
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

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