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Beauty at a Price

THE lives of artists are notoriously hard, and so also are the lives of people close to them. This has seldom been made more plain than in a new biography of Vincent van Gogh, by Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson.* It is a disturbing book, not merely because it tells a tragic story, but also because of the moral question that remains unanswered in its pages. The Hansons are not moralists: they simply tell their story, though there is evidence that they are not unaware of its implications. But every reader who is concerned in any way with the arts must find himself wondering at the end if beauty can be brought into the world at too heavy a cost.

Vincent van Gogh was 37 when he killed himself. He had known much poverty and squalor; and although his pictures are now treasured in galleries and are worth a fortune, he sold only one or two in his lifetime for small sums, and throughout his working years was dependent on his brother Theo. Without Theo, who was almost a saint, Vincent would have died years earlier and his great pictures would not have been painted. The struggle was not only with poverty. Vincent was uncouth, explosive and uncontrolled, and although he hungered for love he was repellant to women. He drew in upon himself until he reached the edge of madness, and he was under the threat of recurring insanity when he died.

If he had found love, he believed, and had been able to live as other men, he would not have wanted to paint. He saw his art as something second best, a substitute for living; and as he wrestled with giant energies, forcing them through error and failure towards their final expression, he became almost a destroying angel in his effect on other people. His father's life was shortened by grief at behaviour he could not understand; Margot

Begemann, the one woman who might have married him, suffered breakdown and misery after an enforced separation; and Theo, who never faltered in faith and support, was made to feel in the end that he had failed his brother, and within a few months was dead himself. Van Gogh's biographers had to ask themselves "how a man could be described as good who caused anger, strife, embarrassment wherever he went—whether a single person who met him could be described as the better for his having lived." The Hansons believe that he was a child to the end of his life; they point out "that the virtues of the child are reversed when he takes on the shape and responsibilities of a man, and that the adult child is a notorious misfit in an adult world."

It is the old story of the rebel who is able to persist in his revolt at somebody else's expense. Yet there is something else, his absolute integrity as an artist; and this can exist in a man whose personal life must be seen as a failure. A work of genius seems to justify its author: it lives on, serene and untouchable, long after the misery which attended its creation is ended. Nevertheless, the gift is more easily accepted when it comes from a distant time. Van Gogh is too close to us; the people who suffered from his short and angry life were people we could have known and understood: they make us painfully aware of the price that was paid, not in money, for all those paintings. Men have endured greatly to paint and write and compose. We admire their fortitude, but seldom remember the humbler people who helped them to prevail. No man stands alone, and few artists of any worth can succeed unless somewhere in the background is a love which "never faileth." Perhaps that is the answer to the moral question, for love needs no rewards. Vincent van Gogh was a great painter; but Theo was a good man; and as long as the two brothers are remembered it is only Vincent who will be pitied.

***PORTRAIT OF VINCENT**, by Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson; Chatto and Windus, and Secker and Warburg, English price 15/-.

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