Werk, also insbesondere in den Londoner Zeichnungen, für neue Einflüsse offen war und wie er diese verarbeitet hat, wird ein reiches Feld zukünftiger Untersuchung bleiben.


Jürg Meyer zur Capellen

Jan Hulsker: Vincent and Theo: A Dual Biography
(Fuller Publications, Ann Arbor 1990)

The viewing of Robert Altman's film «Vincent and Theo» made me wince and writhe as I witnessed and heard one historical anachronism after another. Vincent is depicted as an uneducated, turpentine-guzzling lout without an idea in his head, while Theo is shown as a syphilitic, psychologically tortured entrepreneur torn between his love of art and the required business compromise. Expecting to find a more intelligent interpretation of an artist so long subjected to the market's insatiable appetite for lunatic artists, I was disappointed to stumble once again upon the vulgar stereotype of the artist as madman. Evidently unable to photograph the originals, Altman commissioned such crudely copied examples of Van Gogh's work that he even denied the audience the expression of «genius» which is supposed to be the beneficial byproduct of artistic madness. In the end, I could easily imagine the audience concluding that Altman's Van Gogh was more insane than the auction price for his work reached in the opening scene of the picture.

This is not to deny the real achievements of the film, for examples, the compelling cinematography and recreation of the nineteenth-century locations in France and The Netherlands. Altman also deserves praise for his decision to give Theo, Vincent's primary patron and friend as well as biological brother, equal billing with his notorious sibling. The famous correspondence between the two inevitably beginning with «Mon cher Theo,» «Mon cher Vincent,» demonstrates to what extent Theo could be seen as a kind of co-creator of his brother's work. They shared an obsessional vision that could have found expression only through their umbilical tie. Yet his role in the sustenance of his brother is usually relegated to a subordinate one in the writings of both popular and academic literature, a misrepresentation that distorts the historical record and plays into the hands of those who perpetuate the stereotype. It is customary to recall with bitter irony in these days of inflated market prices for Van Gogh's painting how few works he sold in his lifetime, yet if we reckon into the
equation Theo’s systematic patronage that permitted Vincent to practice his art fulltime we will have to conclude that he had it much better than the average painter then and now. Pissarro and Gauguin, for example, had a worse time of it financially than Vincent. Indeed, on one occasion Vincent expressed surprise that the postman Roulin could support his family of five on a monthly salary of frs. 135, especially since he himself found it difficult getting along with frs. 150 – 200 per month! Thus it may be said that had there never been a Theo, there never would have been a Vincent.

By coincidence, a recent book bearing the same title as the movie, *Vincent and Theo van Gogh: A Dual Biography*, provides us with the historical and narrative components required to redress the exaggerations and distortions of the past. It was written by Jan Hulsker, a leading authority on the Van Goghs, and published originally in Dutch under the title *Lotgenoten*. Hulsker’s meticulous examination of the documents has enabled him to restore sequences of correspondence that clarify and make more coherent some of the confused episodes in Van Gogh’s life. His section on Vincent’s hospitalization and recuperation following the ear-slashing episode is a model of scholarly thoroughness that contextualizes rather than sensationalizes the event. Although Hulsker is as sensitive to the passion and intensity that characterized the relationship of the two brothers, it is with relief that we turn to his book for the scrupulous reconstruction of the historical situation based on primary evidence and the author’s preference for an approach that displaces the melodramatic accounts deriving from Irving Stone’s *Lust for Life*. Hulsker’s sobering dual biography – constructed with alternate chapters on Vincent and Theo – brings back the brothers in all their diurnal activities without foregoing the eccentricities and psychological tensions of their filial bond.

Hulsker is exceptionally keen when he deals with the major events of Van Gogh that have come down to us as quasi-mythologized texts. Sifting through the hundreds of letters and documents (including much new material) exchanged between the two brothers, Hulsker aims, in his own words, at reducing “romantic anecdotes to their proper proportions” and attempts to unravel the wool and warp of fact and fiction surrounding the life and careers of the Van Goghs. Hulsker treats the lives of the brothers as parallel texts that now and again intersect and now and again collide. But each is given its own weight and import in the construction of the Van Gogh phenomenon.

