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than the one most readers call home. Here the landscape is Newfoundland at the start of this century, and Norman fills it with characters (Fabian Vas, his parents Alaric and Orkney, Romeo Gillette), with places (Witless Bay, Richibucto, Trespasey), and even birds (teals, kittiwakes, mergansers) whose peculiar-sounding names reverberate exotically, to suggest a world apart. Each page is a repository of the sensory images of bygone Newfoundland: villagers in the crabapple light of dawn, dressing fish for salting, the odor of codfish blowing down from the flats. But *The Bird Artist* is, foremost, a novel for the ear. Norman favors pared-down sentences and broken dialogue, most of which convey some odd, savory turn of phrase that salts—hermetically seals—the story in its own packing of language. This language, at once simplified and oddly poetic, creates the temporal rhythms of an earlier time, and that time, that different rhythm in human relationships, is the real subject of this novel.

Curiously, the most lauded novel of 1993—Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize-, National Book Award-winning *The Shipping News*—is also set in Newfoundland. This may be more than a coincidence. Literature is filled with idealized, semifictional countries—Blake's Golgonooza, Yeats's Byzantium, Rilke's Russia (glimpsed from the speeding train compartment of a six-month visit)—that, at best, seem like places you might look up in an atlas. In this comedy about a semirecluse, a remote land, and a slower-paced era, Howard Norman has also created a mythic, visionary country, a weather and terrain of his own, where human society is reduced to essentials, people are stoic and humorous, and decency and integrity are the meaning behind everything. Most characters in *The Bird Artist*—except Fabian's mother in her ill-fated adultery with the lighthouse keeper—have learned the hard lesson that Fabian's drawing instructor has drummed into him. "Granted, cormorants can look eerily like a fossil bird come alive in your harbor, there," the instructor says of Fabian's draftsmanship. "Nonetheless, they are worthy of everything but your poor drawings of them. Bird art must derive its power

from emotion, naturally, but emotions have to be tempered and forged by sheer discipline, all for the sake of posterity."

**THE HOUSE OF PERCY:** Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family. By Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Oxford Univ. 454 pp. \$30

According to some of its more legend-prone members, the Percy family in America was descended from Harry Percy, the Hotspur of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Even if they have been deluded in that belief, the saga of this talented and tormented southern family betrays a grand Shakespearian sweep. The six generations of Percys that Wyatt-Brown studies enact a tale full of sound and fury—of senators, military heroes, and literary writers, of honor and bigamy, of eminence and madness and early death.

In his earlier *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982), Wyatt-Brown, a historian at the University of Florida, established himself as the authority on the traditional values of the South. Here he focuses on the Percy family—a clan he likens in some ways to the Yankee Adamses—because in it he finds southern culture writ small. If myth making, the ethics of honor, and the pathology of depression obsessed the Percys generation after generation, they have characterized southern preoccupations at large. Examining this extended group of relatives, beginning with Charles in the late 18th century, Wyatt-Brown anatomizes history in its smallest particulars, showing how general cultural values are recapitulated in families and individuals and at what cost.

*The House of Percy* illuminates, above all, the process of writing, of how for many Percys creative expression eased the pain of an inherited predisposition toward melancholy. Writing allowed brilliant Percy women, such as Sarah Dorsey (1829–79), release from the confines of southern culture when there were few other avenues of escape. Both the father and the grandfather of

the novelist Walker Percy (1916–90) committed suicide, but Walker wrestled a similar depression to fruitful issue in *The Movie-Goer*, *The Second Coming*, and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In such novels he resolved his ambiguous feelings toward two father-figures—his guardian-cousin, Will (a poet and memoirist), and his real father, LeRoy—by indicting rather than indicting them. Rarely have the interconnections among family history, regional history, depression, and creativity stood more clearly delineated than in Wyatt-Brown's efforts to trace how an American family—whether descended from the Northumberland earls or not—turned itself into an aristocracy of conscience and talent.

**HEBREW AND MODERNITY.** By Robert Alter. Univ. of Ind. 192 pp. \$27.95

The rebirth of the Hebrew language is popularly considered a tale at once thrilling and weird: an ancient tongue, lost as a living language two millennia ago, fossilized in liturgy, was resurrected from the dead by a few enthusiasts on the soil of modern Israel. But as Alter, a professor of Hebrew and comparative languages at the University of California at Berkeley, makes clear, the story is more complicated and, if possible, even weirder. He tells of a language that, far from having died out of daily usage, lived "a flickering intense half-life" through all the years of Diaspora, which began in 586 B.C., a language in which Jews continued uninterruptedly to compose not just prayers but secular literature and poetry. Oddest of all, during the 18th century a group of dedicated Yiddish-speaking writers called the *nusakh* began to compose realistic novels in Hebrew, inventing a conversational

style for a language that no one conversed in. In large measure, Alter argues, this made possible the birth of Zionism and the modern tongue.

Alter's essay on the *nusakh* offers not just literary analysis but restored history. Even in Israel, few know that modern Hebrew literature did not result from Zionism but preceded it. In other essays, Alter analyzes modern Israeli novelists such as S. Y. Agnon and David Grossman and the poet Yehuda Amichai, to discover how an ancient mode of expression has been converted to modern, colloquial literary uses. Indeed, Alter suggests, if "postmodern" literature typically unites different, even discordant perspectives, voices, and eras in one work, then Hebrew, in which ordinary conversations can carry echoes of Ecclesiastes or the Book of Judges, makes a surprisingly congenial medium for postmodern poetry and fiction.

### Philosophy & Religion

**THE MAGUS OF THE NORTH:** J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism. By Isaiah Berlin. Farrar, Strauss. 144 pp. \$21

Johann George Hamann (1730–88) is an 18th-century German thinker that nobody, or at least nobody since Goethe, appears to remember. The very titles of his works hint why. In *New Apology for the Letter H*, for example, Hamann attacked a respected German theologian who had suggested omitting the letter *h* wherever it was not pronounced. Hamann, to the contrary, celebrated the ghostly *h* as embodying the unpredictable, the element of fantasy in God's world, the beauty of everything incomprehensible. Given the nature of his preoccupations, the puzzle is not why Hamann was forgotten but why Sir

