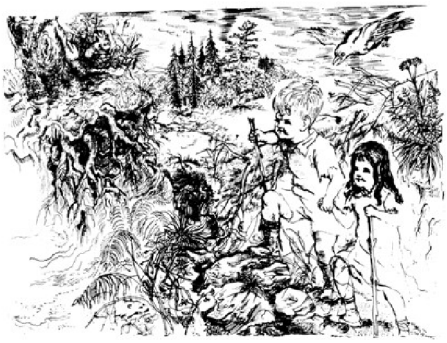
64: George Grosz *The Wanderer* (1943)

Nancy Norwood

> *I left because of Hitler. He is a painter too, you know, and there didn't seem to be enough room for both of us in Germany.*[1]

On the eve of Hitler's rise to power in 1933, George Grosz emigrated to the United States from Germany. A decade later, he painted *The Wanderer*, a work that belongs to a group of paintings that Grosz himself called "apocalyptic, prophetic, or just hell-pictures."[2] They share a characteristic and recurring imagery, both haunting and disturbing: landscapes with rocks, reeds, and earth that appear as living tentacles and mire, flames on the horizon, nightmarish birds, and man's struggle for survival through flight and despair. *The Wanderer's* lone figure, huddled in his overcoat, leans heavily on a walking stick as he trudges through swamp-like mud. The quagmire, smoke-filled sky, and malevolent reeds that reflect the blazing inferno behind him guide his path of escape and illuminate the accompanying horror. Large black ravens hover nearby, seeking carrion in the dense landscape. In total, the nightmarish images that unite the painting create both the backdrop and subject of desolation and impending doom.



George Grosz,
1893–1959
Illustration to Brothers Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel," ca. 1934
Pen and ink drawing.
19 x 24⅛ in.
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New York, New York

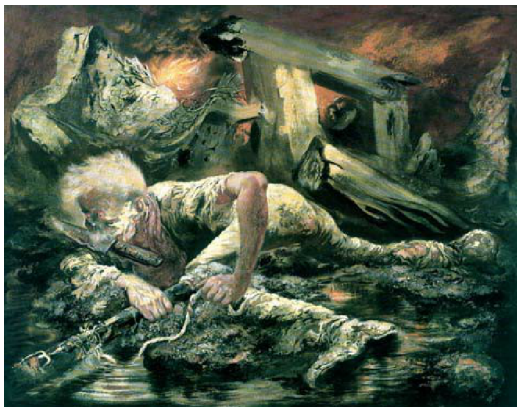
The Wanderer was purchased by the Encyclopedia Britannica as part of its collection of contemporary American paintings. Along with the august company of artists such as Thomas Hart Benton, Georgia O'Keeffe, and William Gropper,[3] the advisory board chose Grosz as one representative of the "frame of an idea—to tell the story of American painting since 1900."[4] In the catalogue of the collection published in 1948, Grosz provided an enlightening though incomplete commentary on his painting:

> *"The Wanderer" is real and and yet unreal at the same time. The old man is the everlasting human spirit....here once more he goes through a dark world—through an apocalyptic landscape—tireless and in deep, maybe grim, thought he wanders on until the dark day changes into a light and sunny day...the bird and the thicket of reeds and brambles symbolizing his thought. So he, the old man, is just a lonely reed, too.*[5]

(Facing page)
George Grosz,
1893–1959
The Wanderer, 1943
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
51.6
Art ©Estate of George
Grosz/Licensed by VAGA,
New York, New York

In letters, conversations, and interviews, Grosz explained *The Wanderer* and his hell pictures in terms less optimistic but more personal, in ways equally compelling and disturbing. In an undated letter to a Mr. Schück, Grosz writes:

> *I work a lot—it is as if I have lost too much time with worthless things. I have so little contact with my former self....I painted a little picture—The Wanderer—myself of course....The resonance of explosion and destruction often shakes me bodily. Maybe all this will one day form itself into greater things. I do not want to survive only as a Callot.*[6]



George Grosz,
1893–1959
The Survivor, 1944
Oil on canvas, 31 x 39 in.
Collection of
The Robert Gore Rifkind
Art Collection, Beverly Hills,
California
Art ©Estate of George Grosz/
Licensed by VAGA, New York,
New York.

Many of the apocalyptic pictures, though primarily painted in the 1940s, were anticipated by drawings from the 1930s, in particular some that Grosz created in 1936 for his first American volume, *Interregnum*. Intended as a commentary on German life from 1928 to 1932, several of the works, though not intended as studies or preparatory drawings for the later paintings, are directly related to the hell pictures through both composition and imagery.[7] Some of his visual vocabulary emerged even earlier, particularly the peculiar and tortured reeds and dense quagmire of his landscapes. His earlier illustration for the Brothers Grimm fairytale *Hansel and Gretel* (ca. 1934), as one of many examples, almost eerily predicts the composition of *The Wanderer* and its related 1936 *Interregnum* drawing *Even Mud Has an End*.[8]

