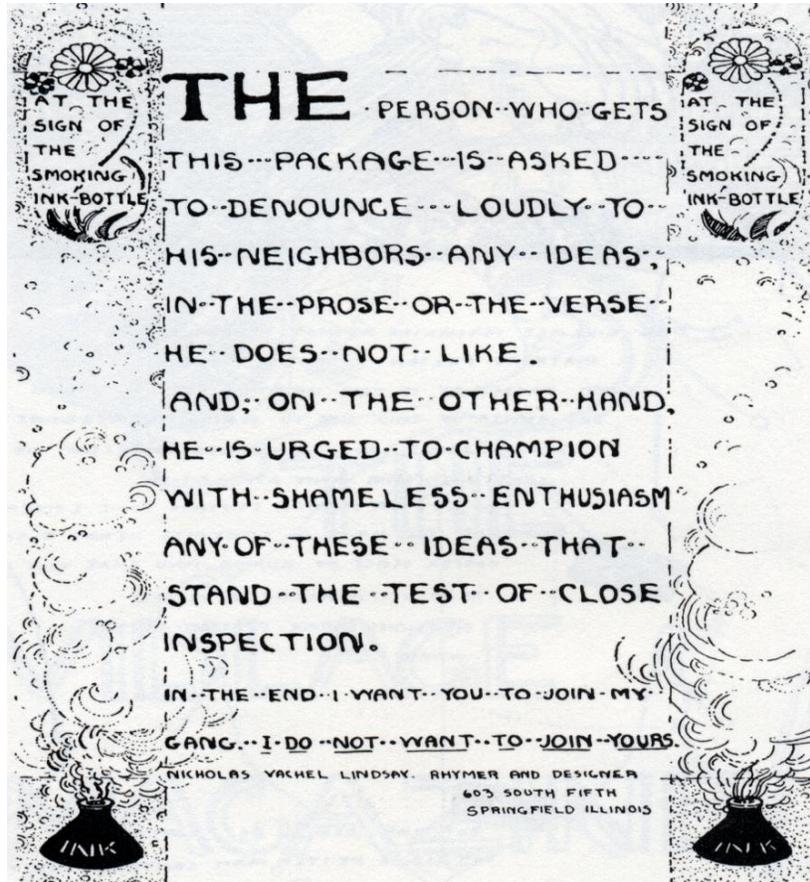


Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Eleven



[Vachel's insert introducing his self-published *Village Magazine* (1910)]

by

Dennis Camp
Professor Emeritus
University of Illinois at Springfield
Springfield, Illinois

[This ongoing biography may be read online at www.VachelLindsayHome.org
Choose "Biography" and then "Uncle Boy: A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay."
The biography and the website are sponsored by the Vachel Lindsay Association.]



11. Chicago and Hope [1902]

“I yearn to be the leading frog in the Chorus.”

1

Vachel returned to the daytime curriculum at the Art Institute in early January 1902. He was still sketching from antique casts, as he had made little progress during the previous fall. Predictably, he remained optimistic and hopeful: “This has been a very successful week at the Institute. I have worked hard, with progress, and wasted no time. I hope I can keep up my present industry. I scarcely realize a week has gone. My sketching is improving and my antique drawing is boosting itself. I find my work much more interesting than it has ever been before.” He also claimed to be intent on economizing: “So far I have been able to cut down expenses more than usual, and I probably will not have to send for money for some time” (January 10). Two days later he affirmed to his father: “I hope before many months to be off your shoulders for good. I feel very guilty about it. I am strong enough and old enough to be making my way, and I will be before long” (January 12). For the time being, though, Uncle Boy was preoccupied with the youthful, dependent side of his nature: he was once again Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay’s boy.

After his abortive attempt to be a self-provider, Vachel seemed to realize, more than ever, the need for parental support—and not simply in the realm of finances. Paradoxically, he also requested assistance in asserting self-discipline: “I want you to insist sternly upon a radical improvement. Mama’s last letter was bracing” (January 10). “Mama’s last letter” has not survived, but it obviously contained strong words because her son responded with an apology: “I am very sorry I left things in a mess behind me. And I will try to do better the next time.” He also used the occasion to urge further stern letters from home. To succeed in art, he maintained, simply meant to exercise will power, and his parents could help: “Now I do not want to be coddled in this matter of Art School. I have big chances here, and I want to feel that you are exacting the uttermost effort of me. It is all a matter of concentrating the will. Unless one is concentrated to a certain intensity he does not progress, no matter how conscientiously he plugs. It is will, will will that is needed. . . .”

For comparison purposes, the now willful Lindsay son enclosed two drawings as representative examples of his latest work, asking that they be kept in trust, in order to “see how much I improve by June.” He explained that the valuable part of the drawings was “the way I have put down the pencil-shading—the ‘tone or treatment.’ The critics always like it.” But he also sought his parents’ opinions: “I have kept it up very well this week, and hope to put on still more pressure next week. I don’t want to know anything but what you are expecting of me—and you must expect and exact a great deal. I will report each letter whether I have worked or not, and tell the truth on myself” (January 10). The “chronic starter” was back in harness.

On February 2, though, Vachel was forced to “tell the truth.” He admitted that he had not passed to the gallery “this time,” presumably his first opportunity for advancement. Of course, he was not disheartened: “I am as well off where I am, so do not worry. I am making real progress and am getting real interest in my work.” As evidence, he sent home another drawing (“just to interest you a bit”), although he also ordered: “Please do not hang it on the wall.” In the same letter, he boasted of recent good fortune at *The Christian Century*. His belief that a would-be Christian cartoonist must first succeed as a news reporter, along with his admiration for Herbert Willett, led him to volunteer his services at the *Century* offices. Almost as soon as he returned to Chicago in 1902, he met with managing editor Charles A. Young, who accepted the young art student’s offer to serve as an unpaid, journeyman writer/illustrator. Vachel’s initial efforts, four short summaries of various current events, were published in the January 30, 1902, issue. Appropriately, the future author of “The Wedding of the Rose and the Lotus” (*Poetry* 153-156) focused his first story on the lively debate over whether or not the proposed great canal to link the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans should be built across Panama or across Nicaragua. After a brief reference to the debate, the author added a personal observation: “Christian truth shall some day achieve its loftiest expression in the lives that shall be quickened by the power of the Gospel in the orient” (“The Coming Canal” 6). [Note 1]

In a matter of weeks, Vachel was working nights at the *Century* offices, primarily authoring the “News of the Week,” a regular column summarizing current events. To ease the burden of transportation, he left the DeLongs and moved into a new room (the move was made on February 3) “about fifteen minutes walk from the Institute, or the *Century* office [which was then located at 358 Dearborn Street].” Curiously, he did not send the new address to his parents, perhaps because he knew that he would be moving again shortly. And he had little to report concerning his landlady: “I had better not describe my new landlady till I try her a week. She seems a satisfactory person. My room is such a one as I had before, in size, accommodations^ etc. It costs half a dollar more a week, but I save more than that in car fares and time. It is as well as I could do in the middle of town, \$10 a month. I will get in an hour more of work a day” (February 2). Although no description of the “new landlady” survives, the early impression must have been favorable. Vachel joined her in a move to 1461 Michigan Avenue, “third flat,” in early May 1902, as he reported in a letter home on May 10. At the end of summer, 1902, however, Vachel begged Mary Humphrey for help in finding a room in Chicago, as he was “tired of the prospect of living with a biddy for a landlord, or else living in an unearthly distance from my temple of Art” (unpublished letter, August 31, Lindsay Home). But now we are ahead of the story.

In late winter, 1902, days at the Institute and nights at the *Century* left little time for reading; and Vachel recorded almost nothing in his notebooks until early fall, 1902. He did find time for a few shows, and he continued to exchange occasional letters with Aunt Fannie, Ruth Wheeler, Mary Humphrey, and his sister Olive, as well as with his parents. He also authored several new poems, including “Farewell to Christmas” (*Poetry* 791) and “Babylon! My Babylon” (*Poetry* 33-34). The latter is the anticipated “Pleasures of Babylon” poem mentioned at the end of the 1901 date book (December 5: see the close of the last chapter). With its vision of Chicago as a modern Babylon or Gomorrah that “must die,” the poem reflects Vachel’s lifelong views concerning the American

megalopolis, especially Chicago and, later, Boston, New York, and San Francisco. In “Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan,” for example, we read that “the whole Atlantic coast / Seemed a giant spiders’ nest” (*Poetry* 344).

