

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-