Although written deliberately in an uninflected style, what I would call the subtext of Hulsker’s sympathy for, and identification with, the Van Gogh family charges the work with a highly personal signification. His acknowledgments attest to his close association with the living members of the family as well as to his profound affection for Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Theo’s widow who preserved and organized the correspondence of the two brothers and the art that sprang from their collaboration, and for the late Dr. Vincent van Gogh, Jo and Theo’s son and the painter’s nephew. Thus his redress of the traditional Van Gogh story and his matter-of-fact interpretation is related to his need to reconstitute the family reputation as if he himself were one of the descendants. This is seen especially in his use of unpublished letters to Theo from his parents which he sees as a partial vindication of them, for they reveal a deep concern for Vincent, and point to “the sacrifices they constantly made for all their children.”

Hulsker betrays his bias early on in the discussion of the impact of the gravestone bearing the name of the still-born child of the Van Goghs (born exactly a year to the day before Vincent) after whom Vincent himself was named. This child had been buried in Zundert in the graveyard near the entrance of the Protestant chapel where the senior Van Gogh, a minister of the church, preached. Vincent would have seen this grave bearing his name regularly and it surely would have made a deep impression on him. Although Hulsker acknowledges the possible traumatic effect this may have had on Vincent, he tends to dismiss previous biographies exploiting this experience as the source of the painter’s preoccupation with death. Noting that infant mortality was hardly rare in nineteenth-century Holland and emphasizing the cir-
cumspect nature of the parson's family, Hulsker immediately starts off his dual biography challenging the typical account of the impact of the grave-stone on Vincent's evolving personality.

Hulsker also points to the sacrifice of the parents in behalf of their children's educations, including that of the eldest daughters. It seems that all the children were trained in foreign languages, and the two adolescent girls could write to Theo both in English and French. Their mother wrote Theo that the boarding school the daughters attended cost so much that they have a good deal of trouble getting it together. Van Gogh senior did all he could to keep Vincent out of the military, paying the considerable sum of 625 guilders for a replacement, about two-thirds of his annual salary. Despite the conflicts between Vincent and his father, the elder Van Gogh did everything possible to help his son socially. Hulsker states that the father's letters rarely display anger or resentment toward Vincent, but more often than not express disappointment and always great concern for his future.

Vincent received an excellent primary school training but it was not known until recently that he had attended a secondary school. The school, called Rijks Hogere Burgerschool Willem II and located in Tilburg, had only been open a short time when Vincent began his studies there in 1866. Although only thirteen years old, he was allowed to skip the preparatory class because of his previous training. His weekly curriculum comprised three hours of mathematics, history, and geography, one hour each of geometry linear drawing, four hours of free-hand drawing, two hours of botany and zoology, and two hours of calligraphy. Such a difficult program produced a high dropout rate, and it is significant that Vincent was one of only five students (out of ten) who managed to get promoted to the next grade. While he never completed the second school year, this advanced education—particularly in languages—served him well in his intellectual development.

Although Theo was four years younger than Vincent, their early careers as art dealers parallel one another. Through family connections, Theo began earning his living at the Brussels branch of the international art dealers, Goupil & Co., while Vincent was employed at Goupil & Co., while Vincent was transferred to Goupil's London branch, and Theo promptly replaced him at The Hague in November and even moved into Vincent's former lodging. At this moment both brothers seemed to have done well and were contented with their work: Vincent wrote Theo earlier in the year that Goupil's was such a splendid firm; the longer you are in it, the more ambition it gives you, while Theo's former employer praised him in his letter of recommendation to The Hague manager for the zeal that he had shown.

Hulsker next takes up the case of Vincent's supposedly passionate love for the daughter of the manager of the London boarding house, who, however, had been already engaged to a previous boarder. Most accounts suggest that Vincent's subsequent disappointment was a turning point in his personal development, irremediably wounding and embittering him. Hulsker claims, however, that the episode has been somewhat exaggerated and overdramatized, since Vincent's letters suggest a brother and sister relationship with Eugenie Loyer and the tone of his writing remains cheerful long after he learns of the betrothal.