Vachel’s letters home include no references to poetry. The Lindsay boy had tried to share his poetic endeavors with his parents on earlier occasions, and he knew what kind of response he would receive. Instead, there is a litany of success stories, recounting achievements at the Institute and at the *Century*. On February 22, he wrote to Papa: “I have made progress in school this week and feel unusually self respecting[^]. I made some sketches at the Saturday morning class that were better than I could have expected to do and which were praised by the critic and my neighbors. One girl said I drove her ‘madly jealous.’ I hope that will encourage you. I begin to see that I am forming a sketching style of my own. Let us firmly resolve to dash ahead and do wonders!” In the same letter, he claimed that *Century* editor Young (who was about to visit Springfield) was “as kind and charitable with my work as I could ask any one[^] to be If he continues so till June I feel that I can develop my style and learn to put my drawing-knowledge into stuff that will print. Jolly him along and keep him cheerful. I feel that I will soon acquire momentum that will make me worth while[^] to his paper.” But, he was forced to add, “I will need more money on the first of March, ten dollars for room rent.”

“Brother” Young had accepted Vachel’s first drawings, along with one of his essays, “The New Paganism and the Old,” for the *Century*’s February 27 issue (p. 8). “If the East remains Christless after the invasion and adaptation of Western secular civilization,” the budding newsman observes, “at best she may ripen an art of her own again.” The former art spirit of the East was destroyed by ordinary Christian missionaries who brought “a new Paganism that is driving all the old art and the best of the old life out of the East, a Paganism of guns and gold.” The ordinary church not only had failed to bring Christ to the East but in the vain process of trying had destroyed the ancient and magnificent Oriental art spirit, largely through lack of understanding:

The art the Church should have cherished has become putrid through the ages; literature is wild with the wine of agnosticism. The drama has become unspeakable. Industry in her throne-room is but a Circe in a herd of quarreling beasts, and the chief temples of science are defiled with the altars of Mammon and Baal, and there is no place clean. Church universal! these your children have gone to the benighted heathen to defile them—to make a new Paganism blacker than the old—a Paganism that is your responsibility.

In an orthodox conclusion, Vachel argues that the Disciples must come to the rescue: “In the East is our long row of camp-fires already. There is our far-flung battle-line. The apostolic church will have its heart in Asia before the twentieth century be done. . . . The Disciples of Christ need to raise up great world-evangelists to save the nations from the damnation of materialism—and by faith, repentance, baptism and the radiant life of the spirit we can save them.” Ironically, the author is unaware that his sister Olive and her new husband, Paul Wakefield, would encamp on that “far-flung battle-line” in less than three years, serving the “apostolic church” as medical missionaries in China. [Note 2]

Vachel’s initial illustration portrays, in the words of Thelma Wiles Thalinger, “a stylized little Chinese figure [“a heathen benighted”] by a symmetrical jar, behind which

looms a symbolically menacing figure” [ordinary Christianity] (452). The following verses are lettered into the drawing:

In the shade of a lantern unlighted
Awaits us a heathen benighted
He drinks inspiration from a jar
His exquisite taste is delighted.

(The word “decoration” follows “jar,” but is likely descriptive of the drawing and not a word in the poem: see Thalinger 452.) The second drawing, at the end of “The New Paganism and the Old,” features the watchwords of the Disciples’ missionaries: “Faith Repentance Baptism.” In spite of its orthodox close, “The New Paganism” was Vachel’s first and last personal essay published in the *Century* during his Chicago art-student days. His disjointed, semi-incoherent style likely puzzled, perhaps even angered, the paper’s already diminished readership. The initial taste of success, though, only confirmed the now-published author’s determination to pursue Christian cartooning as a profession. He resolved to focus his energies on pen-and-ink drawing: “I am going to learn more about pen and ink as fast as I can and do better stuff for the *Century*.” At the same time, he tried to maintain sobriety: “I think the missionary number a general success. I am not satisfied with my stuff though.” And he asked again for parental criticism: “I will be glad to have as much practical adverse criticism as possible on my stuff as it appears. I am apt to displease where I least expect to and be obscure where I intend to be plain. The reader can tell better than any one else whether an illustration really illustrates” (February 28). [Note 3]

Within a few weeks, the Lindsay son had additional reasons for confidence. Several of his journeyman drawings were accepted for the March 13 *Century*, including the border decoration for Edward Scribner Ames’s editorial: “At the Church: The Ruling Passion.” Doctor Lindsay must have been very proud, as the same issue printed his wife’s report of a Disciples’ convention in Toronto, “The Fourth International Student Volunteer Convention” (pp. 7-8). Kate and her daughter Olive had joined 3000 other church members (from 22 countries) in Toronto’s Massey Hall, where the lectures and discussions focused on student volunteerism in worthy church enterprises. For Kate, her son’s volunteer work at the *Century* was certainly a case in point. In fact, the cover of the very next issue (March 20) features Vachel’s artistic representation of Acts 2:42-43 (43a is emphasized):

**AND THEY CONTINUED STEADFASTLY IN THE APOSTLE’S
DOCTRINE AND FELLOWSHIP AND IN BREAKING OF BREAD AND IN
PRAYERS.**

**AND FEAR CAME UPON EVERY SOUL: AND MANY WONDERS AND
SIGNS WERE DONE BY THE APOSTLES.**

This same issue prints the second half of Kate’s Toronto report: “Disciples at the Student Volunteer Convention” (pp. 6-7). [Note 4]

Meanwhile, Vachel wrote his father that Mama and Olive could have their convention. All he wanted was two dollars:

I am in a hurry to buy a book I have been waiting for for some time. It has just arrived from New York at Mc.Clurgs[^] [Chicago's McClurg's Bookstore]. It is the best collection of modern pen drawings and I want to jump in and study styles and treatment right away. I am seriously contemplating a real cartoon for the *Century* and need this book for all such work. It is really the only prize I have set my heart on since I have been here. . . .

Pen drawing is to be my exclusive field, and here I will have stretched before me all the modern masters that I must improve upon. I can hardly wait to get at it. (March 12)

Three days later he wrote again: "I hasten to acknowledge the receipt of the ten dollars. I was very grateful for such a long letter. I have bought my book. It is the greatest real pleasure I have had for many years. Everything I want to know is right there for me to learn. The pictures are printed with beautiful care on especial paper. Some day your son will appear in such a collection I hope. It is my one line" (March 15).

His "one line" led to more success in March, when his former Hiram friend, Charlie Russell, requested original pen-and-ink sketches for the University of Georgia's annual, the *Pandora*. On March 15, Vachel reported: "I have finished this evening three quite successful drawings for Charlie Russel's[^] college annual at the University of Georgia. It is a good advertisement[^] and a pleasant evening. I worked up sketches I had on hand into a sort of cartoon. It was a success, so I am going to spend the next two or three weeks digging out a good one for the *Century*. I have quite a bunch of sketches on hand that I can work up into groups to tell one story or another." Russell and the *Pandora* editor must have been pleased, as less than two weeks later Vachel sent six additional drawings, including one entitled "The Maid of Athens" (a pun on Byron's poem of the same name and on the Georgia city where the University is located). Vachel was pleased but not overly excited. He claimed modestly that the drawings were "merely Composition exercises" (March 26).

Nevertheless, the newly inspired artist set his sights on the *American Weekly*; and in a letter filled with "I hope," he hoped that success at the *Century* would lead to further publications in the *Weekly*. (It did not.) The *Weekly* at least was "not in debt," and there was "more prospect of dividends." He would, however, remain faithful to his initial benefactor in the world of professional publishing: "Not that I ever intend to desert the *Century*. I hope to be able and productive enough to suit both some day. I am studying composition as hard as I can. There is a lot of progress to be made, but I see how and what to do now." At the Institute, he was assured, in his words, "that I could 'draw all right' . . ., without solicitation," although his teacher "added that I did not carry my work far enough, etc. . . . The point is that—I have it in me to be a draughtsman[^]. So cheer up."

