

**ALONG THE EDGE OF  
THE FOREST:  
An Iron Curtain Journey**  
by Anthony Bailey  
Random, 1983  
332 pp. \$15.95

In 1981, *New Yorker* correspondent Bailey traveled from the Baltic Coast to the Aegean Sea along the west side of, and occasionally across, the border that Winston Churchill dubbed the "iron curtain" nearly 40 years before. His aim: to meet and talk with those who live under the shadow of that nearly impenetrable divide—and with those who have attempted to cross it from the east. Interviewing West Germans, he found that their nonchalant attitude toward the barrier often clashed with his own sense of anger. In West Berlin, or "the island," as natives call it, Bailey himself felt everything "from rage through curiosity to resignation (though never disinterest)." The Berlin Wall seemed to him "in its perverse way one of the wonders of the modern world." Continuing south, he reached the physically less-forbidding Czechoslovakian border; in Austria, he passed along the boundaries of Hungary and Yugoslavia. Side trips to Prague and Budapest yielded the most interesting interviews. "[Communism] is a system that suits the second-rate," complained one Prague resident, "those who don't have aspirations or don't want to try too hard." Another Czech sounded perhaps the most despairing note: "It's like living in a year without seasons. It will go on and on and on like this. We would be deluding ourselves to think otherwise."

### *Arts & Letters*

**THE ODES OF  
JOHN KEATS**  
by Helen Vendler  
Harvard, 1983  
330 pp. \$18.50

If John Keats had lived beyond his 26 years (1795–1821), he might well have become his century's Shakespeare. Both in his late poetry and in his famous letters, he expressed a growing interest in dramatic poetry. Tuberculosis cut off any such flowering, and Keats's reputation rests solely, but securely, upon his lyric achievements. Among these stand out six incomparably crafted odes, including the famous "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," all written between March and September of 1819. Haunt-

ing ("I have been half in love with easeful Death") and enigmatic ("Beauty is truth, truth beauty"), these poems have justifiably received wide critical attention, but perhaps none so close as that given in this new study. Vendler, professor of English at Harvard and Boston University, views the odes as a sustained argument and a "system of inexhaustible internal relations," with each poem illuminating "Keats's authorial choices in the others." In each successive poem, Keats attempted to improve upon earlier "solutions" to vexing formal, philosophical, and personal questions: the legitimate uses of classical myth and allegorical language in "modern" poetry; the relation of nature to art; the poetic "state" (indolent or active?); the attractions and hazards of romantic love. Keats's larger aim, Vendler concludes, was self-transformation. Poetry, he came to realize through his odes, was the means by which he, a religious nonbeliever, could fashion his own "soul." Vendler is very much a poet's critic, and her thoroughness may wear on general readers. Yet those who persist will be rewarded: Like all good critics, Vendler compels one to return, with renewed curiosity, to the works themselves.

**THOMAS EAKINS:**  
**The Heroism of**  
**Modern Life**  
 by Elizabeth Johns  
 Princeton, 1984  
 207 pp. \$42.50



American painters are finally beginning to receive serious scholarly attention. Wanda Corn's recent Grant Wood retrospective (*Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, 1983) and Karal Ann Marling's history of Depression-era murals (*Wall-to-Wall America*, 1982) are but two examples of this important cultural recovery. Johns, a University of Maryland art historian, adds to the effort with her biographical and critical study of the Philadelphia painter and sculptor Thomas Eakins (1844-1916). Though trained in Paris and versed in European masters, Eakins took the people of his native city as his lifelong subject; he was, moreover, an enthusiastic portraitist at a time when most serious painters shunned his genre. Eakins was particularly drawn to the *portrait d'apparat*