

Thoughtful readers, however, will lay this book down with a lingering anxiety. True education is necessarily a highly competitive, even aristocratic, undertaking. The process not only discloses mental inequalities but must also concentrate on assisting natural talent. Public instruction in a democracy, on the other hand, cannot properly favor the brilliant at the expense of the stupid. Its highest attainable goal is a dead level of mediocrity. In the last analysis the deficiencies of the Establishment will be found linked to the aggressively egalitarian, and therefore necessarily anti-intellectual, trend in American thinking.

Peru, under the Incas, made no attempt to educate anybody above his pre-ordained station. It was the most completely socialized and highly regimented society this hemisphere has ever seen, contemporary Cuba not excluded. Perhaps that is why our educationists, somewhat baffled at home, are extending their cloudy image to a people who have always amiably accepted whatever nostrums government forced upon them.

Reviewed by FELIX MORLEY.

Two American Poets

Coming of Age: New and Selected Poems, by Babette Deutsch. *Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963. 160 pp. \$1.75 (paperbound).*

Traveling through the Dark, by William Stafford. *New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962. 94 pp. \$3.50.*

LITERARY HISTORIANS of the future—if we can still envisage a future in which men will interest themselves with questions of literature and history as we think of them—will undoubtedly remark the emergence in our time of an increasing number of very fine women poets, to say nothing

of novelists. In this country alone the list one draws up grows impressive. Among the seasoned members there are Marianne Moore, H. D. (who has recently died), Louise Bogan, Léonie Adams, Muriel Rukeyser, Elizabeth Bishop, and Babette Deutsch. More recent women poets of great distinction include Denise Levertov, Barbara Howes, Isabella Gardner, and Anne Sexton. These lists are, moreover, far from complete. It is one of the sad facts of our modern literary activity that while some of the poets mentioned have gained wide critical attention, others have been inexplicably neglected or at least inadequately treated by critics.

Miss Deutsch has, as is evident at a glance, the gifts we look for in a poet of substance: a love of words and a genuine capacity for handling them; a good musical sense; a ruminative and exploratory mind which turns over the objects of experience with pleasurable care; an ability to render vivid and concrete images; a warm feeling for the human element in everything she perceives or undergoes. Exacting craftsman that she is, Miss Deutsch has, as she tells us in a prefatory note, pared down the bulk of her work for this collection. Nonetheless, her choice is excellent, and the reader who has encountered her writing only haphazardly can now measure for himself something of her total effect as a poet. He must, I think, be admiring of what he finds.

Perhaps what is most immediately striking about Miss Deutsch's poems is their revelation of her painter's eye and tactile sense: the felt quality of objects and elements:

Oranges beam
Sleekly as mandarins.
Their cheeks grained
As mellow leather is.
Spice, like a bloom, feathers
The thin tough skin.

(“At the Green Grocer’s”)

Words want to push the things they evoke right into the reader's line of vision, as if it were a painting he contemplated and not stanzas of poetry on a page. Miss Deutsch has two poems dedicated to modern painters in her book, “Homage to Paul Klee” and “Ballade for Braque,” but it is in a third poem addressed to the poet Wallace Stevens that she discloses an awareness of his love for the riches and the nuances of the physical world which might equally have been a

statement of her own appreciation for them:

The senses admiring the delicious drench
Of light, of color, of texture, taste, and sound,
Fruit, flower, sail in the sun, a woman's hand,
Her voice, slight and abounding instruments.
Quench these, there's more: the mind this in-
stant holding

The manifold remembered . . .

("Letter to Wallace Stevens")

Like Stevens, Miss Deutsch is attracted to summer and autumn, not simply for the plentiful material they provide a poet's observant, sensuous gaze, but also for the subtle threads of human significance interwoven with these seasonal periods. Behind all the earthly opulence and beauty to which the poet devotes such ample detail, there lurks the constant threat of dissolution, of time's passage, season's end, and, finally, of death. In her reflective poem, "The Net," Miss Deutsch offers, with a wonderful delicacy of language and accuracy of image, a description of nature which is, simultaneously, a deciphering of the meaning latent in the scene before her:

Into this net of leaves, green as old glass
That the sun fondles, trembling like images
In water, this live net, swung overhead,
From branch to branch, what swam?