If he decided to join the family on their annual Colorado vacation, the Lindsay son continued, "I hope to be in trim to make pictures of everything—the camp—the people—the trees and the mountains I hope you will urge me to do so—and not fight the proposition. I will have a hard enough time to make myself do it and will need all the encouragement I can. Most all the Art students go to sketching camps. It is the accredited method of spending the summer. So wherever I am, at home or Chicago or elsewhere, I hope to follow the fashion." He was even hopeful that he could win some

kind of victory over an old nemesis. He was immersed in “lessons in anatomy drawing,” and he was wildly optimistic: “I hope to get it better than the teacher” (March 26).

2

On March 12, 1902, John Peter Altgeld died. The Chicago newspapers, Vachel wrote several years later, “chronicled with Journalistic sobs how twelve thousand of the Unfortunate filed past [Altgeld’s] coffin—that laid[^] in state in the Chicago Public Library. The procession continued long after dark. Some estimated[^] that twenty-five thousand went by” (“The Altgeld Temperament,” Virginia). Vachel himself was in the procession, and he summarized the press releases on Altgeld’s death for his *Century* “News of the Week” column. He then added some of his own observations: “Altgeld is worthy of study. This man has been in many ways the most consistent, altruistic and respectable radical in America . . . those decent citizens who curse him most are least aware that Altgeld’s chief glory is that his very ghost is feared and execrated by all corruptionists who knew him, great or small, in his party or out of it. His whip was like a whip of scorpions.” (March 20, 1902, “The Death of Altgeld” 5) [Note 5]

Vachel cut out the various newspaper obituaries and pasted them in a scrapbook that he kept to document Altgeld’s thought and achievements (Virginia). In “The Altgeld Temperament” essay, he related: “I have before me a collection of discussions of the Governor from the Chicago Papers the day after his death. They eat their own words. He would have been immortalized if the memorial notices had been printed as many days in succession as the life time[^] attacks. They were careful not to praise him—till quite sure of his demise.” Nine years later the thought blossoms in “The Eagle That Is Forgotten” (1911), the elegy Vachel penned for Altgeld: “They praised you. . . . and laid you away” (*Poetry* 136-137).

News summaries and drawings were not the only items from Vachel’s pen during the early months of 1902. Although he did not inform his parents, he was reading and writing poetry, as well as sketching antiques. In late March, he sent copies of several poems to his Springfield friends, Mary and Maud Humphrey, including at least one new work, “The Heart of Solomon. (What he said to the Queen of Sheba.)”:

Oh kings must love a thousand
 Though poets love but one
 And kings will clasp each love that waits
 And have as many loves as hates,
 There’s glory in a thousand
 There’s weariness in one!
 I had rather be a king than a poet.
 Know it, weeping maiden, know it!

The manuscript is dated “The Art Institute, Chicago—March 1902”; a side note reads: “Presented to Miss Maud Humphrey.” In his accompanying letter (addressed to Mary Humphrey), Vachel praises William Morris’s poem, “Father John’s War-Song”: “It is the kind of a thing that makes the reader desire to go ‘marching to the music of the (warrior) band.’” In regard to his own poems, he added: “I am under the impression that you and your sister asked for the verses I send. If so—forgive the delay. If not—forgive the

sending. You asked for something or other of mine. I am always your servant” (March 30, Lindsay Home).

With “The Heart of Solomon,” Vachel was teasing two dear friends. When Mary Humphrey responded, apparently asking about the poet’s current love interest, he answered: “You want to know something about the present queen of my heart. I will not accuse you of curiosity. But really, she is not one you would approve of—so you are rash to ask. . . . Let me describe her. Golden hair. ‘Eyes of bloo.’ No perceptible intellect. A great mass of well knit temperament. I have adored her without stint for three years. She has a great affection for my unworthy self. That flatters my vanity. She is supremely unselfish. That is very convenient. We have vowed eternal fidelity. When I told her good-by the last time—she lives in Indiana—we were almost in tears. Her name is Frances.”

Mary may or may not have realized that she was again being teased. Vachel’s letter describes his niece, Frances Frazee (born June 6, 1893), the eight-year-old daughter of Kate Lindsay’s brother, John Paul Frazee. As to Mary’s opinion of “The Heart of Solomon,” Vachel continued: “I will not attempt to challenge your verdict on Solomon. But if that royal sport was anything like this prudish serf he had not much yearning for more than a fair face and a true spirit. I find them in Frances. And there are enough other fair ones to gaze on to keep her from being monotonous. This is neither romance nor heroism. It is merely human nature. My soul really ‘cries out’ for little more than a multitude of lovelly^ eyes. I find most other males the same way” (Lindsay Home: the letter is dated—“This is the Sixth of April, in the second or third year of the Century” [it was the second].) Vachel also thanked Mary for introducing him to “Miss Grover,” apparently a Springfield girl who was visiting in Chicago: “We had a very pleasant time at the Institute. And a nice call at [her] hotel. I will be there again soon.” Finally, in the same letter, as if to emphasize his soul’s need for “a multitude of lovelly^ eyes,” Vachel reported that he had seen Mayme Tiffany that very afternoon (April 6). Like Miss Grover, Mayme was visiting in Chicago. And like Miss Grover, in Vachel’s opinion, she was “a dear girl.”

In April, Vachel seems to have written very few letters (at least few survive). In his first letter home in quite some time (April 23), he related to his father that he had attended a large memorial service for Altgeld: “The house and stage were packed. There was tremendous cheering at every burst of eloquence.” Two days later, he proudly announced: “I am feeling very good for I made the gallery today. One more hard spurt and I will make Life-Class. I ought to get there about the day I leave school [June 21]. I will have to do a deal of still-life painting, which I have not before tried. It is a new rule to do still-life befor^ the Life-class^. I will probably work in the Gallery in the morning and the paint-room in the afternoon. I have no ambition to learn anything about paint, but they say it helps one to draw. And a great many illustrations are painted, black, & white (and colors too) that you have seen” (April 25).

The works of America’s top illustrators, including Louis Loeb (1866-1909) and Henry Hutt (1875-1950), were on exhibit at the Institute, but Vachel was not overwhelmed: “After examining the exhibition by illustrators of national standing, I feel sure of my chance to make my mark. My work will take, sooner or later. The style of drawing in which I did ‘The Battle’ [*Poetry* 29], five years ago, that hangs in the

Bedroom^, will take as soon as I put a sufficiency of knowledge into it. I find that I can work into it everything I learn and it is at the worst a question of time. I know you would like my academic work. I am immensely pleased that I have made the gallery. It will give me a fresh start.”



Vachel's drawing "The Battle" (1897).

Be “encouraged about my pen-and-ink style,” he urged his father: “Because it has stayed by me so long, we can depend on it not to leave me, and since it holds all I learn, and I learn fast enough—why it is a good investment. It is really going to take with people of intellect and taste. I am instinctively ambitious about it, and feel that in about ten years the younger illustrators will be copying it, and if I do my duty I will be counted one of the twentieth century forces in art. If I am as faithful to it as you have been to medicine^, nothing else will happen.” Finally, the Lindsay boy responded to some of his mother’s criticism, criticism that he himself had solicited: “Mama’s criticisms were very much in order. My stuff is not simple and plain enough, and it ought to contain more beauty and composition. I have been fighting for these qualities as hard as I can. And it also needs more academic drawing, but that is coming fast” (April 25).

In a separate letter to his mother three days later, Vachel proudly reported that 6 of the 12 cartoons he had brought to Brother Young had been accepted for publication in the *Century*. He further explained: “The one of my Cartoons that especially struck Young will attract a certain amount of attention I think. I did not like it, but it is going to kill or cure. On the whole it will attract attention to the series. It is ‘Burned for Witchcraft.’ ‘Reverent Scholarship’ is tied to the stake of ‘Sectism.’” With typical enthusiasm, he predicted: “as soon as I ‘take’ with the *Century* readers and the *Evangelist* [*The Christian Evangelist*, another Disciples’ publication] I will be no longer a burden and able to pay my way, and I hope this will happen before June.” In the meantime, he agreed to keep a detailed record of his expenses: “I have my accounts for all last year up to September sternly recorded, to the time I went into Field’s. My money goes to just the same things this year. But hereafter I shall send home an account with the expiration of each

installment . . . I am sadly in need of shoes and a hair cut^ and a pair of everyday trousers, but can wait till the middle of the month. I do not intend to spend any money on such trivialities at present. Please cheer up” (April 28).

