

explosive old man of sixty-two that ever was." This figure greatly contrasts with the detached, ironic, and self-deprecating persona he projected in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), one of the great autobiographies in Western literature. With his collected letters now fully in print, it becomes clear that Adams (1838–1918) was not merely the failed and embittered descendant of presidents John and John Quincy Adams. The correspondence reveals a charming, eloquent, and prophetic observer of the awakening of a newly industrialized age. Adams's comment from the Paris Exposition of 1900—"To me [the Exposition] has been an education which I have failed to acquire for want of tutors, but it has been an immense amusement . . ."—was typical. He enjoyed describing himself trapped in the 17th and 18th centuries, but his letters repeatedly show a robust and brilliant mind coming to terms with the 20th century. His encouragement and political advice to his friends Secretary of State John Hay and Teddy Roosevelt testify to his ability and wit. "Great men come and go," Adams wrote, "but I am as permanent as an under-secretary." Many letters bear postmarks from Adams's vast travels, from the Caribbean to Russia, from the Middle East to the South Seas. They brim with insights and perceptions, candid and unrestrained treatises on politics, economics, science, art, and casual chatter. They also constitute an unrivaled commentary upon his age—America's swift and often unsettling transition into the modern world.

AGAINST DECONSTRUCTION. By John M. Ellis. Princeton. 168 pp. \$21.95

"It's all so very *French*," a commonsensical Englishman might observe. And yet deconstruction, the brain-child of Jacques Derrida and other Parisian *philosophes*, is all the rage on American and even British campuses today. A strange outcome, indeed, for a critical theory that maintains that "all literary interpretation is misinterpretation." Literary texts, deconstructors assert, represent not a meaning but an "infinite play of linguistic signs." And since no one can *interpret* an infinite interplay of literary signs, the deconstructor instead gives a "performance" about the text, a performance he holds

to be as creative as the original author's. The critic's challenge is not to construct the "author's meaning" but to deconstruct the text back into its various elements, which he then rebuilds into a text of his own. The deconstructionists' claim to a "new kind of logic that transcends the old" makes their theory unfalsifiable or irrefutable on its own terms, says Ellis, a professor of literature at the University of California. However, Ellis finds the "revolutionary" deconstructionist statements all too accessible to old logic. Most damning, these statements were often better presented in traditional linguistics, theory of knowledge, and literary criticism. Deconstruction is popular, Ellis speculates, because it gives critics "freedom to read texts without constraint"—and so endless rhetorical possibilities for self-dramatization. The price paid for the deconstructor's performance, Ellis fears, is a "readiness to abandon the communal sense of a shared inquiry . . . [the] commitment to argument and dialogue." Ellis's case will hardly convince true-believers, but others will find instructive his deconstruction of deconstructionism.

COLLECTED POEMS. By Philip Larkin. Edited by Anthony Twaite. Farrar. 330 pp. \$22.50

Philip Larkin (1922–1985), the most popular poet to emerge in England after World War II, in most ways hardly seemed a poet at all. Physically, with his bald head and bespectacled owl eyes, he resembled somebody's bachelor uncle whom nobody notices. Larkin, moreover, refused to play any of the usual roles of the Poet; he presented himself as what he was, a provincial university librarian. Partly because he ignored the "poetry establishment," the establishment often ignored him. Critics trained to admire difficulty and allusiveness found his subjects too commonplace, his meanings too easy and accessible to require their services. Furthermore, his rhyming, metrical lines seemed to betoken an outmoded formalism. In fact, the formality of his verse achieves a paradoxical effect: It makes Larkin's poetic diction (with its funny "dirty words") seem more freshly slangy than everyday speech. A poem about his reading habits, for example, con-

cludes with the barely ironic declaration: "Books are a load of crap." Larkin is often called the poet of the everyday, of the ordinary, because he took the unsatisfactory and the mundane—including that unsatisfactory mundane subject, himself—and then made some of the most quoted lines in recent poetry from them. "Sexual intercourse began/In 1963/ (Which was rather late for me)—/ Between the end of the *Chatterly* ban/ And the Beatles' first LP." ("Annus Mirabilis"). But Larkin's poems are not so much about much daily life itself as they are the creation of a stoic philosophy to deal with everyday sadness and loss. "Deprivation is for me," Larkin said, "what daffodils were for Wordsworth." Indeed, Larkin creates a rare oddity, poems with dreary themes which readers nonetheless turn to for comfort. Offering no religious consolations, his poetry illustrates how, once one's worst doubts about oneself are admitted, mental liveliness still makes life interesting. Reviewing some jazz records, Larkin claimed that art is useless unless it helps us to endure and to enjoy—by which criterion his *Collected Poems* is immensely useful.

Science & Technology

AMERICAN GENESIS: A Century of Technological Enthusiasm 1870-1970. By Thomas P. Hughes. Viking. 529 pp. \$24.95

A foreigner wishing to discover the true nature of America would learn less by visiting Independence Hall or Civil War battlefields than by touring the steel mills of Pittsburgh or the auto factories in Detroit—living remnants of America's technological revolution. Technology, argues Hughes, a University of Pennsylvania historian, is "mainstream American history, an exploration of the American nation involved in its most characteristic activity." The "century of technological enthusiasm" which he studies (1870-1970) introduced to America everything from the incandescent light to the automobile, from the telephone to the space shuttle. Hughes begins with the classic American heroes: inventors like Thomas Edison and Orville and Wilbur Wright. Those early inventors were removed from the demands of industry—a freedom which let them choose the problems

they wished to work on; in the absence of theory, they used a hunt-and-try method. Before the era of specialization, Edison could stay abreast of several fields at once: electricity, chemistry, and mechanical engineering. But by World War I, with the growth of industry and the American economy, there came a new generation of American inventors—"system builders" like Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor who organized manufacturing and labor. (The great car producer was also hailed by Lenin and Stalin, who saw "Fordism" as a way to industrialize a backward nation.) The unchecked optimism of Ford's era came to an end on August 6, 1945, with the detonation of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. The "bomb" demonstrated the other side of technology—its potential for destruction. "The effort to organize the world for problem solving," Hughes says, has passed from individual inventors to cumbersome, bureaucratic systems. And he worries whether the people and mechanisms for controlling technology have kept pace: "Like the dinosaurs, some technological systems have embedded in them characteristics suited for past environments but not the present." Einstein said it better: "Everything is now changed, except our way of thinking."

DOCTORS: The Biography of Medicine. By Sherwin B. Nuland. Knopf. 519 pp. \$24.95

"When I sit at the bedside of a patient, trying to reconstruct the sequence of pathological events within his body," writes Nuland of the Yale School of Medicine, "I am applying a method of reasoning that originated in Greece 2500 years ago." In *Doctors*, Nuland traces the history of that method, from Hippocrates's rejection of supernatural explanations of disease to a contemporary account of a human heart transplant. The history of medicine is no unbroken, linear progression. As Nuland shows, it has always been an oscillation, or tension, between medicine as an objective *science* and medicine as a subjective *art*. Nuland states flatly, "I am one of those who believe that the term 'Medical Science' [is] an oxymoron." The oxymoron was embodied fatefully in Galen (130-201 A.D.), Greek physician to the Emperor of Rome. Galen made the connection between