The first rift in the family fabric occurred in early 1876 when Vincent informed Theo that his job at the Paris branch of Goupil's was terminating. Vincent evidently had violated several of the house rules, including having gone home during the Christmas holidays when Goupil's had its busiest season. The unpleasant experience intensified the conflict between father and son, and while these clashes have been described as the result of the father's stern disciplinary disposition, Hulsker's findings show that the father remained caring and considerate in his effort to heal their rupture. Hulsker cites a letter from Rev. Van Gogh that demonstrates how assiduously he tried to get in touch with Vincent during a moment of crisis and how hurt he felt about the son's refusal to answer. The senior Van Gogh declares: I have written again now, but just like before, without any reproaches, yet trying to open his eyes to his own faults. Here I would disagree with Hulsker over
cumbersome nature of the parson’s family, Hulsker immediately starts off his dual biography challenging the typical account of the impact of the gravestone on Vincent’s evolving personality.

Hulsker also points to the sacrifice of the parents in behalf of their children’s educations, including that of the eldest daughters. It seems that all the children were trained in foreign languages, and the two adolescent girls could write to Theo both in English and French. Their mother wrote Theo that the boarding school the daughters attended cost so much that they have a good deal of trouble getting it together. Van Gogh senior did all he could to keep Vincent out of the military, paying the considerable sum of 625 guilders for a replacement, about two-thirds of his annual salary. Despite the conflicts between Vincent and his father, the elder Van Gogh did everything possible to help his son socially. Hulsker states that the father’s letters rarely display anger or resentment toward Vincent, but more often than not express disappointment and always great concern for his future.

Vincent received an excellent primary school training but it was not known until recently that he had attended a secondary school. The school, called Rijks Hogere Burgerschool Willem II and located in Tilburg, had only been open a short time when Vincent began his studies there in 1866. Although only thirteen years old, he was allowed to skip the preparatory class because of his previous training. His weekly curriculum comprised three hours of mathematics, history, and geography, one hour each of geometry linear drawing, four hours of free-hand drawing, two hours of botany and zoology, and two hours of calligraphy. Such a difficult program produced a high dropout rate, and it is significant that Vincent was one of only five students (out of ten) who managed to get promoted to the next grade. While he never completed the second school year, this advanced education—particularly in languages—served him well in his intellectual development.

Although Theo was four years younger than Vincent, their early careers as art dealers parallel one another. Through family connections, Theo began earning his living at the Brussels branch of the international art dealers, Goupil & Co., while Vincent was employed at The Hague branch. In May 1873 Vincent was transferred to Goupil’s London branch, and Theo promptly replaced him at The Hague in November and even moved into Vincent’s former lodging. At this moment both brothers seemed to have done well and were contented with their work: Vincent wrote Theo earlier in the year that Goupil’s was such a splendid firm; the longer you are in it, the more ambition it gives you; while Theo’s former employer praised him in his letter of recommendation to The Hague manager for the zeal that he had shown.

Hulsker next takes up the case of Vincent’s supposedly passionate love for the daughter of the manager of the London boarding house, who, however, had been already engaged to a previous boarder. Most accounts suggest that Vincent’s subsequent disappointment was a turning point in his personal development, irremediably wounding and embittering him. Hulsker claims, however, that the episode has been somewhat exaggerated and over dramatized, since Vincent’s letters suggest a brother and sister relationship with Eugenie Loyer and the tone of his writing remains cheerful long after he learns of the betrothal.

The first rift in the family fabric occurred in early 1876 when Vincent informed Theo that his job at the Paris branch of Goupil’s was terminating. Vincent evidently had violated several of the house rules, including having gone home during the Christmas holidays when Goupil’s had its busiest season. The unpleasant experience intensified the conflict between father and son, and while these clashes have been described as the result of the father’s stern disciplinary disposition, Hulsker’s findings show that the father remained caring and considerate in his effort to heal their rupture. Hulsker cites a letter from reverend Van Gogh that demonstrates how assiduously he tried to get in touch with Vincent during a moment of crisis and how hurt he felt about the son’s refusal to answer. The senior Van Gogh declares: I have written again now, but just like before, without any reproaches, yet trying to open his eyes to his own faults. Here I would disagree with Hulsker over
the attitude of the parent, since the letter indicates a
certain self-righteous tone and critical disposi-
tion toward the «faults» of his son. True enough
that all this saddens the father but the elder Van
Gogh clearly blames Vincent for all his troubles
and especially for undermining the authority of the
manager of Goupil and Co. It is clear that the
reverend felt his own jurisdiction over his son
slowly ebbing away at this point, so he unreser-
vedly defended the authority of Vincent’s employer
to reinforce his own control rather than see the son’s
side of the argument and encourage his independ-
ence from all forms of overbearing authority. Later
correspondence revealed that Vincent felt uncom-
fortable in his public role in the art gallery, leading
him to question his future in the business.

