

LAGERKVIST

GUEST OF REALITY, by Pär Lagerkvist. Translated from the Swedish by Erik Mesterton and Denys W. Harding (Cape, 7/6).

Here are three short novels which give English readers a chance of scrutinizing Lagerkvist's work on, as it were, three landing-stages of development. 'The Eternal Smile,' which appeared separately, by the same translators, some eighteen months ago from Gordon Fraser's, Cambridge, dates back sixteen years. 'Guest of Reality,' a very different experiment in direct narrative, was published in 1925; and 'The Hangman,' with fascist violence as its theme, in 1933. The task of valuation has to face at the outset the fact that the landing-stages are set along no discernible route.

'An individual contemporary unattached to any school of literature, Pär Lagerkvist can only be watched at work without attempts at prophecy.' By this, of course, the translators would not be taken to mean that he is immune from the ordinary critical approach, which would indicate that his power of full-bodied narrative and uncommonly effective use of imagery have not yet been successfully directed to any artistic end. Not yet, since 'The Hangman' is his latest work; though one would like the opportunity of filling in what may be an important gap by reading the short stories which preceded it, a few of which were published in 'Modern Swedish Short Stories' by the Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation two or three years ago. They ought at any rate to be worth a complete translation. So good is the work of those responsible for the present volume that one is almost spared the usual fear that there may be something important in the original which has failed to get through.

'Attempts at prophecy' being denied to us, then—and they could not be very fruitful with this material—all that can be done is to look at each work separately and try to estimate what has been achieved. About 'The Eternal Smile' one cannot agree with the dust-cover that it is 'a truly memorable work of art.' It is an allegory about life, death and God, and since it doesn't add anything to our relevant experience about life or death or God it must be said to have failed as art. The style succeeds in filling

its folk-narrative dress with body and vitality, but there is something curiously unsatisfying in its very virtues ; it is strenuous, but its activity often seems to be in a sub-normal channel, like a highly active brain dreaming. The dream imagery in the narrative is probably deliberate and is quite consistent with the idea of the dead recalling their earthly lives, and yet it is not easy to get away from the feeling that there has been a certain amount of angling after that 'something rich and strange' (dust-cover) which is not really, after all, very close to Hans Andersen.

The prose virtues are better seen in 'Guest of Reality,' which tells without stridency or emotional indulgence about a sensitive boy's realization of youth as 'the most wretched age of man.' The narrative and descriptive passages are loaded with detail which in the hands of a less competent writer—half a dozen photographic 'realists' spring to mind who have attempted this sort of thing badly—would make for unconscionable tedium. Here it is always kept in check, subordinated to the main design. The work of a cultivated and alert mind, functioning at an even if not an exalted level, this novel is as far as it goes the most successful of the three. But, also by a long way the least ambitious, it doesn't go very far.

It is to 'The Hangman' that we come for the big guns (appropriately enough its date is that of Hitler's rise to power). The whole thing is in fact a thunder of indignation, too vociferous and laboured to be successful satire, too well-planned and powerful to be unimportant. The frame-work is good ; particularly well done is the shifting of the scene from a mediæval tavern with its grim but essentially human associations to a modern night-club where the brutal happenings of the story seem in no way out of place. There is every excuse for making National-Socialism the villain of the piece, but there doesn't seem much point in holding up the Hangman, symbol of bloodshed through the ages, as a kind of mystical hero. The trouble with this, as with 'The Eternal Smile,' is that it protests too much. Most of the Hangman's interminable harangue, like that of the Leader in the earlier story, is as gratuitous as a Shaw preface. But 'The Hangman' is the most interesting work of the three, and seems to achieve the most in spite of its failures.

NORMAN SHRAPNEL.

THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION IN SCOTLAND

SCOTTISH JOURNEY, by Edwin Muir (Heinemann and Gollancz, 7/6).

IS SCOTLAND EDUCATED ? by A. S. Neill (Routledge, 5/-).

SCOTLAND : THAT DISTRESSED AREA, by G. M. Thomson (Porpoise Press, 3/6).

LITERATURE AND OATMEAL, by William Power (Routledge, 5/-).

The appearance during the last year of a number of books about Scotland provides an occasion for a review of the cultural situation there. Mr. Edwin Muir and Mr. A. S. Neill from their different standpoints agree that it is desperate. Mr. G. M. Thomson is not concerned specifically with the cultural situation but with the economic situation and with showing that that also is desperate, whether or not there is any connection between the two. Mr. William Power alone is filled with hopefulness from some unknown source ; his second last chapter is headed ' The Dawn Returns : Lang, Stevenson, The Kailyard, and Munro ' and his triumphant last chapter seems an attempt to justify the blurb on his dust-wrapper, ' Literature to-day ranks almost with golf among the Nation's staple industries.'

It seems worth insisting upon one or two points that have already been insisted upon. There has of course been no Scottish literature and no literature of any kind in Scotland since the eighteenth century. There cannot be a Scottish literature in the fullest sense unless there is in the fullest sense a Scottish speech. There is no longer any such speech. What survives of dialect speech among what survives of the peasantry is in its last stages and is even something its speakers have come to be half-ashamed of. The dialects have been destroyed by forces, the most powerful of which operate not only in Scotland but throughout the modern world. What passes for Education has not been among the least lethal of these.