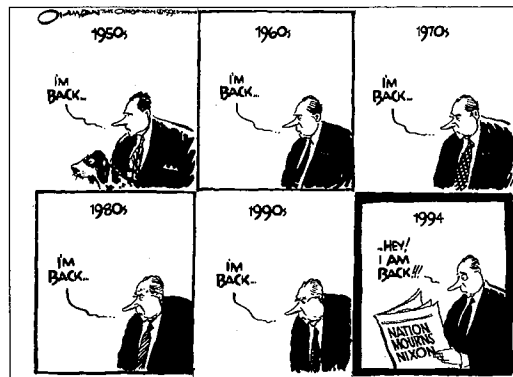


izing U.S. relations with the People's Republic of China in 1972, Nixon in 1992 reversed his opposition to aid packages for Boris Yeltsin's Russia (which he had previously denounced as "counterproductive Western painkillers"). Essential to Nixon's strategy was his uncanny ability to manipulate the media. Kalb unravels the symbiotic relationships that Nixon cultivated with news outlets such as *Time* (where current Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott called himself Nixon's "case officer"), the *New York Times* op-ed page (which swallowed Nixon submissions as if they were bon-bons), and the TV networks (where Ted Koppel said "interviewing Nixon is one of the most fascinating political experiences").

The "Nixon memo" of Kalb's title refers to Nixon's carefully orchestrated dispatch on March 10, 1992, to 50 opinion makers blasting the Bush administration's Russia policy as "pathetically inadequate." Given Nixon's growing stature and his proven access to the media, neither President Bush then nor President Clinton later dared to alienate an elder statesman capable of asking the politically damaging question, Who lost Russia? While history may discredit Nixon's acuity as a Russia analyst (in 1991 Nixon was observing, "I doubt that Yeltsin wants Gorbachev's job"), his stage-management of the Russian question put Nixon, Kalb writes, "finally back in the big leagues."

Kalb's analysis would likely not have displeased Nixon, who once told his chief of staff H. R. Haldeman that "mystique is more important than content." There is an odd irony here. Kalb, for all his animosity toward Nixon, has not only explained but contributed to the former president's rehabilitation. Haldeman, who professed to admire Nixon and whom Nixon in turn said he "loved," may have all but ensured that the 37th president's rehabilitation will be temporary. Each evening Haldeman repeated into a tape recorder what Nixon had said and done that day, and there never has been a portrait of a president such as those tapes reveal. (These 700 pages are, in fact, but a fraction of the "diaries" available on CD-ROM.) Nixon's well-known dislike of



blacks and Jews, both individually and in general, is recorded here in detail; more surprising is his sheer lack of knowledge of both domestic and foreign policy. Almost every major domestic innovation for which the Nixon administration is credited—from education to welfare, from environment to consumer protection—was passed, Haldeman reveals, despite Nixon's secret opposition. The mystique of Nixon's second act, as Kalb shows, might have been new and improved; under the rhetoric, Haldeman reveals, the substance had not changed.

Arts & Letters

WALTER PATER: Lover of Strange Souls.
By Denis Donoghue. Knopf. 347 pp. \$30

Hearing of Walter Pater's death, Oscar Wilde reportedly said, "Was he ever alive?" Donoghue might answer, "Why, he lives still." In this eloquent and wonderfully nuanced book, Donoghue makes large claims for Pater, the languid 19th-century Oxford don who smuggled subversive Continental notions of art for art's sake into traditional Britain and, in so doing, helped conjure into existence artistic modernism.

Donoghue, who holds the Henry James Chair of Letters at New York University, writes against the current fashion in biography, in which the accreting volumes can double as doorstops. His book is not only of relatively modest size; it gets the proportions

right. The discussion of Pater's works, twice as interesting as his personality, fills twice the space of the formal biographical section. For, in truth, there was little outward excitement to Pater's life. He was born in London in 1839 and educated at Oxford, where, after becoming a fellow of Brasenose in 1864, he remained till his death in 1894. Occasionally he visited the Continent with his two sisters. But these were brief interruptions in the routine of the quintessential—cartoonish even—homosexual Victorian don, the type of committed nonbeliever who nonetheless toys with the idea of taking holy orders. His outward life might be compressed into a single sentence: he taught, he thought, he wrote. Displaying minimal social charm, he was the taciturn guest you would have dreaded sitting next to at dinner. But do not mistake the scale of the physical life for its true dimensions. In his mind, on the page, Pater made a life of continuous event. He created himself as a work of art.

Pater is most famous as the author of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873; later retitled *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*). The conclusion to his *Studies* was thought, in Victorian England, nothing short of dangerous. Pater's essentially pagan fervor might mislead young men, it was worried, as when he argued for the importance of self-realization, of experiencing the moment profoundly: "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy," Pater wrote in phrases that became famous, "is success in life." That so wan and self-effacing a personality should have measured his worth against fire and Dionysian transport is ironic indeed.

Why should we still care about Pater? To begin with, he is reckoned by some a master of English prose, and by some measures he indisputably is: the form is prose, the words are English, and Pater is masterful at putting them together in certain lush, idiosyncratic patterns. Whether today's reader will take pleasure in the patterns is another matter. Donoghue makes the strongest case for their appeal. He explains that the techniques of delay in Pater's sentences "mark refusal to live by the rhythms of public life, commerce, and

technology." This is ingenious, as is his assertion that Pater's truest existence was lived out in prose: "He was, sentence by sentence, a textual self in the act of becoming, of making itself, improvising itself from one intense moment to the next." For many readers, though, a Pateresque sentence approximates pushing a large rock up a hill and wishing finally, in exhaustion, that the thing will simply roll backward, flatten you, and end the ordeal.

But there is other evidence to argue the man's enduring importance. Donoghue believes that Pater, more than any other English writer, made available the disjunction of sensation from judgment and thereby intuited the form of modern literature we find in the early work of Yeats, Joyce, and Eliot. Pater was modern literature's first act, Donoghue argues, and "the major writers achieved their second and third acts by dissenting from him and from their first selves." In the end Donoghue appears to surprise even himself by advancing the claims of aestheticism, "for all its risk of triviality, exquisiteness, solipsism," against our dominant contemporary critical theory that understands every work of art as merely illustrative of a certain ideological formation. Finally Donoghue admires the shy Oxford don for his audacity in proposing a so-called "higher morality," which was "to treat life in the spirit of art."

THE BIRD ARTIST. By Howard Norman.
Farrar, Strauss. 289 pp. \$20

"My name is Fabian Vas. I live in Witless Bay, Newfoundland. You would not have heard of me. Obscurity is not necessarily failure, though; I am a bird artist, and have more or less made a living at it. Yet I murdered the lighthouse keeper, Botho August, and this is an equal part of how I think of myself."

With these sentences, short, flat, and unpretentious, begins what may be the past year's most successfully realized novel. *The Bird Artist*, like Norman's earlier *The Northern Lights* (both were nominated for the National Book Award), are novels of the unfamiliar, transpiring in a terrain simpler, harsher, and stranger