing art had become bland and conventional; an occasional lapse into social criticism brought forth nothing more sinister than a few Arthur Rackhamish monsters. Shortly before his death in 1959—incidentally, while on a visit to Berlin—he was awarded that accolade of respectability, the medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In discussing the satirical work of this artist, critics have often compared him to Hogarth, Goya, and Daumier. The similarity is superficial; it consists only in their common and violent reaction to corruption in persons and practices. In artistic significance Grosz cannot be considered with the masters mentioned. Even in his relation to his very talented and original German contemporaries, the Expressionists, his contribution, however striking, was of topical rather than stylistic importance. If at times he adopted a few mannerisms of the Cubist or Bauhaus styles or borrowed the palette of the Fauves, in his best work he simply drew an angry, somewhat dry and scratchy line around some of the more re-

volting representatives of a decadent Fatherland.

In our own era, when an interest in Nazism persists like a recurrent nightmare in the consciousness of almost everyone from television watchers to serious historians, the reappearance of *Ecce Homo* as a handsomely produced picture book represents something more than pure sensationalism. Nasty and pornographic as the pictures are and had to be, they document a period of cynicism and despair so deep that it could only turn for hope and leadership to a deranged and criminal genius.

Reviewed by SUZETTE MORTON ZURCHER

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