

and ostracism during Mussolini's later years forced "the private, muted, ancestral consciousness" to the surface earlier. Nevertheless, argues Hughes, because Jews in Italy were in many respects "indistinguishable" from their Christian compatriots, they wrote ecumenically of their ordeal, testifying "on behalf of all victims," anti-Fascist Christians as well as Jews. Always striving for "what was universal," Jewish writers affirmed the resilient optimistic humanism of their heritage.

OUR NIG; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black

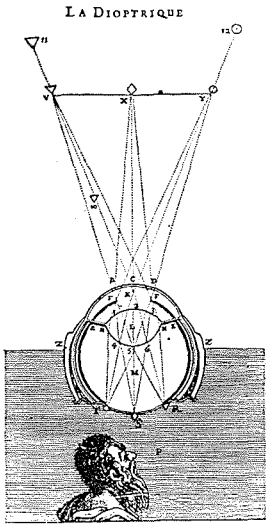
by Harriet E. Wilson
introduction and notes
by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Vintage, 1983
232 pp. \$10.95 cloth,
\$4.95 paper

This landmark of black American fiction—it was the first novel by a black woman to be published in this country—suffered more than a century of neglect. A sentimental novel focusing on white racism in the antebellum North, it resembled in some respects the widely read slave narratives written during the mid-19th century. Its heroine, Frado, an indentured servant, suffers under her cruel white mistress until, at age 18, her health broken, she is thrown out upon the world. Wilson's largely autobiographical 1859 novel touched on interracial marriage and the hypocrisy of abolitionists. Such matters were far less palatable to white readers than those treated in the more exotic slave narratives. *Our Nig* did not receive a single review. It remained known only to a few librarians and scholars, who considered it a curiosity authored by a white woman. Gates, a Yale scholar, has done a masterful piece of detective work in establishing the identity of the author. His efforts have given this work its proper place in a vigorous literary tradition.

**THE ART OF DESCRIBING:
Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century**

by Svetlana Alpers
Chicago, 1983
273 pp. \$37.50

Dutch painting of the 17th century, though widely admired by gallery-goers for its richness of detail, has usually received less than the highest marks from art historians and critics. Alpers, a Berkeley art historian, attributes their faint praise to the fact that most "analytic strategies" used by modern academic critics were developed "in refer-



ence to the Italian [Renaissance] tradition," with its emphases upon elaborate perspective systems, the human form, and iconography (i.e., the painting's allusion to religious or mythical texts). By contrast, the works of such painters as Pieter Saenredam, Willem Kalf, and Jan Vermeer reflect the distinctive cultural climate of 17th-century Holland—a society fascinated by the visible world. The popularity of the *camera obscura* (prototype of the modern camera), optics, and lens-making disposed artists toward a kind of visual reporting. While the Italians sought primarily to interpret the world, the Dutch sought to describe the world—an impulse shared by Holland's skilled cartographers. The interest in description found intellectual support in a number of widely circulated philosophical and scientific texts, including Sir Francis Bacon's empiricist arguments and Johannes Kepler's treatise on the eye. Alpers acknowledges exceptions to the Dutch pattern. Rembrandt's thickly layered canvases, his moody orchestrations of light and shadow, and his frequent treatment of Biblical themes suggest an emphasis on things felt rather than seen. But most Dutch artists strove to depict the teeming here-and-now, a task at which they had few equals.

Science & Technology

ALGENY
by Jeremy Rifkin
Viking, 1983
298 pp. \$14.75

"Can any of us imagine saying no to all the great benefits that the bioengineering of life will bring to bear?" Rifkin, author of the controversial *Entropy* (1980), here argues that we should. "Algeny," a neologism coined by Dr. Joshua Lederberg, a Nobel laureate biologist, is the belief that all living organisms are merely temporary sets of DNA-based relationships on their way to becoming something else—and now, with the aid of genetic engineers, cybernetics, and computers, something "better." The new "algenetic" theory of evolution will, Rifkin believes, supplant the Darwinian theory, and become the justification for a world in which living organisms are