

those idyllic scenes: That year, the Russian Revolution forced his family to emigrate to Germany, leaving behind several million rubles, a 2,000-acre estate, and what Nabokov valued even more—"the beauty of intangible property, the unreal estate" of flora and fauna and affection where his memories were set. For Nabokov, literature became a way of preserving what circumstances take away: In a 1925 story titled "A Guide to Berlin," Nabokov said the role of fiction was "to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times."

On March 28, 1922, Nabokov's beloved father, the liberal politician V. D. Nabokov, was killed in Berlin by a Russian monarchist. Nabokov quickly finished his studies at Cambridge (a string of his mother's pearls had paid for his education there) and made Berlin his home, there publishing four books in as many months. Nabokov soon became the darling of a Russian Berlin, a part of the city which Boyd describes as "a cultural supernova, without equal in the annals of refugee humanity." But being a writer in an émigré supernova is hardly a paying proposition, and Nabokov was forced to eke out a living working as a secretary, tutor, and tennis and boxing coach. Germany's emerging fascism appalled him long before it did most of the world. Nabokov also had special personal reasons for hating the Nazis: His wife Vera was Jewish, and his younger brother Sergei was arrested as a homosexual (and later died in a concentration camp). In 1940—the year this first volume of Boyd's biography closes—Nabokov is seen leaving for America, having already published more than most writers' entire oeuvre: eight novels, two novellas, four volumes of poetry, four plays, and 50 stories. In his suitcase were two unfinished works which, when later transformed into English and published as *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, would make his reputation as a dazzling pyrotechnician in his second language.

Critics have often fastened on Nabokov's rich vocabulary and his mandarin elegance to complain that his novels are "all style and no content." Yet Nabokov had witnessed too much of the evil that politics can do to be an escapist or mere wordsmith. Boyd finds a surprising number of Nabokov's works that deal with politics, such as the novels *Invitation to a Beheading*

(1959) and *Bend Sinister* (1947) and the play *The Waltz Invention* (1966), where the Stalinist and Nazi versions of totalitarianism blend in surreal horror.

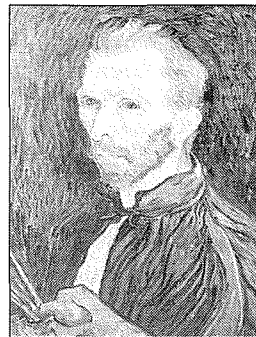
The charge that Nabokov is merely an aesthete misses the point that all his novels challenge the easy 20th-century opposition between politics and aesthetics. For Nabokov, the artistic is political precisely because it defeats the totalitarian goal (and to a lesser extent, the democratic conformist urge) to reduce consciousness to a set of predictable, familiar responses. Boyd defines Nabokov's formula for happiness: "Detach the mind from accepting a humdrum succession of moments, and everything becomes magical."

Nabokov always relished ironies. A posthumous irony is that Nabokov, who mistrusted biography and feared that it "can produce no closer likeness of its subject than macabre dolls," should have as his Boswell a critic as perceptive—and respectful—as Boyd.

VAN GOGH: His Life and His Art. By David Sweetman. Crown. 391 pp. \$30

VINCENT VAN GOGH. By Evert van Uitert, Louis van Tilborgh, Sjraar van Heughten, Johannes van der Wolk, Ronald Pickvance, and E. B. F. Pey. Rizzoli. Volume I: *Paintings*; Volume II: *Drawings*. 292 pp.; 336 pp. \$90

On December 23, 1888, Vincent van Gogh quarreled violently with the painter Paul Gauguin. Failing to wound him, Van Gogh rounded on himself and cut off part of his left ear. This violent act has entered the mythology of the modern artist driven to extremes by his sacrifices for art. According to the myth, the artist is ignored and despised by the public. This certainly describes Van Gogh, whose paintings now sell for more than \$10 million but which he couldn't sell for 10 francs during his lifetime. Popular works, most famously Irving Stone's novel *Lust*



for *Life* (1934), have indeed canonized Van Gogh as the martyr-saint of art and a hero in the cause of modernism.

Sweetman, an English art historian and producer of art documentaries for the BBC, wants to expose this "image of Vincent as isolated Holy Fool, artist-sage or whatever . . . as the nonsense it always was." Sweetman's task is not entirely simple, for many aspects of Van Gogh's life conform quite well to the tragic stereotype. Born in 1853, the son of a Dutch pastor, Van Gogh inherited a tendency toward depression and possibly epilepsy. (His favorite sister, Willemmina, spent four decades in an insane asylum, where she died in 1941.) At age 37, Van Gogh took his own life, in part discouraged because in his whole career he had sold only one painting. As for the myth of the "holy fool," Van Gogh did have an extravagant desire for holiness. He volunteered as a missionary to the coal-miners in southern Belgium, where, taking Christ's teaching literally, he gave away all his possessions and slept in a bare hut. It was only when his ecclesiastical superiors dismissed him in 1880, finding him lacking in solid bourgeois respectability, that Van Gogh turned to art.

Sweetman doesn't make light of Van Gogh's suffering—after all, Van Gogh spent the year 1888 in an asylum. Sweetman's argument is rather that whatever Van Gogh "was suffering from cannot be directly 'read' into his art." The two volumes, *Vincent Van Gogh*, prepared for the 1990 exhibition in Holland on the centenary of his death, sumptuously reproduce that work. They show, contrary to customary opinion, that Van Gogh was as original drawing on paper as he was painting on canvas. Van Gogh completed more than 800 paintings and 700 drawings in his 10 years as a painter, most of them done in the last three years. This unprecedented achievement, Sweetman argues, could only have been accomplished by someone in control of himself. Sweetman quotes from Van Gogh's correspondence to prove there was no evidence of insanity whenever the painter was discussing art. At times, in Sweetman's biography, Van Gogh comes off sounding like the sanest man in Europe.

Sweetman thus puts Van Gogh's suffering in context. But he doesn't explain the achievement of the art which, in the years 1887–90, is

so extraordinary as almost to justify an outlandish explanation. Perhaps some confusion is due to labeling. When the Museum of Modern Art opened in New York in 1929, its first show was devoted to the four fathers of modernism in art: Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and Van Gogh. But Van Gogh wouldn't have considered himself a modernist; his own taste ran to more old-fashioned (and now almost forgotten) painters like Jules Breton or Ernest Meissonier, and his intentions were less exclusively "artistic" than the true modernist's. His free association of colors with emotions, his flat, at times all but abstract perspectives, and his fluid contours and loose brushmarks were less an artistic experiment than an attempt to show visually a world that was more than the visible world. The spiritual fervor that once propelled him as an evangelist he now realized in the blue-violet foliage against a yellow sky in *The Sowers* (1888); he painted his *Yellow House* (1888) in a light that made the house equal to a place of worship. His old popularizers, while hackneyed, may have been on the right track when they treated art like religion. But for Van Gogh, the relation of religion to art reads the other way round: He broke fresh ground by realizing his idiosyncratic religious longings in the secular medium of paint.

History

SOVIET DISUNION: A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR. By Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda. Free Press. 432 pp. \$29.95

Thomas Hobbes should be in the Soviet Union now. While not yet engaged in a Hobbesian "war of all against all," the country is torn by fighting among ethnic minorities and by the threat of secession by at least half of the 14 non-Russian republics. Even the Ukraine—the republic closest to Russia culturally and longest a part of the Russian empire—has effectively issued its own currency. Those hoping for easy solutions will not be heartened by *Soviet Disunion*. It shows how deep and intractable the current divisions are. The Ukrainians, for example, welcomed the German invaders as liberators during World War II, showering them with