

**LITERARY DEMOCRACY:
The Declaration of Cultural
Independence in America**
By Larzer Ziff
Viking, 1981
333 pp. \$20

In 1837, a serious economic crisis sent tremors of self-doubt through American society. That same year, Ralph Waldo Emerson offered a Harvard audience his profoundly simple solution to the country's ills: Believe in the primacy of "inborn values"; do not submit to material pressures; be better men, and a better world will follow. A nation whose genius, according to Tocqueville, lay in commerce rather than in art or ideas paid unusual attention to the widely published words of the Concord idealist. What *could* the American character be? Answers were not long in coming. Discovering that "America meant more than a new setting for time-honored forms," Emerson's literary contemporaries, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Whitman, and others turned away from the sentimental portraits by earlier writers such as Cooper and aimed for radical and imaginative reconstructions of what America truly was. Poe's dark tales, private to the point of solipsism, marked an extreme of the new quest, but others also sensed that truth could be found only through imaginative "isolationism." Indeed, argues Ziff, professor of English at Johns Hopkins, the terms of American writers' lives—their estrangement from the rest of society—provided them with vital clues to the American character and predicament. Celebrating the Self (Whitman), exploring the connections between man and nature (Thoreau), or unraveling the mystery of human communities (Hawthorne and Melville), these writers produced interior landscapes vast enough to match the sprawling terrain of their young and growing nation.

Science & Technology

**THOMAS ALVA EDISON:
An American Myth**
by Wyn Wachhorst
MIT, 1981
328 pp. \$15

During his lifetime, Thomas Edison (1845–1931) obtained 1,093 patents. But Wachhorst, a historian at the University of California, is interested less in the man and his machines than in the changing Edison legend. As the Western frontier shrank during the late 19th century, Americans looked on Edison as a