The almost obsessive visual motifs in the hell pictures as well as the earlier drawings—the muddy swamps, the tortured and withered landscapes, infernos, and ravens—emerge from the not-quite buried memories of Grosz's German military experience and his despair over the rising power of Hitler and Nazi Fascism. The larger-than-life birds of *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Wanderer,* perhaps, emerged during his institutionalization in a military mental hospital in 1915, when he described the darkness that surrounded him, the approach of death, and his fellow sufferers: "Above the beds hang black birds; the nameplates of the sick animals."[9] Grosz claimed a premonition of World War I, for example, when he noticed that, marching toward Belgium, the flowers soldiers placed in their rifles withered and died. He knew Fascism was coming because "ordinary walking sticks had become quite heavy."[10] Regarding the heavy quagmire seen in many of his apocalyptic pictures, a root can be found in his experience of the German army: "They crush you. They humiliate you. They break you....Then the mud...I don't know why soldiers are always in the mud."[11] His visceral response to the image of mud erupts during a conversation with the writer John dos Passos in 1948 about the struggling figure in *The Survivor:* "It's the last survivor," he says "The mud itself becomes alive to kill."[12]

George Grosz was a complex, tormented and contradictory man. In 1943, the year of *The Wanderer,* Richard O. Boyer wrote a series of three *New Yorker* profiles that explored the painter's daily life, his American dreams, and his darkest fears. Respectively titled "Demons in the Suburbs," "The Saddest Man in all the World," and "The Yankee from Berlin," the profiles present the portrait of a man torn between two very conflicting worlds—America and Germany, his present and his past.[13] Grosz had always idealized America and idolized Americans—in a 1927 symposium in Berlin, for example, he responded to the question "Where is paradise?" with the answer "In the Rocky Mountains."[14] He thought of America as a place of the pioneer and the innocent, far distant from his own personality: "The Americans have something bold in them, something of big, innocent boys. It must be nice to be with them. They have a better attitude toward life."[15]

Grosz's only real difficulty with America was the critics, many of whom found his "American" paintings uncompelling, preferring instead the German Dada works and the scathing satirical drawings that had made him famous. Others, though—even if they preferred the earlier satire or the later nudes and still lifes—acknowledged his American efforts and the roots from which the hell pictures emerged, especially on the occasion of the exhibition where *The Wanderer* was first exhibited.[16] The reviewer of the *New York Sun* wrote:

Although he laid the foundations of his international reputation by his bitter satires of war…[and his] scathing attacks on the beginnings of Nazism, George Grosz is an artist who more and more concerns himself with purely a painter's problems. But the old horror will not down, and his present exhibition…shows him still dwelling in part on the nightmare of war in canvases that are at once symbolical and realistic. Among these are "The Mighty One Meets Two Poets," "I Woke up One Night and Saw a House," "The Wanderer" and others that must be seen to get their bitter message. But it is that other side of Grosz's art that one prefers to dwell on now. We find enough of the rest around us daily, over the air and in the press. So Grosz the painter, as revealed in his various nudes, his landscapes and still life subjects, presents the more inviting theme.[17]

George Grosz,
1893–1959
Even Mud Has an End,
plate 4 from the *Interregnum*
portfolio, 1936
Photolithograph, 8⅜ x 10⅜ in.
Art ©Estate of George Grosz/
Licensed by VAGA,
New York, New York

Grosz well realized the extent of his obsession with the hell pictures and understood its derivation. On the one hand, he treasured it: "The darkness that surrounds me is not just fear and terror.…It is very sustaining."[18] On the other hand, he was tormented by it: "Like Goya, I am torn in two.…It is like living in a haunted house. You can't escape it and you can't forget."[19] His own evaluation of his hell pictures of the 1940s, however, is unambiguous:

Maybe it was in reality only a thunderstorm, one of these odd American thunderstorms, that suddenly appears and becomes a monstrous hailstorm. Then it disappears again, and is monstrous. But for me it became a symbol.…The war was in the air. A man who lived through the first world war feels that.…That's why I use the example of a walk on the beach [before the war], just to clarify the root from which the memories and thoughts that are a part of my last paintings originated.[20]

In 1945, *The Wanderer* was used as the illustration for "A Poet's Anti-Fascist Melodrama," the *New York Times* review of Frederic Prokosch's *Age of Thunder*.[21] The painting was curiously but perhaps appropriately captioned "'The Wanderer' in an Age of Thunder." In one of the crucial and most poignant moments in the book, Ulysse whispers to his fellow-traveler Amedée, "It's a troubled kind of night.…Motionless. Unreal. Like a dream." "All of life nowadays," responds Amedée, "has that torpor, that unreality. Life has become a dream." Ulysse replies: "It is the war, Amedée, which is the dream. Some day we shall wake up. The dream will crumble, and even the memory of the dream will crumble.…Happiness will return."[22]

The Wanderer is to all accounts a desolate and disturbing image of flight, exile, and the struggle for survival. As manifest in his hell pictures, Grosz was filled with the despair of Prokosch's Amedée: "This war will last the rest of our lives. Even when the killing has stopped…the war will live on; no one can rebuild the ruined nerves."[23] Perhaps, though, like Ulysse, Grosz's protagonist—the old man, the everlasting spirit—retains a modicum of hope for the crumble of the dream and the end of the recurring nightmare.

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