The spider's thread

Is less passive, where it appears to float
Like a bright hair clinging to the wind's coat.
Hot at work, history neither schemes nor
grieves

Here where the soaking dead are last year's
leaves,

And over them slung, meshed with sun, a net
No creature wove, none frantically tried to
fret.

The huge weight of time without its sting
Hangs in that green cradling woof.

A wing

Has caught there, held. Held. But not to
stay,

We know, who, how slowly, walk away.

Miss Deutsch's art, her full and marvelous descriptive powers which achieve such completion there, reaches no further than the limits of the actual world: into it we come at birth, she says in the title poem of her book, to "hear the Song of the Senses, as it rises out of the air, from water, earth, and fire." Thus we can best call her ultimate outlook a humanist one. Our lives are ringed around with oblivion; that is

our sentence without appeal. Only personal love, the natural beauty of creation, art and the working of the imagination extend value to us and a momentary stay against the inevitable. Whatever firm laws seem to govern the dimensions of being we inhabit, Miss Deutsch insists, human love penetrates every barrier to renew itself at the profoundest level within individuals:

Love is not true; mathematicians know
Truth, that's alive in heaven, and in the
mind—

Out of our bodies; you will never find
Love strict as number, and enduring so.
It is not free: alone the grave's narrower
Than the little space in which this passion
moves,

With a door that opens inward: he who loves
Measures his paces like a prisoner.

They who give it large names are liars, or
They are fools. More softly, you and I,
Slow to assert what we can never prove,
Wonder what algebraist, what dictator

Can teach us much of truth or tyranny.
Look at me. Do not speak. But this is love.

("Dogma")

The themes of these poems repeat themselves—the world of nature, love, art, animals and their lives—but certainly not through any failure of the author's imagination. Miss Deutsch is really a very personal poet, as is William Stafford, and appears as a controlling, witnessing presence in the experience of the poem. She differs from him, however, by sharply restricting the amount of material in her art which could be identified with events and details of her life, yet she always returns to the subjects occupying and provoking her mind. These thematic recurrences by themselves do not account for the singular impression Miss Deutsch's poetry makes upon us. Rhythm, use of language and imagery, a particular way of looking: these blend skillfully in a quiet, thoughtful body of work whose virtues are enduring ones.

William Stafford's poetry is long overdue for the kind of collection it has at last received in *Traveling through the Dark*, and likewise for the recognition now accorded it as the selection for the National Book Award. Mr. Stafford's is a deceptive art, for a careless or superficial look might lead the reader to believe that this is a poet who leans toward a false simplicity in the treatment of experience. But no one could en-

certain such a notion after a second look: I am sure he would settle down to read the entire book. There is frequently a plain-spoken character (but how authentic!) to Mr. Stafford's poetic speech, yet one imagines the labor he must have demanded of himself over the past years to arrive at this language. In an apparently direct and simple manner of the sort attributable to Mr. Stafford, the subtleties, the variations and alterations in tone, cadence, and diction are highly charged with meaning for the poem. We cannot read these poems properly without the closest attention to each detail—an attitude scarcely to be recommended for the reading of simple-minded writing.

Much recent poetry has relied on the happenings of the poet's life, domestic and otherwise, and his surroundings as primary artistic material. We need only recall the newest poetry of Robert Lowell, the work of Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, or W. D. Snodgrass to remind ourselves of this important preoccupation. William Stafford belongs somewhere along the margin of these interests because he takes his material from a number of sources. Yet his poems reflect to a marked degree a fascination with members of his family; a life spent in Western and Middle Western American towns and small colleges; an intimate knowledge of and feeling for the habits of nature in such regions; and a deep sense of underlying spiritual destiny, though its patterns can merely be glimpsed on occasion. Mr. Stafford's beliefs about the poet's task assume the form of a dream which includes his mother and father, the familiar—but at the same time strange—earth, the fusion of the temporal with the seemingly timeless in a poem appropriately entitled "Vocation":

This dream the world is having about itself
includes a trace on the plains of the Oregon
trail,

a groove in the grass my father showed us all
one day while meadowlarks were trying to tell
something better about to happen.

I dreamed the trace to the mountains, over
the hills,
and there a girl who belonged wherever she
was.

But then my mother called us back to the
car:

she was afraid; she always blamed the place,
the time, anything my father planned.

