

**THE DEMOCRATIC
MUSE:
Visual Arts and the
Public Interest**
by Edward C. Banfield
Basic, 1984
244 pp. \$15.95

To "make fresher the winds of the arts"—that, announced President Lyndon Johnson in 1965, was his reason for signing legislation to establish the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Nineteen years later, Banfield, a Harvard professor of government, suggests that LBJ's hopes were misguided. Echoing James Madison, the fourth U.S. president, Banfield asserts that the powers of the federal government are "few and defined." Supporting the arts is not one of them. For one thing, the ever-evolving definition of "art" makes subsidizing it a questionable proposition. Even Michael Straight, a former NEA deputy chairman, confessed that the Endowment had "funded activities which I can only characterize as frivolous." Banfield contends that modern museums have contributed to the misuse of NEA subsidies by using them to sponsor "monster" exhibits that encourage the "substitution of pecuniary and curiosity values for aesthetic ones." (In fiscal 1980, the NEA gave \$100 million to art museums. Most of it went for "blockbuster" exhibits, rather than for the collection, preservation, or interpretation of art.) Banfield wryly proposes a way for the government to bring at least one form of art to a wider public: Subsidize the purchase and exhibit of near-perfect *reproductions* of the works of the masters. Better still, he argues, would be to abolish the Endowments and return art to the private sector. Banfield makes some telling points; his unflattering portrait of the contemporary art scene will not gain him many converts among curators and their patrons.

Arts & Letters

SWEENEY ASTRAY
by Seamus Heaney
Farrar, 1984
85 pp. \$13.95

Twelve centuries before James Joyce banished himself from Ireland, only to devote his self-imposed exile to describing his native land, Irish bards fashioned another story of banishment: Sweeney, king of Dal-Arie, slays an innocent Christian psalmist while fighting