

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*

(which depicted the subject at work), and for a special reason: He wanted to capture the "heroism" of late 19th-century life. For Eakins, this heroism consisted of professional excellence in one's chosen field, whether it be sport ("Max Schmitt in a Single Scull"), medicine ("Portrait of Professor Cross"), or art ("The Concert Singer," "Walt Whitman"). Focusing on five major paintings, Johns reveals much about Eakins's technique, particularly about his dramatic use of lighting. And her passing notes on Philadelphia life (everything from schools to athletics), the practice of surgery, and 19th-century notions of good character and professionalism add a nice slice of social history.

PIPERS AT THE GATES OF DAWN: The Wisdom of Children's Literature
by Jonathan Cott
Random, 1983
327 pp. \$19.95



Many adults' notions of "good" children's literature run to Victorian specimens, books that teach manners or narrate trivial adventures of elves and cute animals. Cott, a poet and journalist, believes that children like fiction for much the same reasons that adults do: It provides consolation for, escape from, and criticism of our lives. Cott here weaves interviews with six authors of children's classics with samples (graphic and textual) from their work. Cott's subjects explain their work using the language of folklorists, literary critics, and, most frequently, such explorers of the psyche as Sigmund Freud, Karl Jung, and Wilhelm Reich. William Steig, known to adults for his *New Yorker* cartoons, and to children for *Abel's Island* (1976), works from Reich's theory that facial gestures and expressions are truer language than mere words; Maurice Sendak (*Where the Wild Things Are*, 1963; *Outside over There*, 1981) speaks of the influence of his feminine side (the Jungian anima) on his imagery and plots. These authors discuss the slow, painful death of wonder in childhood. But all find in the making of their books a means of recapturing that fresh view of the world. Says Astrid Lindgren, creator of Pippi Longstocking: "I don't write *for* children . . . I write books for the child I am myself."