Vincent’s rupture with Goupil (now run by
Boussod & Valadon) marks the end of a solid
bourgeois lifestyle mapped out for him by his
family. Meanwhile, Theo hangs on as the dutiful
son and torch bearer of the parent’s desires for the
children, but in the process suffers bouts of
depression and illness. Vincent encourages and
cheers him with long biblical quotations and con-
soling passages gleaned from moralizing literature,
in effect taking upon himself the paternal role but
making more use of modern and protean sources.
By so doing, he begins to rehearse his future career
as evangelical lay preacher and thus for the first
time links his art directly to his life. Theo, however,
betrays his irreligiosity in the same period, ques-
tioning his parental demands to go to church. Thus
the two brothers express their independence in the
way they accept and reject different components of
their collective parental persona: Vincent spurns
the slavish bourgeois tradition but absorbs and
reconstitutes the religious motivation, while Theo
retains the bourgeois careerist goal and foresewears
religion. Vincent’s break with the bourgeois life-
style (the parents continually refer to his strange or
eccentric behavior) threw him out of touch with
the familial tradition, while Theo’s rejection of
religious affiliation proved less disruptive socially,
hence Theo’s role as mediator between his brother
and parents who put more emphasis on what the
neighbors thought than on their religious beliefs.

Yet Theo paid a high physical and mental price for
this position, and had to live out his creative long-
ings vicariously through his brother’s social and
imaginative independence.

It is altogether consistent with Van Gogh’s social
independence that he preferred a course of self-
instruction for his religious career (even his study
with Mendes de Costa in Amsterdam could hardly
be considered academic) as opposed to the more
protracted formal curriculum required to satisfy
the call of his uncles and his father for ordination.
Analogously, he would order his own instruc-
tional program when he embarked on a career as a
painter, again flouting the conventional bourgeois
institutional channels for social and official suc-
cess. In both cases, he aimed at expressing his
feelings to and for the poor and oppressed in
society. This required traits of courage and self-
sacrifice (and ultimately misguided bourgeois ide-
alism) that Theo did not possess but evidently
recognized in his brother.

Vincent continues to console Theo in his extreme
dejection (exacerbated by an unhappy love affair in
1877) with biblical texts, thus carrying on both the
paternal and familial responsibility for his younger
brother. Vincent in fact sided with their father
against Theo’s relationship with a working class
woman (possibly a prostitute; the passage – sup-
pressed by Jo van Gogh-Bonger – of March 1877, in
which Vincent speaks to Theo’s frustrated desires
by advising him, «Do go there, whenever it be-
comes too much for you, suggests a brothel), a
situation that will alter drastically in the next de-
cade as Vincent confronts a similar dilemma. But the
heretofore censored text reveals Vincent still iden-
tifying with his father – now bitterly disappointed
in his son’s failure to complete his studies in Am-
sterdam – on the eve of his trial in the Brussels
Training School for Evangelists.

Although quitting the school before receiving his
certifying diploma, he moved to the mining dis-
tric of the Borinage, Belgium in December 1878 where
the requirements for evangelical service were less
stringent. Here he quickly gauged the impover-
ished and dangerous conditions of the miners’
lives, displaying an unusual empathy for the vic-
tims of mine disasters and their families. Momentarily, it looked as if Vincent had found his niche even to the satisfaction of his parents. But then in February 1879 the situation changed as Vincent found it painful to enjoy a lifestyle above that of the poorest members of his congregation. Accordingly, he began divesting himself of his worldly belongings and left his boarding house for a small miner’s cabin and the barest of essentials. His parents now began to worry again, as they interpreted this expression of his intense religious feelings as “fanatical” (Hulsker’s term). They soon resigned themselves to having a son they considered peculiar and eccentric. Despite a meeting of the elder Van Gogh with the authorities of the local evangelical church who were becoming uncomfortable with Vincent’s behavior, Vincent was not reappointed when his first term ran out. While the report of the clerical superiors recognized Van Gogh’s traits of compassion, self-sacrifice and devotion, they claimed he lacked “the gift of the word” that was indispensable to the successful evangelist. I suspect that this bit of self-serving nonsense simply meant that the clerical committee found Van Gogh’s work too subversive to local mining interests.

