

THE SONG AT THE SCAFFOLD. By Gertrud von Le Fort. (Sheed and Ward; 6s.)

This remarkable novel (even in somewhat clumsy translation) helps one to realise why Gertrud von Le Fort, practically unknown in England, has elsewhere been so highly praised. Inevitably it invites comparison with classical tragedy; there is the same force conveyed by the same economy of means, and here too the unbearable tension is softened by a device of indirect narration, as by the Greek chorus. But this is a drama entirely Christian: the drama of French Carmelite nuns who accept martyrdom under the Revolutionaries. The most immediately striking figure is that of the nun who inspires this dedication and alone escapes its fulfilment, to learn that one's own aims, however worthy, are less important than doing God's will; that it is harder to live than to die. But the central character is a novice who is afraid and who cannot help succumbing to her fear, yet learns to receive it as the fear that fills her unhappy country, and to identify it with the fear of Christ himself in the garden of Gethsemane. We ask ourselves, with the voice of the wise and saintly prioress, 'Is thy mercy so great that thou hast divined and understood the weakness of a poor soul who cannot overcome it, and that this very weakness thou hast merged with thy love . . . so that while others are preparing to exult in the dying of thy death, thou hast communicated to her thy mortal fear? Was this the adoration that was still lacking to thee?'

Sister Blanche runs away, and amidst scenes of horror in Paris her personality is entirely consumed by this fear; but she remains loyal to it, and in the last extraordinary moments her sacrifice completes that of the others at the scaffold: with its acceptance the Terror too is at an end. There remains the quiet final chorus to tell us that 'the purely human is not enough. It is not even enough to offer as a sacrifice.'

IMAGES OF TOMORROW: an anthology of recent poetry. Edited by John Heath-Stubbs. (S.C.M. Press; 10s. 6d.)

Since it is becoming increasingly difficult for young poets to get their work published, anthologies of this kind play an important role nowadays. The present selection has been made by one who is himself a poet of distinction. In an interesting introduction he explains that the poems he has chosen have themes able to be classified in quasi-theological terms, though the dogmatic implications are not, of course, necessarily acceptable to their authors—for poetry is neutral ground. This was a brave thing to do. For there is a danger that such poetry will remain abstract, fail to work out in concrete imagery: as Mr Heath-Stubbs puts it, will be 'about' something instead of being something. The remarkable thing about the present selection is not that a number of poems do, for this reason, fail to come off, but that there are so many which succeed. Inevitably somebody

here asks the Hidden One if there is a purpose (the answer is creativity), but there are also such fine poems as W. K. Rogers' beginning

Mary Madgalene, that easy woman,
Saw, from the shore, the seas
Beat against the hard stone of Lent,
Crying, 'Weep, seas, weep
For yourselves that cannot dent me more.'

Some established writers are included (though none had published anything before the war) whose verse undoubtedly stands out for its sheer competence; but a number of less familiar names indicate a genuine hope for poetry. And it is good to see account taken of the posthumous work of William Bell, which will bear comparison with anything written in our time.

LAURENCE BRIGHT, O.P.

THE LANGUAGE AND HISTORY OF SPAIN. By J. B. Trend. (Hutchinson's University Library; 8s. 6d.)

This is a sprightly and entertaining account of the development of the Spanish language. It is not intended as a manual for students, but is more like those old-fashioned Victorian books that still delighted one's youth—stray chapters on words and their vagaries. As the title implies, there is a strong lacing of history, and with history some King Charles' Heads. This is not to say that the little book is unsystematic. The author is out of his depth in chapter IX, on biblical translations. *Alma*, on page 136, is not here 'soul', but the transliteration of the Hebrew word variously rendered *moça* or *virgen* in Isaiah 7, 14. (See, e.g., Cruden, s.v. *virgin*; but information is available on the very text in question, the Ferrara Bible.) Nor is there anything in the remarks on 'the last Gospel' on page 137. However, Professor Trend has here gathered an abundance of interesting items of information and is, as always, very amusing to read. His new work can be recommended to undergraduates who are bored (as they too often justifiably are) with philology, but not if they are going to believe him when, in prophetic strain, he writes: 'The future of the Spanish language lies with the twenty Spanish-speaking countries in America'.

E.S.