“Burned for Witchcraft” appears in the *Century* for May 15 (p. 4), along with an editorial (“Biblical Preaching”) by Brother Young himself. Vachel’s parents assumed that their son was defending Herbert Willett, the reverent scholar whose plea for union led to persecution at the hands of conservatives and “sectists.” After all, as we have seen, Vachel had suggested that Willett’s ideas would have greater impact if they were expressed in Christian cartoons. When informed of this interpretation, however, Vachel responded that he “had everybody this side of Joan of Arc in mind, especially Alexander Campbell etc.” He also offered his own evaluation: “I do not admire my cartoon work yet a bit, but hope enough people will be fairly interested in it to enable me to follow it up with better stuff. It will change all through when I learn composition” (May 16).

A second Vachel cartoon, “Break Her Chains,” was published the following week (*Christian Century*, May 22, 1902, p. 6). It depicts the Christian church as a girl locked in chains, such as the chains of “Theological Tradition.” She reaches toward the “Bible” and “Apostolic Freedom,” but is in obvious need of someone to “Break Her Chains.” This second cartoon clearly reflects the Chicago Disciples’ break with tradition, especially in regard to baptism by immersion. As such, it is a defense, not only of Willett but also of Charles Clayton Morrison. Other Lindsay submissions remained unpublished, so that Brother Young may have felt that the volunteer Christian cartoonist’s works did not “take” or that they were too provocative. Coincidentally, in the same issue that features Vachel’s second cartoon, the *Century* announces the appointment of Mr. and Mrs. R. Ray Eldred as missionaries to Africa (“Notes and Personals,” p. 17). In late 1913, Ray Eldred drowned while attempting to swim a branch of the Congo River; and Vachel’s then pastor, Frederick William Burnham (1871-1960), preached a subsequent sermon on “the heroic life and death of Ray Eldred” (*Poetry* 178). After the service, Vachel hurried home to write the first draft of a new poem, “The Congo,” one of his works that did “take” with the American people, and in a very big way. [Note 6]

3

Vachel continued to write poetry in May and June 1902, but he refused to discuss what he referred to as “literature,” even with close friends like Mary Humphrey. On May 13, he sent Mary a soulful letter (written on absorbent paper with a leaky pen, so that the manuscript is filled with messy ink blots): “Write and tell me something about your soul. Really, you want to talk literature—and I dare not express my opinion of literature in general to you. It is less than the dust in the balance beside religion^, or Art to me, and it is other things too dreadful to say . . . Let these small blots stand as symbols of its vanity. Not that I challenge your wisdom in loving letters. But I can’t at present love them. Talk about your soul,” he continued, “and other peoples^ . . . I always like souls. Pull out their sinews—stretch their nerves. It is the only way to find the golden secret of life. The stony human heart is the philosophers^ stone of the universe. The soft human heart is the only tradjedy^ in all time, (and the only tragedy too).”

As to the soul itself, Vachel argued, it is not “that dim corner of the nature that preachers search for but never penetrate . . . Most people assume that the soul is the name for that dreadful judgement closet hidden in the bottom of the heart. But I prefer to suspect it is the personality minus that closet of fear. . . . Sometimes I think the souls of women and men are more apt to live in their hands and their lips and their shoulders, and nearer to the presence of Deity: in the air [—] than if they were packed in the thick darkness of the freest chamber of the brain or heart. Tell me what you think.” (May 13, 1902, Lindsay Home)

Three days later Vachel sent another soulful letter to his father. He wanted to stay in Chicago for the summer, although he knew that he was expected to join the family in Colorado. He was torn between the desire to please his parents and the desire to further his art: “I have been improving right along, and did some things this week I have always tried in vain heretofore. There is always one step ahead to be taken. One beautiful thing is that when you once learn a thing here you cannot forget it, if you are at all conscientious. Every new step involves all those taken already. . . . Owing to my late progress in school I feel very much tempted to take the Summer work, I feel that I have reached a stage where Mr. Wilson [his still-life instructor] is just the man I need. He insists on just the qualities that are hardest for me. I could take a lot of still life too, and have that over with.”

In addition, he wanted to stay at the *Century*, perhaps doing some “extra work . . . This Chicago set of Disciples is here to stay and bound to grow and I want to do them favors when I can. It will not be possible for me to write my column away from Chicago. It consists principally of the items in the very last evening paper, rewritten in the light of the whole week. That means but the addition of a significant line here and there. Young would not care much if I gave up my column, though it might annoy him a bit. But I want a reputation in that office for being a sticker. Everybody and everything comes and goes with the *Century* especially in summer [the last three words were added afterward, obviously for emphasis]. I can win easily by being always there. Of course I could take off two weeks for a home visit easily. . . . I discuss this matter at length for a very short conclusion—that I had a little rather stay here this summer. Art is no longer a dry study, and with two weeks at home, in June and September—it would be my month’s vacation.”

In his inimitable way, the Lindsay son then provided his parents with the excuses they needed in order to insist on his presence at summer camp: “Still I have long anticipated going west, and will not kick against going. If I do I want to do lots of sketching with the whole family for critics. I hope you will make it a matter of conscience to keep me at it. It will count for as much as anything you could scold about. Most of the artists of the world will be sketching in the same way at the same time, so it will be a proper thing. Staying in school will pay better, for what I learn there is solidier, and goes farther in the fall term. . . . If Papa is the only man in camp, I will consider myself needed there. . . . I don’t see how Papa can take care of so many fair ones alone.”

The “fair ones” were Mama, Joy, Helen Campbell, and Olive, who was accompanied by her now close friend, Ruth Wheeler. “I know I am not much help when I intend to be,” Vachel admitted, “but I ought to be present with my good intentions, unless I have a substitute. Paul [Wakefield] can’t go. Says he can go next summer. . . This summer,” he concluded in his probative argument, “will be a good one for all of us,

wherever we are . . . I can catch up with myself for last fall [when he worked at Field's] and have a good round year if I go to the Institute next year. Well, we will talk it over when I get home—June 21" (May 16). Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay, however, must have felt that there was little to talk over. The rest of Vachel's letters from this May and early June do not mention the possibility of a summer in Chicago. He knew he was going to be with the family in Colorado.

Vachel's troubled perspective this May involved more than his indecisiveness as to whether or not he wanted to camp in Colorado during the coming summer. In his work at the Institute, he took his mother's criticism to heart and decided to emphasize beauty and composition (in his mind, they were identical) in his academic drawings: "I see plainly that in one more year like this last I will be able to do full justice to most any ordinary cartoon idea. I need a year of Composition. I have drawing enough to stagger along at a pinch. I am going to attempt my two first Compositions^ this evening. I have attended the classes for some time, but it takes the courage of a lion to hand in ones^ first composition. Really, all my Hiram work was nothing but crude Composition^—no drawing in it. So I feel that I have the bulge on them, a three years^ start, when I have gotten their rules and regulations once learned. I will spring all my Hiram tricks in decency and in order. It (the Hiram style) is entirely too erratic to use unadulterated, but in three or four years it will be a mine of infinite resource" (May 16).

By the end of May, though, Vachel discovered that his search for beauty was not appreciated by the Institute faculty. Of course, he had no doubt as to who was at fault: "I am trying hard of late to pack as much beauty into my pictures as I can. I have an ability that way, and it will be my shortest road toward^ passing the rest of the students. Hundreds of them become quite respectable draughtsmen^, but have no sense of beauty. That, I begin to discover is the principal criticism that Eastern and Foreign^ authorities have passed on the Faculty of the Institute. They turn out drawings that are hard and tight and dry and over-Academic. Well, if I can infuse enough of a personal sense of beauty into my stuff I will risk these dangers. While the Faculty theorise^ about Beauty in a way, and preach it in a measure, still the practical results of their system do not make it good." He then hinted at why, in a year's time, he would beg to go to New York: "There are schools where if one has a sense of beauty it is sure to be thoroughly developed. . . ." (May 31).