It is no coincidence that Van Gogh, stripped of the possibility of communicating through “the word,” now turned to the image to render his religious feelings. The themes of his short-lived evangelical career were now transferred to the graphic surface. Indeed, there was no break between his evangelical work and his drawing activity, which began before he quit his religious functions in July 1879 and continued in earnest almost immediately after he lost his appointment. Not surprisingly, his earliest subjects were the miners and their surroundings in the Borinage, thus maintaining a continuity with his previous occupation.

Now began the rupture with the family who perceived Vincent as a social liability and financial burden. Yet at the same time the tempo of the lives of Vincent and Theo pick up and overlap: Theo is transferred to the Paris branch of Goupil’s (1880) in the very period Vincent embarks on a career in the arts, inaugurating their fraternal patron-painter relationship and creative partnership. But first Theo had to divest himself of the sense of the family “curse” that now attached itself to his brother, and in the consequent dialogue with Vincent gained an insight into his own creative frustrations. At the same time, the exchange with Theo helped Vincent put his painful experience of the Borinage into perspective and moved him from a dogmatic religious position to an aesthetic view of the Godhead. In his new formulation, love is the liberating factor in all authentic creative work and signifies the presence of the Creator. Thus Vincent could justify the choice of his new profession as perfectly reconcilable with his previous mission.

It is curious to see also the paradoxical bourgeoisification of Van Gogh’s mindset at the moment he decided to take up art as his profession. Since he had to justify this decision in the context of his parental aspirations and those of the wider Dutch society, it is not surprising to come upon repeated references in his letters during the ensuing years to his need to produce “salable” drawings for a popular market. Although normally given short shrift in the literature, it is to Hulsker’s credit that he points out the importance of Vincent’s ambition to become a commercial illustrator for the popular journals. His peculiar graphic style and his legendary speed of execution grew out of his illustrational practice of the early period and remained hallmarks of his mature style. In any case, Vincent’s strategy for beginning his art career in this practical activity explains why both Theo and their uncle Tersteeg could accept and even encourage Vincent’s move to become an artist. As Theo assumes the responsibility of supporting Vincent, the parents breathe easier about their eldest son. It is as if Theo’s success in Paris compensates them for Vincent’s failure and by further enabling Vincent to survive without burdening them it softens their bitter disappointment. There is now an inversion in the brothers’ relationship, with the youngest assuming the paternal role heretofore reserved to Vincent. (Vincent would sardonically refer to Theo as „Pa II.”) Vincent literally “sold his birthright” when he began life all over again to become an artist, and Theo simultaneously gains a new lease on life.
Vincent’s break with orthodoxy led to a falling out with his father, with whom a violent altercation precipitated his departure from the reverend’s parsonage in Etten at the end of 1881. (The year before the elder Van Gogh, distressed over Vincent’s conduct in the Borinage, tried to commit his son to an asylum for the insane, an act which embittered their relationship ever after.) Vincent now engages in the generational conflict, associating his father with rigidity, academicism, outworn tradition, and stale ideas. He looks for surrogate father figures in the person of artists he admire such as père Millet, père Israels, and even his cousin, Anton Mauve. His emancipation from the paternal authority and religious orthodoxy coincides with the development of his originality and creative self-confidence. Indeed, it is his stay at The Hague following his abrupt departure from Etten that marks a watershed in his artistic career.

At first, Vincent planned to accept his brother’s patronage only as a provisional condition until his black and white illustrations would earn him a comfortable monthly salary. His progress was rapid during this period, and even Uncle Cor decided Vincent had talent and commissioned a series of pen and ink drawings from him. In the same period, Vincent began systematically collecting prints of English, French, and American illustrators and cartoonists whose work carried a social meaning, especially in relation to the poor. His ambition to illustrate for popular journals was fired by these examples, which kept alive the possibility of translating his social compassion into something both practical and salable. He could get the «message» across to the widest possible audience and still make a living, exactly as he did when carrying out his evangelical work in the Borinage. Vincent looked about for cheap means of reproducing his work to make his drawings available «for workmen’s houses and for farms, in a word for every working man.» As he gained mastery, he became enmeshed in the market system of high art but he never entirely abandoned this dream of making his work accessible to an audience normally excluded from the system. This explains in large part the peculiar graphic look and immediacy of his painted surfaces.

