

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

flowers.

Nahaylo, a research analyst for Radio Liberty, and Swoboda, a scholar at the University of London, write that the "nationalities problem" today is putting "the Kremlin's entire new course to the test." The creators of perestroika envisioned democratic reforms to make a malfunctioning economy viable. But the Russian empire—under both tsars and commissars—was always held together by military power, not by democracy. The supreme irony is that the Kremlin's sharing of power has not defused but increased opposition: No longer do the Armenians, the authors write, mainly vent "their nationalist sentiments against Azerbaijanis across the border. Now they are venting them against Soviet power."

In the early 1920s both Lenin and Stalin paid lip service to the rights of national minorities, even while they engaged in a bloody seven-year struggle to reconstitute the old tsarist empire by force. The Soviet Constitution of 1923 granted the national republics the right to secede, and native language newspapers and schools were encouraged. By the end of the 1920s, however, the old empire was reassembled, and Stalin abrogated the "national contract" and resumed the tsarist policies of Russification.

The authors speculate about possible futures for the Soviet Union—disintegration, confederation, or a renewed authoritarian empire—but conclude that only "one thing is clear: Genuine democratization and the preservation of empire, however disguised, are incompatible."

One other thing, however, seems certain. Russia needs the other republics more than they need Russia. Great Russia by itself is hardly great. It has limited access to the sea, little good agricultural land, and no natural borders for defense. With its own army in turmoil, the Soviet leadership today faces the challenge of devising a federation whose advantages to the different national minorities will be clear enough to win their support. Surprisingly, Nahaylo and Swoboda write, Gorbachev has shown until quite recently little interest in this problem: "The mere fact that glasnost was now bringing certain problems to the surface did not necessarily mean that the authorities were any more receptive to what the non-Russians had to say."

**LEWIS MUMFORD: A Life.** By Donald L. Miller. Weidenfeld & Nicholson. 628 pp. \$24.95

**LEWIS MUMFORD: Public Intellectual.** Edited by Thomas P. Hughes and Agatha C. Hughes. Oxford. 450 pp. \$39.95

Lewis Mumford, declared his friend Van Wyck Brooks, was "one of the few men who have not *ideas* but an *idea*." Through some 30 books and more than 1,000 essays on art, history, literature, architecture, city planning, and social philosophy, Mumford elaborated his idea—his erudite and impassioned warning about technological civilization and its human toll. Mumford's heyday was the 1920s, when most people were singing the benefits of technology and he was the ugly frog croaking in dissent.

Miller, a historian at Lafayette College, here traces Mumford's life (1895–1990), which nearly spans the 20th century. Mumford called himself a "child of the city," growing up in a quaint, more humanly scaled New York that, already by the 1910s, was disappearing under megalopolitan height and sprawl. He was an illegitimate child of a patrician Jew and a German housekeeper. To offset the stigma of illegitimacy, he vowed to advance himself through his intellect. His education at New York's City College was secondary to his course of independent readings in which he discovered Sir Patrick Geddes. Geddes (1854–1932) was a Scottish botanist and town planner who believed that no living form could be understood in isolation from its environment. Geddes's organic perspective inspired Mumford's central perception that an environment fragmented by technology deprived people of the connections and unity that give meaning to life. (Mumford expressed his debt to "his master" by naming his only son Geddes.)

The 16 essays in Thomas and Agatha Hughes's volume analyze the various ways Mumford elaborated his one idea. Mumford wasn't against the contemporary world. He became the first champion of Frank Lloyd Wright