In the same long letter, Vachel compared his drawing with his poetry, making a rather startling claim in the process: "If I could only make as much progress every day as I do every month I would be happy. I improve by the month, in a general way. But I am encouraged when I remember that in the tabooed matter of poetry, that my times of progress got much closer together as time went by, and I may reasonably hope that drawing will follow the same course. I suppose you know that I quit writing poetry last August." Had he claimed that he quit sending manuscripts to publishers "last August," Vachel would have been very nearly truthful. But the fact is he had written many poems during the previous few months, several of them among his better works to date. Apparently, literature, especially poetry, was something of an embarrassment at this point in the Lindsay son's life, as well as a red flag for parental criticism. An interest in poetry somehow suggested a lack of responsibility, a deviation from duty, a wavering aim. He was not about to give up his avocation, but he also was not about to advertise his efforts,

especially to his parents, although he did go so far as to express his thoughts on the value of poetry (that is, in the past, when he used to write it!):

As soon as I can draw as well as I could write then I will be a success here. My experience with verse has been quite valuable to me in furnishing me analogies in studying my own powers of creation. It will enable me to avoid much waste of time and effort in the development of my drawing. Some of the best of my verse I am quite satisfied with and it gives me confidence to feel that some day I can respect myself just as much as a workman in line drawing. Of course, in a sense your true artist is always a bit disgusted with his level best efforts, but then there is that other feeling that one has really accomplished something worth while that comes with it.

“The thing that will count most for commercial success,” he insisted, “is the beauty and character of faces and the action and decorative qualities of figures If I cannot put real beauty and poetry into my work it will not command the best prices, no matter how honestly it is drawn. I must pack my stuff with poetry. . . . There is no end of work here for a really high-class commercial artist. I have got to get a good big sense of beauty as fast as I can” (May 31).

His reading during the past winter (1901-02) had introduced Vachel to the concept of beauty as it is proclaimed in William Morris’s socialistic views, views that stand in marked contrast to Edgar Allan Poe’s aestheticism: “I want to learn the beauties that everybody can see, rather than those peculiar to Art School. I want to learn to make the kind of a pretty girl that somebody not an artist can admire, and likewise really rugged manly men. They have never appeared in a very handsome way in our cotemporary[^] illustration. And Composition—which is another name for the sense of Beauty, has another advantage. If rightly understood it saves a course in decorative design. If I really get into the depths of the sense of beauty as I sketch, the designing will come of itself” (May 31). We may be tempted to conclude that here is the seed for Vachel’s “Gospel of Beauty”—and certainly Kate Lindsay’s powerful influence adds to the temptation. The “Gospel of Beauty,” however, was intimately associated with Vachel’s later views on Springfield: it did not focus simply on “the sense of beauty.” In 1902, the Art Institute student demonstrated little passion for saving Springfield. In fact, just one week prior to the letter quoted above, he praised his sister Olive’s decision to return to the family home (she had accepted a teaching position at the Springfield High School). But he closed with some unflattering comments on his old hometown:

I am on the whole, very glad Olive is to be at home. Now that she will have some definite responsibility, she will be very happy there. Helen [Campbell] and Joy need a working model too, and they won’t find any other in Springfield. Springfield Culture is generally too crude or too worldly to be normal, too worldly for our sort to follow. Olive now has more culture of soul and sense than the best or the worst of them. (May 24)

Vachel’s love for Springfield, the magical city of his discontent, did not manifest itself until his return home from New York City, in mid-summer, 1908. At that time it surfaced necessarily (he had no other place to go) and spontaneously—and soon became one of the main tenets in his “Gospel of Beauty” (*Prose* 157-158), but now we are ahead of the story.

By the end of May 1902, contrary to what he wrote to his parents, Vachel had authored “The Cup of Paint” (*Poetry* 25), a second version of “The Angel Frozen-Wings” (entitled “The Angel Goldenflesh”), and probably “The Witch of Lake Michigan” (*Poetry* 56—an early version was entitled “The Water Witch”)—all of which he sent to Mary and Maud Humphrey. As we have seen, he also quit Field’s the previous December, in part to write poetry. In March, moreover, he sent copies of several more new poems to the Humphreys. Meanwhile, the poet himself described “The Cup of Paint” as a “Souvenir of my first and last visit to Sam T. Jack’s [burlesque] Theatre, Chicago” (*Poetry* 25). On the copy of the poem sent to the Humphreys, he recorded the date of authorship: “May 22, 1902.” “The Witch of Lake Michigan,” like the earlier poem, “Song of the Michigan Waves,” reflects Vachel’s walks with Paul Wakefield, many of which led to the Lake Michigan beaches. Along the way, however, the two friends experienced—and even searched for—the miseries of the modern megalopolis, as Olive Lindsay-Wakefield discloses: [Note 7]

During the weekends, [Vachel] and his closest friend of college days, Paul Wakefield, now a medical student in the University of Chicago, wandered through the slums and factory districts, and, with aching hearts, talked over together what they saw. They wondered why a democracy turned out to be like this; hovels and misery on one side of the city and palaces on the other. Vachel said, “Why can’t these children playing in the streets and alleys have a chance to develop their minds and bodies so that each may contribute something to glorify our land? Their faces show that they have qualities of mind and heart of priceless worth to our nation. Why are they smothered out and given no chance?” And so he wrote “The Leaden-Eyed” [*Poetry* 134] and “Factory Windows are Always Broken” [*Poetry* 223]. (Lindsay-Wakefield 86)

Chicago’s Goose Island was the destination on one such walk: “This is a very warm day,” Vachel advised his parents: “Paul and I will take a long walk this evening, to get in trim for next week [Paul faced strenuous final examinations]. My last expedition was across Goose-island—a big island in the midst of the North Chicago River. The country is very heavily populated and full of traffic and railroads all around it, and three big Polish Cathedrals skirt it on the West.” The island was a contrast between sparsely populated, “half-swampy” land (with Irish cabins and goats) and “sky-scraping elevators . . . within a block of streets so thickly populated that the children live on the streets” (May 24). A few days after the walk, Vachel mailed the Humphreys a



“Sweet Briars of the Stairways”

copy of his new poem, “Sweet Briars of the Stairways” (with the variant title, “We Who Are Playing Tonight,” *Poetry* 28-29), a work depicting the tragic future awaiting slum children. On the manuscript, he noted: “June 1902. Chicago / The Ghetto.” With “The Cup of Paint” [*Poetry* 25], “Sweet Briars” would be illustrated, privately published, and sold on the streets of New York City (April-May 1905). [Note 8]

Although Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay did not know about their son’s poetry, they may have suspected that he was under some tension. In January, as we have seen, Vachel informed his parents that what was needed to succeed in art school was “will, will, will.” On May 31, however, he wrote: “I will be obliged to dig hard to make Life Class before June. It is not a question of quantity, but of quality of work. I must get deeper and more elaborately into the fine surfaces of the drawing than I have ever yet. One drawing of the right kind will pass me. Sheer will and effort count for very little. It is foresight, rather, in getting ones^ nerves into the very best possible condition to get them absolutely in tune. Brute will power will not buy art any more than money will buy salvation. A lazy man cannot draw, and a worker may not. The artist has to be a very conscientious person. He has to have all his nervous force in a lump, he cannot afford to think about anything outside his work that is not absolutely necessary^.”

From our perspective, we know Vachel felt that writing poetry was “absolutely necessary.” But he was not prepared to argue the point with his parents. Instead, he continued: “The field of Art is as broad as the world, so he [the artist] is scarcely a monomaniac—but to the outsider he appears to be so. The most dangerous thing about an illustrating career is that the Artist has to allow literary considerations to mark out his work, and at the same time maintain the Absolutely^ unliterary Atmosphere^ in his working hours. Any interest outside pure art considerations is an actual drain on the powers. I mean any thing that involves creative effort or special worriment. . . . So I am doing my very best to make my life and aims simple. My one purpose every day is to draw a little better and take the next necessary^ step in the search for beauty. For one who is as easily confused and so diffused in imagination this takes about all my conscience.” Then he seemingly changed his mind again, claiming that “The one thing I want to get is will to push harder . . . I have discussed the situation at length so that you could understand your son at the present day and hour. My life will be the reverse of yours, in that you both are surrounded by a complex machine of duties, and the more complex you are, the more satisfied. Goodnight^. Yours with love . . . Vachel” (May 31). Obviously, though, the Lindsay son had some complexities of his own.

