

students and workers. They have not done so to date. One explanation is tempting: possibly the Establishment has its own reasons for promoting P.L. as the voice of younger

radicals. Another explanation is closer at hand: possibly Mr. Adelson is a bit naive. The evidence of this book favors the latter explanation.

Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes by Thomas R. Edwards

(Oxford University Press; 232 pp.; \$7.50)

John Tytell

Thomas Edwards, early in his engaging and urbane study of the poet's use of political subjects, remarks that disillusionment with politics is a condition of our times. Since Aristophanes, the skepticism of power has been the property of poets, part of a tradition that uses the falseness of men who serve themselves in the public name as a foil for the private integrities of the artist. An irreconcilable antinomy exists between the poet, whose words are carefully measured artifacts designed to guide the reader to disciplined understanding, and the public man, who irresponsibly sacrifices language for personal power in the name of the common good. On this point writers of all political persuasion unite: In our time George Orwell on the left and Ezra Pound on the right have castigated political leaders for their contributions to the degeneration of language. Most writers subscribe to the eighteenth-century notion that the way we use words governs both thinking and morality—a motivating belief, as it implies governance in the profoundest and most pervasive sense—and the result is a necessary rivalry between the contemplative man of the imagination and the pragmatic man of decision. The antithesis has been fruitful for the concerns of art. Despite a natural distance caused by a suspicion of slogans and inflated rhetoric, and despite a meditative advocacy of in-

ner experience, poets have been fascinated (or appalled) by those who move nations and stage spectacles of suffering.

Imagination and Power tells how poets have confronted questions of public significance since the Renaissance. Mr. Edwards's method depends upon exegesis of representative poems to illustrate both the range of attitude in a given period and a general evolution from, for example, the confidence in monarchic stability of Shakespeare's history plays to the uncertain judgment of modern poets when considering events of magnitude. Edwards argues that poets started to use their contempt for public corruption as the motivation for poems in the eighteenth century. Before the satiric thrust of the age of Dryden and Pope, writers such as Spenser, Milton and Marvell could still conceive of heroic action. Edwards examines Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* as a prototype of Elizabethan feelings about men of power. *Tamburlaine's* ability to say things into being is a sign of the sacredness of power, its mysterious connections to deity. Edwards reveals how power can create its own moral justifications for Marlowe; how greatness may not be measured by ordinary standards (as Carlyle and Nietzsche also believed). With *Tamburlaine* and *Coriolanus* Edwards sets the stage for demonstrating the intolerably high cost of great actions.

This grandly Miltonic sense of the largesse of heroism wanes in the later seventeenth century as heroic man becomes "an object of pious nostalgia." Just as the realistic bias of the emerging novel form spreads the idea that great men may be as pretentiously hollow as their followers, so too the mock-heroic mode reduces epic stature to the audience's sense of what the real world is like. The result is the emasculation of the heroic image, as in Butler's *Hudibras*. Replacing the hero, the poet himself becomes the dominant presence in public poems; instead of wondering about the moral nature of power, poets concern themselves with participation in, or resistance to, power.

The use of poetry to counter the abuses and excesses of political power begins with Dryden, for satire is the most open literary form of resistance. Edwards focuses on Dryden's "The Medal" because the vehemence of his attack on the ambitiously unprincipled Shaftesbury almost dissolves the distinction between art and polemic. The portrait of Lord Shaftesbury is a fulcrum for changing attitudes toward public men, especially when compared to the earlier panegyric of a Marvell in praise of Cromwell. Dryden's aggressive indictment of Shaftesbury and the perils of crowd rule, however, is atypical. Pope, in the "Epilogue to the Satires," withdraws from the overwhelming public corruption of his time, abandoning Dryden's reasonable persuasiveness for a more didactic corrective that confesses practical defeat. This flight from encounter with society (of course, coincident with Pope's death, the picaresque novel was to succeed through the virtues of social scrutiny) is amplified in the sonorities of Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." The moral imperatives of satire are forgotten as Gray sings pastoral dirges to a ruined past. Such avoidance of politics for the compulsions of oblivion, according to Mr. Edwards, testifies to the final death of the heroic note in poetry.

