

## Percy Mackaye: An Appreciation, So Far as Is Possible

*Originally published in the February  
1917 edition of The International.*

A publisher, hearing recently from Mr. Percy Mackaye, to whom he had sent a book for review, was advised by this great poet to have the volume rebound; for the cover was so brutal and repulsive that, for his part, he had thrown the book into the wastepaper basket without further investigation.

Here is the calibre of Mr. Mackaye's mind.

What insight! What knowledge of the world! How much must one know who judges of literature by what is not even its outward show, but an accident for which the writer is not, as a rule, in any way responsible.

This revelation of genius, the power to divine Hercules not from his own foot, but from the boot of somebody whom Hercules had never met, sent me headlong to the library; for alas, my own shelves were bare of any such masterpieces as Percy Mackaye's.

The covers of his books were neither brutal nor repulsive; my path to the chefs d'oeuvre themselves was easy.

The "frightfulness" only appears on beginning to read. I began with *A Thousand Years Ago*. In a preface the great poet explains why he wrote this play; for which much thanks.

The scene is laid in Peking. Mr. Mackaye has read the encyclopedia for China under the letter C, and for Drama under the letter D, and confined his information. But it must have been a somewhat poor encyclopedia.

All his characters rant like Ancient Pistol; wordy bombast, all at the top of their voices. "By the carcass of Charlemagne, I am dog-awearied of twanging these gutstrings for breakfast." (Dog-awearied is a new one on

me, but it is probably poetic license. This stuff is printed as if it were blank verse, but the scansion is as poor as the sense.)

To get the Chinese flavor, Mr. Mackaye deems it sufficient to preface every other speech by an oath introducing the name of what he probably supposes to be a Chinese God. The emperor keeps on ejaculating "by holy Confucius!" "Great Buddha!" "My star!" His name, by the way, is Altorma, which does not sound very Chinese, somehow. But it doesn't matter much, for his courtiers talk Arabic, saying "Salaam!" when asked to salute a superior, who then assumes a "toploftical" attitude, though probably still "dog-awearly."

The book is full of such delightful finds — almost every page has a gem. "Is he at the door?" "Not him."

The play itself is the veriest rag-bag of stale device. The princess whose hand depends on the guessing of three riddles; the potion which if dropped on a sleeping lover's lips will make him tell his secret thought; the prince who disguises himself as a beggar, and so on. As the princess herself says, "O, you poor, bloody heads on Pekin's wall. Have you, then, died for this?"

I thought perhaps that Mr. Mackaye might be happier at home; so I turned to Yankee Fantasies. Here also he graciously explains himself, and why he did it, and his importance to the theatre, and again I am very glad. He tells us how impossible it is to represent dialect graphically, but in the text he proceeds to do it, and by great Buddha, I am dog-awearly.

But I do adore his stage directions; the climax of Chuck woke me up. Here you are:

"A locust rasps in an elm.

"Faint crickets chirp in the grass.

"An oriole flutes from an apple tree.

"From his hole, the wood-chuck crawls cautiously out, nosing, as he does so, a

crumpled and earth-soiled veil, which clings  
to his dusky hair, half clothing him.  
"Pulling from his burrow an ear of corn, he sits  
on his haunches, silently nibbling  
it — his small eyes half shut in the sun-  
shine."

I do honestly hope the greatest success for Mr. Mackaye, the modern Shakespeare, because I want to see Sir Herbert Tree as *The Woodchuck*.

And now I am awake enough to get on to *Gettysburg*. This play is printed in blank verse, minus capitals at the beginnings of the lines. But Mr. Mackaye is out to prove that blank verse need not be poetry. He ambles along with perfectly commonplace thought and language, which happens to scan. It simply makes the play read like shocking bad prose.

"O' course; but I must take my little laugh. I told him I guessed I wasn't presentable any how, my mu'stache and my boots wa'n't blacked this morning. I don't jest like t' talk about my legs. Be you a-goin' to take your young school folks, Polly?"

Mr. Mackaye, like other amateur minor poets — if you can call him that — never suspects that there is a reason for using blank verse, that the only excuse for using it is to produce an effect which cannot be produced elsehow. Without exaltation of theme and treatment, blank verse is a blunder, and one can usually spot the poetical booby by his abuse of it.

In the books at my disposal I can find few lyrics. It may be that Percy Mackaye — how full of suggestion is that name! — has written some odes which leave the "Nightingale" and the "Grecian Urn" and "Melancholy" in the wastepaper basket along with that book with the brutal and repulsive cover; he may have "Prometheus Unbound" beaten a mile; he may have "Lycidas" and "Adonais" taking the count; he may be able to give cards and spades to "Atalanta" and "Dolores" and "Epipsychid-

ion" and "Anactoria." Hope so. I want some first-rate fresh poetry to read. Hope so. But I have not seen it. Instead, I see this!

"Long ago, in the young moonlight,  
I lost my heart to a hero;  
Strong and tender and stern and right  
And terribler than Nero.  
Heigho, but he was a dear, O!"

At the conclusion of this, one of the listeners asks: "Was it a fragrance or a song?" In my considered opinion, it must have been a fragrance.

I am aware that this is a very short article, but there are really limits to the amount one can write about Nothing.