

Embattled Establishment

The Miseducation of American Teachers, by James D. Koerner. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963. 360 pp. \$4.95.

AS THE AGENCY for International Development acquires steam its truly extraordinary operations simultaneously become more varied and more specialized.

In Communist Poland, for instance, AID concentrates on the delivery of grain. In regard to India major emphasis has been placed on the provision of facilities for steel production. In the case of Peru it is the promotion and direction of education which is coming to the fore.

Each instance, one must assume, has an underlying if unadmitted reason. Communism has so thoroughly ruined Polish agriculture that Gomulka might be replaced by somebody even worse if we failed to provide him with food-stuffs. But since Communism in general is strengthened by our aid to satellite Poland it becomes logical for us to beef up India's defense potential. The educational direction of Peru, however, would seem to have a more subtle background.

In several other Latin-American countries AID has now for some time been building schools and providing free lunches at the expense of the U.S. taxpayer. But only in Peru, so far, have we openly undertaken to revamp the entire educational system. To accomplish this, AID, in May, awarded a \$1,187,500 contract to Teachers College of Columbia University. This school will provide "advisors" whose function in Peru, according to the official announcement, is to "scrutinize educational content at all levels, starting with teacher education in order to provide more useful preparation for teachers who will fill positions in both rural and urban schools."

For obvious reasons our aid to Poland is not

denounced by wheat farmers, nor that to India by manufacturers of the equipment sent there. Similarly, this novel form of assistance to Peru is not likely to be criticized by any part of that far-flung educational establishment in which Teachers College has always played a significant role. This, in turn, gives additional importance to Dr. James D. Koerner's timely study on *The Miseducation of American Teachers*. For the major target of his criticism is that same "Educational Establishment" now proliferating under the spreading cloak of the Alliance for Progress.

By the "Establishment" Dr. Koerner means the "hierarchy of controls" in our public education, all the ramifications of which tend to support and supplement each other. The U.S. Office of Education, he says, "has acted like an arm of the Establishment within the Federal Government." It is noteworthy that Dr. Sterling M. McMurrin, until recently the head of this office, does not deny the charge in the favorable introduction which he contributes to the Koerner book.

The Establishment is described as knit together and given political effectiveness by the National Education Association, called by Dr. Koerner "one of the largest, if not most effective, lobbies in Washington." More than half of the nation's 1,500,000 public school teachers are NEA members, partly because of the strong pressure to join which is exerted on them. NEA associates are usually to the fore in repudiating any adverse comment made on text books, approved curricula, teaching methods or disciplinary practices.

If a mother plaintively asks "Why Johnny Can't Read" she will probably be told politely by his teacher that this is natural; he has not yet acquired "reading readiness." But if the inquiry is pressed the reaction is also likely to become stiffer and the baffled parent may end up by being thrown into outer darkness as "an enemy of the public schools."

Dr. Koerner's main point, however, is not so much the power of the Establishment but rather the stultifying effect it has exerted on the noble profession of teaching. He examines the deterioration in the teaching of subject matter in favor of "life adjustment" courses and other attempts to give "methodology" a substantial content which it does not and cannot possess. The net result of this "progressive" downgrading of subject matter is a plethora of high school graduates, let alone bored drop-outs, who can

neither read intelligently, write grammatically, nor figure accurately. Small wonder that we have so many healthy young people who are not only unemployed, but even more tragically unemployable.

Towards teachers as such, this author is sympathetic throughout. They are, he thinks, much more to be pitied than blamed. Their shortcomings are rooted not so much in individual incapacity as in those teacher-training techniques which we are even now introducing to the unfortunate Peruvians.

In a chapter based on careful and extensive research Dr. Koerner shows that there are now practically no intellectual requirements necessary to obtain the degree of Doctor of Education, possession of which is a virtual authorization to teach teachers how to teach. At many institutions of alleged "higher learning" anyone with a bachelor's degree, no matter how flimsy, can go on rapidly to acquire an Ed. D., entitling him to be addressed as "doctor" and to receive the public respect which that appellation once justified.

Some of the actual doctoral dissertations by which the Ed. D. is currently "earned" should help to spread a more realistic conception of its educational value:

"A Performance Analysis of the Propulsive Force of the Flutter Kick."

"The Relative Effect of Mental Practice and Physical Practice on Learning the Tennis Forehand and Backhand Drives."

"The High School Student's Perception of Most-Liked and Least-Liked Television Figures."

"An Experimental Study of the Effect of Soothing Background Music on Observed Behavior Indicating Tension of Third Grade Pupils."

The puerile nature of such "research" is actually less distasteful than the masquerade of educational significance. The attempted deception is assisted by the use of what Dr. Koerner, in a chapter which leaves the reader torn between tears and laughter, calls "Educatanto." This is the *lingua franca* of the Establishment, the use of which distinguishes the modern "Educationist" from the old-fashioned teacher.

The essence of Educatanto is to veil matters of no importance in pseudo-scientific language, creating the impression that trivia are significant. Since extreme verbosity is a necessary fundamental it is impossible to quota more than one of the illustrations assembled by Dr. Koerner. But the following, from a current re-

port on the role of school superintendents in public education, may be taken as typical;

Another consequence of abandoning the postulate of consensus on role definition that deserves exploration lies in the implications it has for explaining different behaviors of incumbents of the same position. Most students concerned with role phenomena, assuming consensus on role definition, have tried to account for variability in behavior by invoking such variables as different motivations, attitudes, or personality characteristics. Our research experience suggests that different expectations held for incumbents' behavior and attributes are crucial for an understanding of their different behaviors and characteristics. Theoretical formulations which attempt to explain different behaviors of incumbents of the same position cannot be based on concepts in which the postulate of role consensus is involved.

In short, for the benefit of the Peruvians, don't assume that all school superintendents will be identical just because they are all school superintendents.

The Miseducation of American Teachers appears at the psychological moment. Of course the educationists are not to be blamed for all the deficiencies of the public schools. But the fatuous arrogance of their imaginary expertise has strengthened the nation-wide revolt against obviously inferior instruction. No longer is it possible to assert airily that "there's nothing wrong with the public schools that more money won't cure." It is too obvious that the teaching, whether for white, black or integrated, is generally second-rate. And the bottom is out of the Establishment's effort to ward off criticism by achieving centralized control, through the superficially seductive channel of Federal Aid.

The merit of Dr. Koerner's contribution is that he does not concern himself with symptoms but gets right to the cause of the malaise, then offering some thoughtful though not too optimistic suggestions for its removal. His book will certainly be denounced. Indeed, the gored oxen of the Establishment are already bellowing. But as a former teacher himself—though no Ed.D.—and as president of the highly reputable Council for Basic Education, this critic knows at first-hand of what he writes. Many, if not all, of our miseducated teachers will be grateful for the better prospects in their profession towards which he points.

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