Theo’s support brought with it some hidden costs: the younger brother now usurps the paternal position reserved in traditional families for the eldest. This becomes evident in Theo’s attempt to break up the relationship between Vincent and Sien, the hardened prostitute who significantly influenced the painter’s life during his stay in The Hague in the early 1880s. Indeed, he brought so much pressure to bear upon the eventual outcome that Vincent compared Theo to their father for his severity of judgment. Blaming Theo for influencing his decision to leave Sien and her children in September 1883, Vincent wrote his brother: «You have this much in common with Father, who often acts in the same way, that you are cruel in your worldly wisdom.» What is striking in this passage is Vincent’s obvious acknowledgment of the switch in the relationship, with himself in the subordinate, infantilized role. Theo was soon to criticize Vincent in every area of his existence, including Vincent’s attitude toward their father, the quality of his work, his want of diligence in pursuing his commercial career, and his unkempt appearance (reverend Van Gogh is forever harping on Vincent’s outward mien). Theo even provided him with a suit and other hand-me-downs.

Meanwhile, all was not rosy with Theo. He fared poorly with his superiors Boussod & Valadon, Goupil’s successors, and for a moment feared being peremptorily dismissed. Theo became so despondent that he considered running away to America. Vincent advised his brother to give up art dealing for painting, betraying an interesting insight into Theo’s frustrations working in a firm displaying official taste. Although Theo disclaimed any artistic talent, Vincent now looked on him as his Doppelgänger: «I am so deeply convinced of your artistic talent that to me you will be an artist as soon as you take up a brush or a piece of crayon and, adroitly or maladroitly, make something.» His compulsion to make Theo his counterpart must have implied a need to shore up his own anxieties about breaking with the familial aspirations. Backing off from pressure on Theo who in response stopped writing, Vincent explained: «I would not want to develop the artist in me if you
have to suppress your artistic talent for my sake, I
would never approve of your repressing the artist
in yourself, in no matter whose sake it were for, for
the sake of either Father, mother, brother or wife.«
Thus their partnership sprang from their profound
need to live through each other.

It was while Vincent was living again with his
family, this time in the parsonage at Nuenen, that
he reformulated his economic relationship with
Theo. Early in 1884 Vincent put forward this pro-
posal: «Let me send you my work, and keep what
you like for yourself, but I insist on considering
the money I receive from you after March as money I
have earned.» This new proposal alleviated Vin-
cent’s guilt about dependence on his brother's
income, and at the same time sets up a situation in
which Vincent could sell his work, indeed, have a
guaranteed sale for all of his creations from a rep-
resentative of the most reputable art dealers in
the world. What more could an artist ask for? Theo
for his part, feeling uncomfortable with Vincent’s
proposal, harshly attacked his brother’s first pack-
age of works under the new arrangement by ques-
tioning the «salability» and originality of the initial
sketches. Soon, however, Theo relished this rela-
tionship and grew defensive when Vincent threat-
ened to end their collaboration.

A turning point in their lives was the sudden death
of their father on 26 March 1885. Theo came home
from Paris and the two brothers reunited, putting
aside their differences for the time being. Soon
after, Vincent left his parental home forever, event-
ually moving to Paris, where he lived at first with
Theo on rue de Laval (now rue Victor Massé). The
shift to Paris also entailed a change in his identity:
he began to attend to his health and physical ap-
pearance and dress more fashionably, a change we
can map out in the first self-portraits of this period.

Vincent’s spurt of self-confidence was matched
by Theo's growing self-assertiveness in his work.
He had weathered the crisis in his job at Boussod &
Valadon, and, as manager of the branch on Boule-
vard Montmartre had begun — tacitly at first —
promoting the cause of the Impressionists and
other independents. Vincent’s presence and en-
thusiasm for the new trends fortified Theo's deter-
mination to represent them, and by 1887 he had
acquired a reputation for establishing a kind of
showcase for the avantgarde. Nevertheless, he was
assigned only a small portion of the gallery to show
these artists and he had to vigorously justify his
taste and defend their qualities. Here the mutual
exchange between Vincent and Theo proved deci-
sive, preparing them intellectually to understand
the achievements of the young painters and ena-
bling them to form a cohesive, if tense, artistic unit
that brought out their best traits and attracted to
them a representative circle of these painters.

