

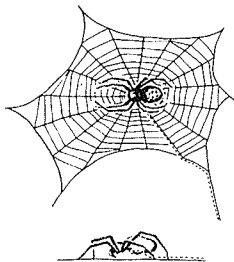
tive, and certainly more experimental sort of poetry. Pound's insistence that "the cherry tree is *all that it does*" was only part of his larger goal: to "MAKE IT NEW."

Elsewhere, Perloff looks at how the Pound tradition took form (partly inspired by "documentary collages" of the *fin de siècle* French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska) and then filtered through the work of other artists, including some, such as novelist James Joyce, playwright and prosateur Samuel Beckett, and composer John Cage, who are not strictly considered poets.

Beckett's "associative monologues" may baffle or repel many readers: "Absence supreme good and yet. Illumination then go again and one return no more trace. On earth's face. Of what was never. . . ." But however strange they may occasionally seem, Perloff makes a good case that they are as genuinely poetic as John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

Science & Technology

FEMALES OF THE SPECIES: Sex and Survival in the Animal Kingdom
by Bettyann Kevles
Harvard, 1986
270 pp. \$20



In the opinion of Charles Darwin (1809–82) and many of his successors, females of the species stood lower on the evolutionary ladder than males. Viewed as passive and "coy," females seemed to play a secondary role in the all-crucial struggle for survival. Kevles, a science journalist, draws from a wide range of recent animal studies to present a new understanding of the "fairer" sex's role.

Kevles notes patterns and peculiarities throughout the animal kingdom. A female balloon fly and a female stickleback fish typically appear to be put off by eager male suitors. Their reluctance, however, stems not from abhorrence of sex but from the desire to choose the best possible father for their offspring. Female elephant seals actually provoke males to combat in order to identify strong mates. And high-ranking female baboons band together to attack a low-ranking female just as she shows signs of fertility.

The passive, stay-at-nest image of females crumbles before the fact that, in many species, the male is the primary caretaker of offspring. Male Antarctic King penguins have a special fold of skin on their feet for incubating eggs during the entire 50-day gestation period. Some mothers seem alto-

gether ill-suited to child-rearing: An American opossum will make no effort to pick up a suckling infant who has fallen from her pouch.

Kevels thinks scholars would be repeating Darwin's error if they appropriated "patterns that come from the study of animals as imperatives for human actions." But scientists should now recognize the variety of female behavior, and acknowledge that females have always been "co-equal players in the evolutionary game."

**THE CULT OF INFORMATION:
The Folklore of
Computers and the
True Art of Thinking**
by Theodore Roszak
Pantheon, 1986
256 pp. \$17.95

In pre-World War II America, there was nothing extraordinary about "information." Historian Roszak, author of *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), recounts its evolution into a more esoteric concept. Thanks to the work of Bell Laboratories scientist Claude Shannon and other technical wizards, it now may mean "whatever can be coded for transmission through a channel that connects a source with a receiver, regardless of semantic content."

Whatever *that* means, information is also a burgeoning industry, aggressively promoted by computer companies, artificial intelligence specialists, and futurologists of the Alvin Toffler-John Naisbitt school. All variously promise that information technology will brighten our economic future, improve our schools, make our houses "talk," and even one day do our thinking for us.

Roszak finds the popular middlebrow faith in such overblown promises not only comic but potentially harmful. Exaggerated confidence in a high-tech service economy future, for example, feeds suburban Americans' indifference to the fate of older industries, even agriculture. Educators are convinced that students should be "computer literate," and hard-pressed American universities spent \$1.3 billion in 1984 to achieve that dubious end. Such "literacy" is at best ephemeral, Roszak notes, when "user friendliness" increases with each generation of machines. Something is amiss in academe (and elsewhere) when a college president declares that "the great university of the future will be that with a great computer system."

That "something" is a radical confusion of information with ideas, of data processing with the process of thinking—and is the real target of Roszak's feisty polemic.