The Mortality of Magic

FAIRIES AND FUSILIERS. By Robert Graves. Knopf; $1.

OUTCASTS IN BEULAH LAND. By Roy Helton. Holt; $1.25.

Magic, whether of diction or of thought, is the one quality in poetry which all poets seek with equal passion. But how different are the wiles of these fantastic huntsmen in pursuit of this golden bird! For some are bold and direct, attempting to slay the creature outright; some go warily with a fine net; some wait in the darkness, hoping to be found rather than to find; while others still—it cannot be doubted—trudge patiently through the forest with a handful of salt. This much their contemporaries may observe of their appearances as huntsmen—but of their success, who can say? For magic is itself a changing thing. The sparrow of today is the phœnix of tomorrow, and vice versa; and tomorrow the captors of sparrows and phœnixes may regard each other with changed eyes.

This, it hardly needs to be said, is largely a matter of diction; and this again is largely a matter of the rate of growth and decay in the language at any given time. Some poets resist the growth of language, some merely acquiesce in it, and some (like Dante and D'Annunzio) exult in and compel it. These last are the boldest spirits, and, on the whole, the most likely to fail. "Will this word live? Will this word die? Will this word, tomorrow, be beautiful or merely vulgar?" In every line they hazard answers to these questions; and the chances are much against any high average of success.

These differences in the attitude towards diction set gulfs between poets who would otherwise be commensals, and constitute the deliciousness and futility of criticism. Observe, for example, the astonishing unlikeness, on this point, of "New Paths," that most interesting English anthology of the verse and prose of the younger men, and the two volumes now before us. The anthology represents, rather consciously, a band (by no means unvaried) of pioneers—wrestlers with new diction and rhythms, pursuers of new kinds of magic. One could gladly forego, it is true, a sort of Pre-Raphaelitic pinkness and faunishness which crops out here and there, as in the work of the Sitwells. But many of these English huntsmen have attained to a subdued and cool and almost intellectual kind of magic which, in America, we do not know.

At the same time one cannot help feeling a trifle dubious about a charm which is so conscious of itself, so practiced in self-exploitation. It is too deliberately naïve, too sophisticatedly primitive. However nicely a poet may write of sirens, fauns, elves, or other superannuated evidences of man's thirst for the supernatural, nowadays it inevitably smacks of affectation.

It is partly because this fault is common in England that one is delighted with such a volume as "Fairies and Fusiliers," of which the American edition has just appeared. This is forthright and honest verse, Anglo-Saxon in its vigorous directness, at the same time irresponsible and sure. Mr. Graves is less ostentatiously serious than his sedater contemporaries in "New Paths," yet one is not certain that in the upshot he does not come off better. Whereas among the younger contemporary poets one finds a good deal of emphasis on phrase-making for its own sake, here one finds a poet almost scornful of trappings and color, intent only on what he has to say, and saying it vividly and musically in the unaffected language of prose. Certainly these are among the most honest and vivid war poems which so far have come to us—and if Mr. Graves does not cut very deep, neither, on the other hand, does he go in for the usual mock-heroics and sentimental buncombe. Hear him in "A Dead Boche":

> To you who'd read my Songs of War
> And only hear of blood and fame,
> I'll say (you've heard it said before)
> "War's Hell!" and if you doubt the same
> To-day I found in Mametz Wood
> A certain cure for lust of blood:
> Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
> In a great mess of things unclean,
> Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
> With clothes and face a sodden green,
> Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
> Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

This approaches, it is true, that sort of romanticism which consists in the deliberate exploitation of the ugly or horrible. But for the most part Mr. Graves is a dealer in whim, and it is to Mr. Roy Helton that we must turn to see this method working in extenso. "Outcasts in Beulah Land" qualifies Mr. Helton for admission among our realists, but not as yet on a very high level. For the most part his work is still tentative and imitative: one swims successively through currents of Bret Harte, Masefield, Service, and O. Henry. The rhythms are insecure, the narrative psychology undeveloped. Mr. Helton at present finds it difficult to end a story otherwise than in sentimentality or melodrama. At the same time it should be said that these stories are often vivid, richly—if somewhat commonplacely—imagined, and on the whole well-proportioned. Most of one's objections are comprised when one has said that Mr. Helton is young. As for diction, Mr. Helton's method is that of D'Annunzio and Dante: he believes in using the demotic tongue,

neologisms and all. He is willing to take his chances that the slang of today will become the magic of tomorrow. Unfortunately he does this without much discrimination; he appears to be somewhat insensitive to values. Even among neologisms it is possible to distinguish vigorous from vulgar, beautiful from merely pretty. And it is this which Mr. Helton, like so many of our contemporary pursuers of new magic, has failed to do.

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