In an addendum to the above letter, Vachel reported (with pleas for confidentiality) that he might have a chance to win a position on the Institute faculty. Two or three graduates (“who are of no great brilliancy”) were being “pushed forward,” he maintained, in an attempt to counteract the school’s “dry atmosphere . . . The big professors are vetran^ students from all the big European schools, but they have somehow been unable to find a common basis, and build up a real ‘Art-Atmosphere.’ And so two or three of the young fellows are being pushed up, just because they are thought to have a little more of it. Now lets^ think it over. There are no Artists in Chicago that are setting things afire, in the Institute or out of it. Now they know enough, but they are not creators. If Olive can win the High School, I ought to win the Institute. Lets^ think it over.”

A short time later, though, the Institute faculty's lack of response to Vachel's "search for beauty" soured his enthusiasm. On June 3, for example, he complained: "I am anticipating coming home, but have on a full head of steam and must use the last minute. The head critic [likely Wilson] combed me good and hard this morning, and I am bound I will suit him before I quit. I am satisfied that with pains and work I can suit the beauty-lovers here all right. But no matter how rigid your work is, it will not suit the realists here if it has the taint of an effort at loveliness[^]. They are very amusing in their suspicion that everything pretty must be careless and ignorant. I am bound sooner or later to please both factions, if I can. It is seldom done, but I want to be like a rigid lawyer with a finish of flowery Oratory. The critics here are really amusing. They hate each other, but I hope to suit them all." The "realists," as we shall see, seldom were (are?) satisfied with Vachel's work. Nonetheless, he never lost sight of his mother's advice to pursue beauty and composition. [Note 9]

Vachel's second year at the Institute did not end in failure. By mid-June, he was certain that he would make the Life class, and his prophetic powers proved almost correct. He was promoted to the "probation life-class—the one I was after first," he informed Paul Wakefield: "I will not stay in it any longer than I must of course. But think of it—I must commence to paint next fall. I rather prefer it to cast drawing. My main efforts will be drawing from the nude and still-life painting" (August 3, 1902, Hiram). Indeed, he ended the term in June with very nearly the same enthusiasm that he had manifested in January, advising his parents: "I send you a sketch to keep you in faith that I am a good investment. I wish you could see the big exhibit of the Chicago illustrators this week. In two years I can beat such a gang as they are. I hanker to set the fashion in Chicago work. I yearn to be the leading frog in the Chorus. There is no grand high mogul now—they are a host of small cheap chaps with no real fashions or ideas among them. I could join their gang now and do fairly well, but I want to get to the place where I can lead off. I am reasonably confident of making the Life Class this Spring. Yours with love, Vachel. [P.S.] I would like to receive money by Monday" (June 13). Dr. Lindsay dutifully mailed six dollars—to pay for a train ticket to Springfield.

Summer vacation did interrupt Vachel's current events column at the *Christian Century*, although just three weeks before he left he changed the name to "A Glance at the Globe" (beginning with the May 29, 1902 issue). He also tried his hand at collecting some of his father's bad debts—from former patients who had moved to Chicago without paying their bills. A man named Mitchelson gave him one dollar, but other creditors gave only excuses. Vachel found that, somewhat to his surprise, he rather enjoyed his new line of work. Of course, he had incentive: "If you have any other Chicago creditors that will not answer by letter, why I would be glad to try personal work, next year. I find I rather like it . . . I find that it adds a certain zest to collecting when I need the money myself!" (June 13). A little more than a week later, he was back in Springfield, "doing the housework a bit, and cleaning up the yard," he reported to friend Paul Wakefield (June 21, Hiram). He also was packing for a summer camping trip—to the Guanella Ranch, Empire, Colorado.

Before returning home from Chicago, Vachel proclaimed that he had reached the point in his art training where he could advance independently. What he needed was conscientious effort: “I have gotten to the point where I can make a deal of progress alone, if I work conscientiously. A good sketch can be made in fifteen minutes and one day would count a lot in a summer. I am thinking a little of seeing what I can do from Landscape in black and white, but I am not going to promise myself much” (May 31). He knew his own tendencies toward procrastination well enough, as we have seen, so that he requested that his parents provide the necessary discipline. However, the day he arrived home, June 21, he confessed to Paul Wakefield: “Just as I feared I have not done a bit of sketching. Nobody expects it of me, and I can’t get up the atmosphere alone. Tell Olive to help when she arrives.” (Paul and Olive had begun a regular correspondence). As the summer of 1902 progressed, the wisdom of not promising himself much became more and more manifest. The Lindsay son accomplished very little: the “boy” in Uncle Boy was very much alive and well.

Vachel’s first known letter from Colorado this summer was addressed to Paul Wakefield and not written until July 20: “We are all having the regulation camping-time.” The site at Empire, he claimed, was better than the former one at Stamford: “more mountainous and the roads are better for climbing.” With his sister Joy for chaperon, he and Ruth Wheeler were hiking and talking, while Mama and Papa gathered gooseberries and Olive made pies. Ruth added a postscript to the letter: “Olive & Mrs. Lindsay are evolving the Sunday dinner, which will be very welcome when the bell rings as we have just returned from Empire and the arduous duty of mailing a few letters. Wish you could come in and eat some of Olive’s cooking and enjoy with us the intellectual talk” (Hiram). The next day, while off by himself, Vachel wrote to Paul again. Although we must read between the lines, it is apparent that the Lindsay son was not an enthusiastic camper:

My dear boy, I havn’t^ been in the midst of any happenings really worth writing and somehow I havn’t^ felt prompted to write till today. Yesterday Ruth and I felt prompted. Today I singly and alone desire to tell you—well—nothing much—except that I have been taking it as easy as possible since we parted—and will be in great shape to dash in hard next fall. Have just commenced to think about it. . . . You are no doubt speculating as to just exactly how much I am enjoying Camp-life—but you didn’t say much about Commencement week. I speculate I am having as nice a time as you had then, provided you were as good as you hoped to be. But I will never forgive you if you tell a soul. Don’t presume sir. (July 21, Hiram)

Two weeks later, he reported to Paul matter-of-factly:

Do you know I havn’t^ sketched hardly any? I am awfully stupid out here. I suppose it is a reaction from the strenuositities of Chicago. I am making the best of the situation occasionally by exercising on mere creations—compositions, etc. But even imagination seems dry. I am building up so much though that there is no use worrying. . . .

I never felt so stupid for four weeks steady in my life. I suppose my nerves were stretched more last Spring than I realized. (August 3, Hiram)

Even at the end of summer, Vachel continued to manifest signs of changeable moods and indecisiveness. In his August 3 letter cited above, he claimed that Ruth and he were “getting acquainted all over again. We enjoy each others^ company, but in some ways have much less in common than of old” (Hiram). After returning to Springfield at the end of August, however, Vachel sent Paul another letter, this one offering a different estimate of the relationship with Ruth: “We are the same old friends we were in Hiram days. It was good to see her again” (August 31, Ward). He also was devising plans that were not compatible with his often-expressed hatred for money, Mammon, and materialism. Again on August 3, he confided to Paul:

One of my good resolutions next fall will be to get acquainted with moneyed men. I don't know how we are going to do it—but I have the hope that by the time I am able to draw in two years, I ought to know men I can sell such things as that old “nonsense tree” [*Poetry* 788] thing I gave you. I do not see why I couldn't sell such things as easily as some poor devil Artists sell blue and green painted things. If we only knew the men to buy them.

At the same time, in the interest of artistic sensitivity (rather than salability), he suggested a change in the itinerary of their Chicago walks: “Another good resolution—I am going to stay out of the black corners of the city and go in only for the level best things. As I look back I think we did not go in enough for the rarest and loveliest^ things. So I am going to do the other thing—depending on your cooperation. I think it will keep my art more delicate, sensitive and progressive” (August 3, Hiram).