Now both of my parents, the long line through
the plain,

the meadowlarks, the sky, the world's whole
dream
remain, and I hear him say while I stand
between the two,
helpless, both of them part of me:
"Your job is to find what the world is trying
to be."

One of the prominent aspects of this poetry is its inclusion of nature as a constant, living force making itself known. Mr. Stafford's eye and ear, from long acquaintance, are sensitive to the movements of that larger realm of nature in which we exist but in our urban ignorance have refused to accept any more as an integral part of our most valuable knowledge and experience. Nature is seen in the poems not just as a backdrop receding into the distance as technical proficiency expands, but as actively engaged with man's affairs: the settings avoid cities, show men and their houses etched against forest and plain, mountain and sky—essential portions of the reality of human existence.

It is the fundamental human situation which touches Mr. Stafford's strong imagination. Sometimes nature and man participate in a kind of eschatological vision. The poem "Reporting Back" illustrates this vein of his work:

By the secret that holds the forest up, no one
will escape. (We have reached this place.)

The sky will come home some day.
(We pay all the mistakes our bodies make
when they move.)

Is there a way to walk that living has ob-
scured?

(Our feet are trying to remember some path
we are walking toward.)

The sparse, aphoristic style here, with its emphasis on hidden correspondences between man and the cosmos, reminds us of the contemporary English mystical poet Kathleen Raine, who reads the Northumberland terrain as if it were a book of symbols, keys to a transcendental reality, and the French poet René Char, whose native Provence is the source of a lyrical and visionary image of the human relationship to earth in its fullness.

Mr. Stafford also explores our ties with nature in a more personal fashion. In "Traveling through the Dark," the opening poem of the volume, the focus turns upon an occurrence from the writer's own life. The situation in which he finds himself, his considerations and his final decision are related straightforwardly: more is left unsaid than is said, which is both the poet's in-

tention and a necessary quality of good art. The presentation of experience, magnificent in understatement and compassion, remains in our minds to haunt us:

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make
more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of
the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold,
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the
reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there wait-
ing,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking
lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turn-
ing red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness
listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerv-
ing—
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

I hope that the few notes and quotations as-
sembled in these pages will convey to the reader
some notion of the excellence of the two books
Miss Deutsch and Mr. Stafford have given us.
Their work attests to the continuing vigor and
originality of contemporary American poetry.

Reviewed by RALPH J. MILLS, JR.

Domini Canis

The Conservative Affirmation, by Will-
moore Kendall. Chicago: Henry Regnery
Company, 1963. xiv & 272 pp. \$5.95.

A BOOK REVIEW by Willmoore Kendall (1) be-
gins, like this, with a list of things numbered 1,
2, and 3; (2) if it has appeared in recent years,
can be found in the second half of this book;
(3) must reduce any author who knows Kendall
is reviewing his book to a state of sleepless ter-
ror, a fear of the sixth sense that seems to guide
him toward the fatal point where an author nods,
tries to cover a weak point, lapses into silliness
or dishonesty; and (4) is probably an analytic
and literary masterpiece.

A *literary* masterpiece, for it is one of the best-
kept secrets of our age that one of the best prose
stylists of our age is Willmoore Kendall. The
long sentence that argues with itself down one
page and around the next did not, we find, go
out with William Morris wallpaper. Professor
Kendall has given the circumspect Victorian
periodicity, which *disciplines* the reader while
delighting him, a new lease on life; and this by
three means. First, he introduces slang into these
staid surroundings. Then, he follows speech
rhythms—not the lecturing cadences of a pulpit
age, but the lunge of two voices contrapuntally
going at each other. Last, he makes fun of his
own grammatical arabesques, elaborating them
in the most arch fashion. The result is a com-
bination of the colloquial and the baroque that
is invariably exciting. His sentences hover some-
where between a ballet and a rumble.

This unique arguing voice, disciplined and
given prose continuity, is very compelling in the
final 125 pages of short, astringent reviews. (I
count 31 such encounters, and rank the casualties
thus—sixteen dead, four wounded, eleven deco-
rated for service to political philosophy.) Ken-
dall's martial edge comes from a belief that the
Liberal maxim "It does not matter what one be-
lieves" is the worst kind of insult to humanity. If