Romantic poetry has been understood as a renewal of the poet's in-

volvement with the social fabric. At this juncture Mr. Edwards's thesis takes an interesting turn. He argues that the Romantics tended to anesthetize their concerns for social change, finding the symbolic formulations, as in Blake's *Prophetic Books*, more congenial to the poetic temperament than the more direct confrontation of satire. To anesthetize mass suffering and political injustice is, Edwards charges, to anesthetize the immediate powers of the artist. After a brilliant reading of Blake's "The Human Abstract," where we are reminded that nature offers no better model for successful tyranny than the human brain's inclination to reductive, mechanical reason, Edwards presses the aestheticist argument by pointing out how the idiosyncratic exclusiveness of Blake's later work assures its unavailability to the ordinary intelligence. Edwards warns of a quality of self-dramatization that hampers Blake's genius (but isn't this obsessive sense of self, as in Whitman, the politically igniting value of the Romantics?), of a hermetic language of private symbol that contradicts Blake's early impulse to convert the world to simple truths.

Blake, of course, has been more important for our time than for his, and populist expectations of his poetry are barren. Edwards, while extremely sensitive to Blake's words and skillful in his poetic analysis, seems fundamentally wrong in a failure of sympathy with the intentions of poetry after 1798. While he reveals the artistic weakness of Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy," he avoids Byron and Whitman and seems inconclusive with Wordsworth. He argues that the Victorians further the Romantic withdrawal into aesthetic pattern, but does not consider the implications of dogmatic statement in as political a poem as Tennyson's "Locksley Hall." The problem of statement, as in Pope's "Essay on Man," is the precarious edge dividing poetry and politics; modern poetry has relied on indirection and the objective image in order to transcend statement, and Edwards interprets this as neutral uncertainty.

The chapter on modern poetry is

the most flawed part of Edwards's book. He begins with a good essay on Yeats's "Easter 1916" that shows how the poet's characteristic argument with himself captured the complexity of response that the Easter Rebellion deserved. Edwards does not see, however, that the crucial third stanza—where the revolutionists' implacability is metaphorically represented as a stone to trouble the living stream—is what he has termed, in connection with the Romantics, "aestheticizing." Yet Yeats's complexity of response occurs precisely because of the animating imagination of this stanza. In the remainder of the chapter Edwards avoids Pound (surely the most political poet of our time, and the one who paid most dearly for his views) and decides instead to deal with Eliot's "Coriolan" and Auden's "September 1, 1939." He reveals some of his own bias by admitting he selected Auden's poem to illustrate the difficulty the modern mind has with political subjects. The choice of Lowell's "The March" is

a reflection of the "pathos of one's public impotence," and here again Mr. Edwards seems more determined to substantiate a thesis than to explore Lowell's art.

One wants to praise Edwards for often using poems that have been less in fashion, less exhausted by criticism, and this is especially true of the poets he treats with most command: Spenser, Marvell, Dryden and Pope. However, beginning with the Romantics, the poems discussed seem more suited to the theme of the political ineffectuality of the modern poet than to the broad scope of the relationship of poetry to politics. Still, if he is more successful with poets through the eighteenth century, at least that much has been mastered for us.

As Yeats once admonished Pound, poets are as uneasy with political life as "the first composers of Sea-chanties in an age of Steam." Those who reinvent the acts of mythical heroes can hardly be expected to offer more than tin wreaths to modern puniness.

Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians by Ronald H. Stone

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Franklin Sherman

William V. Shannon of the *New York Times* has recently suggested that George McGovern's challenge to Richard Nixon's foreign policy may be viewed as a revival of the idealism of the Social Gospel, as distinct from the Niebuhrian realism that has governed U.S. foreign policy during the past twenty-five years. The suggestion has a *prima facie* attractiveness. In dealing with China and the USSR Nixon and Kissinger have indeed shown themselves masters of the balance-of-power game, and in the cautiousness of their plan for withdrawal from Vietnam have revealed their conviction that, however loud may be the domestic protest, international affairs cannot

be made subject to moral considerations in any direct or simple sense. McGovern and his followers, by way of contrast, are fixed with moral indignation. America must cease the killing, must stop collaborating with tyrannical regimes. "McGovern," writes Shannon, "would bring to national leadership the energy, confidence, and moral determination of an earlier, less doubt-ridden, more innocent America."

The suggestion begins to break down, however, when one recalls that many of the Niebuhrian realists—such as John Bennett among the theologians and Hans Morgenthau among the political scientists—were among the earliest and severest crit-