Since he associated “the black corners” with Chicago's west side, it is not surprising that Vachel's living quarters for the fall, 1902, were back on the south side. He was determined anyway not to return to his old room on Michigan Avenue. He told Mary Humphrey, as we have seen, that he was tired of “living with a biddy for a landlord.” He also asked Mary: “Do you know anybody in Chicago who wants a roomer like me for two years straight, all the year round? I would like to have very permanent very exclusive headquarters for seven dollars a month, among people addicted to very high thinking and deep consecration. And if they are within three miles of town, and are very asthetic^, I might throw in a dollar or so. . . . The only quarters where I would like to room are in the holy sections consecrated to the High Priests of Mammon, where roomers never come. . . . Do you know any decaying nobility yearning in secret for a disguised roomer? I am trying the French section near Rush Medical, in imagination, and may in reality.”

At the time, he was back in Springfield and back in characteristic temper, at least in regard to the “High Priests of Mammon.” His romantic imagination was also back in form, as he poured out his hopes for Mary's well-being: “I know you are having a multitude of dreams, and I hope they may be draped with the mists that hang heavy with soft hidden castles wafted from the chaos land where only new fancies rise. And then may you dream the old dreams that have compassed the heart of man since he named dases^ and birds and butterflies in the hallow shadowed land of Eden” (August 31, Lindsay Home). A few days later, he had returned to Chicago. “A Glance at the Globe,” his *Christian Century* column, appears again, beginning with the September 4 issue.

Details of Vachel's life during the fall, 1902, are sketchy at best. It is the one period in his adult life where none of his personal letters seems to have survived. We know from other documents that he was actively exchanging letters with Ruth Wheeler (none of which is extant); that he was a member of the probationary Life class, drawing from the nude; and that he was writing letters home with regularity, as he had before. We also know that Kate Lindsay was very careful about saving her son's letters, so that there is some mystery as to why these particular documents seem to be lost. A letter to Harriet Moody, in 1914, relates that Vachel was staying in a room on the University of Chicago campus and that he was reading the poetry of Harriet's late husband:

Mr. William Vaughn Moody is closely tied up with the memories of my beginning days in Chicago. About 1902 or 1903 I was rooming in Chicago University—Middle Divinity—though not a student. By special arrangement I occupied a room to which Prof. John Kenyon was entitled—who was then taking his post-graduate degree in English, and living in married quarters outside.

Well—I wanted something to look out on besides brown stone flats. So I had that campus, meanwhile studying Art in the Art Institute.

John Presented^ me with Mr. Moody's poems—and the memories of memorizing them and all—are bound up in my Chicago life at that time. (April 17, 1914, Chicago; quoted in part by Dunbar 110; an inaccurate typescript is at Virginia)

(Vachel's use of "beginning" is ambiguous: the time was the beginning of his third year in Chicago, not his "beginning days.")

The interest in "people addicted to very high thinking and deep consecration," as Vachel expressed to Mary Humphrey in the letter quoted above, apparently led him away from Pastor Allen's First Christian church and increasingly closer to the nearby Hyde Park church, where he agreed to teach Sunday school. He continued to author "A Glance at the Globe" for the *Century*, at least until the beginning of 1903, when the column was retained but likely written by another hand. Significantly, on December 4, 1902, Vachel reported briefly on General William Booth's visit to the University of Chicago (p. 1443), not knowing, of course, that his own future fame was partially aligned to the fate of the General. (Booth was in the midst of his triumphant American tour.) Not all of Vachel's global glances, however, are of international import. The week before Booth's visit, "A Glance at the Globe" includes one ominous news item: "A late Chicago suicide, to make sure of his purpose, took doses of rough on rats and carbolic acid and turned on the gas jets" (November 27, 1902, p. 1412).

In addition to writing his column, Vachel once again began to record his insights in a personal notebook, this one entitled "A Book of Mild Hopes." Starting in September 1902, the "Mild Hopes" notebook provides our best source for understanding Vachel's intellectual growth during late 1902 and early 1903. It reveals that his current hopes were very much in accord with his past ideas and dreams. It does not reveal how well he was progressing at the Institute, whom he was seeing, or how many pieces of lemon pie he ate for lunch. One of the first things he did this fall was to transcribe several ideas from his earlier, "Illustrating" notebook into the back pages of "A Book of Mild Hopes." In the process, he left conclusive evidence that his wishes and concerns had changed very little:

On the whole, I personally am most endowed when attempting the highest ideals, the things that seem supreme, absolute, isolated.

The demand for perfection is the end of art, the highest.

The ideal cartoon has all the dogmatism of a parable, it is an appeal to the imagination, not an argument.

My art should contain Beauty, and love and goodness.

He who would not be useless as a dandelion must have his picture on fire with the spirit, a Sun, not an imitation sun.

There is one thing infinitely better than art for art's sake, and that is art for love's sake.

An artist is preeminently a man who does infinitely fewer things than other men.

An artist is the man who strives to do one thing perfectly.

Let me never be a learner again. Always, in all things, a creator.

To study is to forget and to lose, to create is to remember.

Yet another of the notebook's earliest entries (September 15) manifests the consistency of Vachel's democratic outlook: "There are only two kinds of good influence. First, we influence our nearest dearest friends, and this kind of influence is generally the more effective. It is extended by extending the circle of ones' intimates. The other sort—the one usually striven for is when people far off and lower down idealize us through no great desert of our own. The first sort of influence I want to get, the second very little." A few days later he added further details concerning the second kind of influence: "Human nature is only that and nothing more. We stratify the sky with vision over vision and seem to ride the topmost when here we are with our heels still firmly planted in the dirt of which we come. . . . Let us not sacrifice our real selves for glories of altitude." And still later, around Christmas, 1902, Vachel summarized his democratic feelings for Aunt Fannie's edification: "If a man cannot repent of his sins, let him at least feel for his fellow sinners who commit the same ones, and let him not judge them" (Ward).

The "Mild Hopes" notebook is not without Vachel's characteristic self-analyses. He seems to have been more determined than ever that he would be a savior/artist. On or about September 23, he proclaimed: "I musn't think for a minute that I am going to be a failure. I must be both an artistic and a financial success. Every man of my station in a civilized land should. Those who love him have no right to be happy if he is not a success. . . . One should be at pains to vindicate the trust of ones' best friends." A few days later he returned to the same thought: "The Empire of letters and art should have a pride like to, but more intense than the pride of the Empire of Mammon. It should not weakly flush in the presence of the arrogance of materialism, but should have an arrogance of its own that shall cause the knees of Mammonism to weaken, and its proud head to droop and its voice to toady. This is not immoral, since it is not life, but art that is at stake. It is things, not men, that are at stake." The following day he speculated on a subject for a new poem: "The kiss of the dollar bill. A tragedy."

Apocalyptic vision was the new theme that entered Vachel's social concerns this fall, 1902. Sometime around mid-November, he speculated: "The Chicago Fire should occur many times, each successive time the buildings rising smaller, less expensive, more economic, more beautiful." If a second fire were out of the question, he considered

the benefits of bringing back pioneering days: “America needs to be gone all over again, we need new pioneers who will hew down the stairways of horrible shame and likewise the marble halls of ugliness.” He also resolved to learn more about the pioneers who made up his own ancestry: “Some three months sometime, if my Grandmother [Frances Frazee] lives, I want her history from the beginning as she can tell it, with the wisdom thrown in, especially the atmosphere of the pioneer days and their ways and progress. I want the origins of the Middle West civilization traced up through my Grandmother and mother, for it is this middle West that has been making Chicago.”

In still other entries, Vachel concentrated on the mild hopes (and fears) concerning his artistic development:

In art at least at present, I am too too subjective, whirled about by every wind of doctrine, not a fountain of inspiration within myself, steady and consistent. . . .

Always start out with a vision, a beautiful idealization of the thing you see, if it be only still life-pots[^]. Let this vision be on[e] third art and two thirds poetry, both as intense as possible.