Vincent’s wholehearted plunge into impression-
ist color and themes, and Theo’s enthusiastic sup-
port for the Impressionists, may be seen as a sign of
their own growing independence no doubt stimu-
lated by the death of their father. The sense of
liberation from the rigid authoritarianism embodied
in the elder Van Gogh coincides with Vincent’s
rejection of Mauve and Israels, who despite their
modernist attempts still embodied traditional au-
thority in the aesthetic realm. Both Van Goghs
breathe the heady cosmopolitan air of the Parisian
capital, seeking the sunlight to burn out the past
and the conventions associated with their native
heritage.

At the same time, it should not be over looked that
both brothers saw impressionism as a potentially
good business investment. Vincent not only adopt-
ed it as a source of original expression, but because
he could see its market potential. Vincent and Theo
planned to introduce impressionism into England
and Holland, working in the last country through
Uncle Tersteeg, perhaps Vincent’s ultimate vindica-
tion since he now considered himself an «im-
pressionist» as well. Thus by broadcasting impres-
sionism and its sketchy and rough qualities, the
two brothers were creating the conditions for the
sale of Vincent’s work and for the securing of
Theo’s reputation as a prescient art dealer.

Vincent tried to enlist Theo’s support in bringing
Gauguin to Arles by pointing out the business
advantage of establishing a contractual arrange-
ment with Gaugin. In return for a fixed sum for
both Vincent and Gaugin, Theo would get pic-
tures from both of them every month (he was able
to sell Gauguin’s work immediately). They in turn would provide a nucleus for a modern art colony that would produce a stream of pictures for the Dutch market, again funneled through Tersteeg. Here Vincent’s entrepreneurial side is clearly seen, again altering the traditional view of the artist as a hapless and unworldly creature and showing another critical facet of the relationship with his brother. Thanks to the stimulation of their entrepreneurial venture the time in Arles turned out to be the most productive period of Vincent’s career.

Of course, the arrival of Gauguin at the end of October 1888 would presage the most traumatic event of Vincent’s life as well. Hulsker is at his best in piecing together the events culminating in the ear-slaughtering episode of 23 December, carefully sifting through the correspondence of Gauguin and Vincent and weighing Gauguin’s reminiscences of a later period. Since Vincent kept silent about the incident (undoubtedly because he could not recall it), the historian is obliged to depend on Gauguin’s self-serving and guilt-ridden account. Although numerous attempts to explain the episode in terms of Van Gogh’s state of health have not yet proven satisfying to scholar and medical practitioners alike (Vincent suffered from epileptic-like seizures and I personally lean to the idea that he acted in a state of disorientation during the post-ictal state), it is clear that what occurred cannot be attributed to insanity. Yet history, reinforced by the market, has exploited the event to establish his reputation as the quintessentially mad artist. Refreshingly, Hulsker divests the experience of its accumulated layers of anecdotal hysteria by putting it into historical and medical perspective.

Finally, there is the retelling of the final days at Auvers-sur-Oise in June and July 1890 leading up to Vincent’s suicide, precipitated by a rapid sequence of unfortunate events including a frustrated love affair with the daughter of his physician who forbade the artist to see her, Theo’s threatened break with Boussod & Valadon and the potential loss of income, the domestic conflicts of Theo and Jo and the recent illness of their baby, the dissatisfaction with the way Theo and Jo were storing his pictures in their Paris apartment, and the general sense of being a burden to everyone who cared for him. All of these seething issues came to a head on 6 July when Vincent visited his brother and sister-in-law in Paris, and he returned to Auvers feeling crushed by the weight of the family tensions. Three weeks later he shot himself and died on 29 July. Six months later Theo himself died in an asylum near Utrecht. The poignant drama of the two Van Gogh boys, whose lives were so inextricably fused, culminates with the haunting prospect of their double grave at Auvers, the closing image of Altman’s film and Hulsker’s dual biography.

The guilt carried by Theo who, for some reason, never relieved his brother’s suspense over the outcome (positive, as it turned out) of his conflict with Boussod & Valadon, was that of a sibling whose entire life had been shaped by the interaction with his brother. Yet in his last days he could have taken solace from the words of the draft of Vincent’s last letter to him:

But yet, my dear brother, there is this that I have always told you — and I repeat it once more with all the earnestness which results from a mind assiduously fixed on trying to do as well as possible — I tell you again that I shall always consider you to be something else than a simple dealer in Corots, that through my mediation you have your part in the actual production of certain canvases, which will retain their calm even in catastrophe.

Albert Boime