

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

