

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 inditing 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

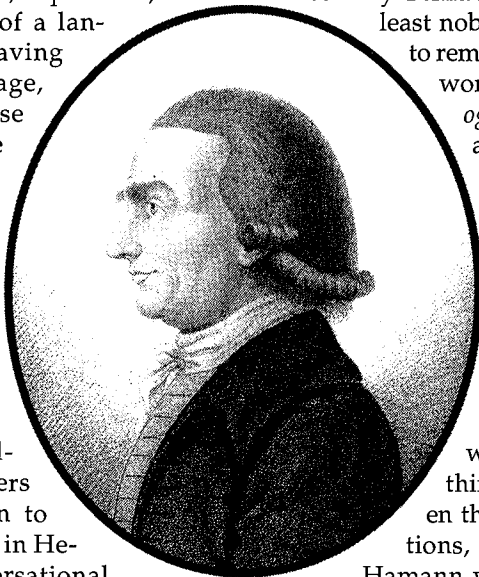
style for a language that no one conversed in. In large measure, Alter argues, this made possible the birth of Zionism and the modern tongue.

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



Isaiah Berlin, the Magus of Oxford, the octogenarian historian of ideas, has devoted a small book to reviving him.

At the very moment Diderot and his fellow Encyclopedists in Paris were erecting their edifice of rational knowledge, in Königsberg Hamann was advocating the idiosyncratic over the systematic, the bizarre over the daily, and the scarcely believable over the commonly accepted. And it is exactly this contrariness that interests Berlin. Hamann was the first European thinker to formulate a rebuttal of the Enlightenment that was not grounded on strictly religious premises. His fundamental insight was that the supposed universality of Enlightenment rationality tends not only to deny religious faith but to negate the validity of what all individuals uniquely see, hear, and feel for themselves. Consequently, Hamann opposed science, and even common sense, even when they produced useful results, fearing their suffocating effect upon the individual's autonomy.

At times Hamann comes off sounding like an early D. H. Lawrence, offering the same heady cocktail of antiscience, romanticism, and individualism. However, readers of this small volume will likely find Hamann's intelligence less intriguing than Berlin's. Berlin's complexity of mind, neither strictly Enlightenment nor "Counter-Enlightenment" (a word he coined), enables him to hold contradictory ideas simultaneously. He thinks that Hamann's irrationalist spiritual vision (so unlike Berlin's skepticism) does possess "intrinsic value," even though Hamann carried it into a fanaticism that imperils social and political life. Hamann's brand of fanaticism—a dangerous mixture of anti-intellectualism, anti-Semitism, fideism, and populism—would grow over the next two centuries "until it finally reach[ed] a point of violent hysteria in Austro-German racism and National Socialism." Yet it is for his positive as well as his negative qualities that "Hamann repays study," Berlin concludes. "He struck the first blow against the quantified world; his attack was often ill-judged, but he raised some of the greatest issues of our time by refusing to accept their advent."

Contemporary Affairs

BLACKS AND JEWS: ALLIANCES AND ARGUMENTS. Ed. by Paul Berman.

Delacorte Press. 303 pp. \$22.50

JEWS AND BLACKS: Let the Healing Begin. By Cornel West and Michael Lerner. Grosset/Putnam. 226 pp. \$24.95

Of all "emigrant groups" in America, blacks and Jews have come closest to sharing a common sociological experience: both historically were victims of persecutions, and both minorities were long regarded as outcasts by the dominant culture. For much of this century American Jews and blacks co-operated in an unofficial alliance, one that began with the supporting links between W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Crisis* and Abraham Cahan's *Jewish Daily Forward* and continued through the close friendship of those moral prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr. Why, then, since the late 1960s, did black-Jewish relations go so bad?