Let ones main labor be to keep the heart tender and glowing with the vision, not to draw the thing. Keep to the main track always.

To keep the imagination burning bright, and gasping with love, and to trust the Lord to guide one’s hand.

This is necessary[^] when the theme is driest[^], such as still life or a scrawny model. Cram them with epic thought and feeling. (c. October 1902)

And there are important indications of his growing disenchantment with his school: “The Art Institute is a poor place to follow in technique, and such matters should be for the most part postponed for two years, or developed from one’s inner consciousness in the effort for the main creation” (c. November 1902).

The “Mild Hopes” notebook also offers evidence that, during fall and winter, 1902-03, Vachel was again reading rapaciously. In addition to William Vaughn Moody’s poetry, he was studying Milton, Keats, Landor, Charles Waldstein’s (a.k.a. Sir Charles Walston) *The Work of John Ruskin: Its Influence on Modern Thought and Life* (1889), the collected works of Poe (including the letters of Thomas Holley Chivers), and the poetry of Walt Whitman. The latter writer, especially, sparked Vachel’s interest in “a simple American art” and a new attention to “notable American names, with a zeal to discover their distinct American quality”: “Find the absolutely native American painters, study, study, study them; and on this choose to live or die. One little thing done from the spirit of the soil is worth a thousand great things done abroad. . . . Through Whitman to Lincoln may be a path to artistic rest” (c. December 1902).

Along a more academic line, the art student was reading and taking extensive notes on Richard Muther’s four-volume *The History of Modern Painting* (1895-96) and Helen Knowlton’s *Art-Life of William Morris Hunt* (1899). Why was the would-be illustrator back to reading? “Remember what your Mama said,” one notebook entry reads: “Michael Angelo[^] and Raphael didn’t—when you said artists ignored Literary significance.” Mary Humphrey may have accepted Vachel’s denial of literary values, but Kate Lindsay did not agree with her son’s views—and she said so. The end result was

predictable. Her son again embarked on an extensive, self-directed study of the literary classics.

He also authored poetry and mailed out manuscripts, although not to publishers and not to his parents, but to his friends: to Mary and Maud Humphrey, to John and Myra Kenyon, and to Susan Wilcox. For dreamy Mary, he sent “An August Afternoon” (*Poetry* 5-6), with the variant title “The Dreams of God” (dated “September 14, 1902”). He added a note to the manuscript: “Written for my lady far away. . . . Do not let me catch you guessing who this is about, or I will be cross and freezing. But—I know you are woman enough to be more interested in knowing that you don’t know the lady, and the occasion than you are interested in the poem. Now please smile” (Lindsay Home). Mary should have guessed “Frances,” as the poem was likely written for Frances Frazee, Vachel’s beloved young cousin.

Two collections given to the Humphreys during the summer, 1903, include the dates of composition of individual poems. “A Song for Good Knights, Stupid with Weariness” (*Poetry* 20-21), “Indian Summer” (*Poetry* 19), and “The Dance of Unskilled Labor” (*Poetry* 735) are dated September 1902; “The Myraposa Lily” (*Poetry* 792) and “The Little Yellow Bird of Weariness” (*Poetry* 51) are dated November 1902. Most of the poems have variant titles and some include personal notes (for details, see the respective entries in *The Poetry of Vachel Lindsay*, volume three). Several works show the influence of Sidney Lanier, as well as the influence of Milton, Keats, Poe, and Moody. Several reflect the author’s weariness, as well as his mild hopes—his mixed feelings of sadness and expectation:

I am awake. Yet longing so
To know where Aladdin’s Lamp may be—
I am happy now, yet longing so
For hopes like mountains all arow
For memories like prairie-fires,
That the bird of yearning is dear to me:
Though I know he knows in lesser measures
The endless perfumed torture-pleasures
Of these old dry desires. (*Poetry* 51)

Perhaps Vachel’s mixed feelings were best expressed in the final notebook entry for 1902: “Let us try sometimes the philosophy that Heaven is when we seek for God, and Hell is when we find him. That it is life to be wooing but death to the best of Love to ever win. Let us wonder if art is good where it is old, and if anything is ever perfect except in Childhood” (December 31). [Note 10]

In future years, Uncle Boy would look backward time and time again—from the imperfections of maturity to the perfections of childhood. On the last day of 1902, however, his boyish vision was still forward, to what he was going to be when he grew up. Once again he entered into his notebook his mild but abiding hope as a student: “I ought to have some results by June in School” (December 31). [Note 11]

Notes for Chapter Eleven

[Note 1] *The Christian Century* began publishing as a weekly on January 1, 1900, following the demise of *The Christian Oracle* (1884-99). In the earliest years, May 1901 to April 1903, it was closely associated with the *American Weekly: A Journal Devoted to Religion, Literature, and Social Programs*. The early *Century* was never financially sound; and, in 1908, Charles Clayton Morrison purchased its assets at a sheriff's sale for \$1500. "Brother" Morrison maintained the *Century* as a Disciples' publication until 1915, when he learned that many of his readers were Methodists. After 1915, the *Century* became nondenominational and, subsequently, flourished. [McElroy (p. 183) gives the purchase price as \$600, but Morrison's approved biography in the *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* (52:276) reports the sum as \$1500.]

[Note 2] Compare Vachel's later poems "The Missionary Misgiving" and "Foreign Missions in Battle Array" (*Poetry* 128-129).

[Note 3] Writing to his father on February 22, 1902, Vachel reported: "The stuff that goes into next week's *Century* was as good as I could make for the time put in, except the lettering on the banner and below the other drawing. I learn that lettering is considered the hardest part of commercial work. It is hard to make it 'compose' and still be readable and simple." Another example of Vachel's uneven work may be seen in the *Century* for March 27, 1902 (p. 5), where he attempted to letter Revelations 5:12.

[Note 4] Edward Scribner Ames (1870-1958) and Vachel remained friends long after the latter's art-school days. However, although Vachel was acquainted with Ames in 1902, their friendship was not established until early 1903, when Vachel began teaching Sunday school at Ames's Hyde Park church. Pastor Ames also taught psychology of religion at the University of Chicago: see *Beyond Theology: The Autobiography of Edward Scribner Ames*, ed. Van Meter Ames (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1957). In October 1909, Vachel advised Nellie Vieira: "The doctor [Ames] and I have been allies since I was a student in Chicago. He is one of the few friends I made that three years. He is a pet target for the haters of Advanced Thought and the University Spirit in our Brotherhood, and has been in his time an angel of light to me. Papa hates him like a Catholic hates a protestant, and can never speak of him without a bitter sneer or a growl" (Fowler 200). Also see Ames, "Vachel Lindsay—or, My Heart Is a Kicking Horse"; Chénétier, pp. 2-5, 37-41, 400-401, 412; and *Uncle Boy*, Chapter 23 (Note 8), p. 30.

[Note 5] Compare I Kings 12:11: "my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions" (repeated in I Kings 12:14 and II Chronicles 10:11, 14.)

[Note 6] Thalinger's appraisal of "Burned for Witchcraft" seems appropriate: "As a dramatic sermon in black and white, the Burned for Witchcraft design fails, in spite of the poet's intense emotional idea and his year's drill in art school." Thalinger wrongly dates the cartoon "February, 1902" (452).

In 1927, to Burris A. Jenkins, then managing editor of the *Century*, Vachel wrote (none too grammatically): "I tried to do religous^ cartoons for 'The Christian Century' in 1902 and 1903 when an Art student in Chicago—and that puzzled my most loyal friends—just as they do now. But the essential matter is in me, and will some day emerge—I feel perfectly confident" (August 18, 1927: the letter is slightly misquoted in

Chénétier 412-414). No Vachel cartoons, however, were published in the *Century* after May 22, 1902.

[Note 7] In September 1909, when Vachel was attempting to win the heart of Nellie Vieira, he wrote to her: “To every Evanston student [Vieira was a student at the Cumnock School of Oratory, Northwestern University] the lake [Michigan] is a beautiful and uplifting scene—but I want you to look upon it with divine eyes, I want you to be so delicately attuned that a certain spiritual glimmering and glowing cannot escape your eyes, that you will see in the leaves and the waves the wrists and the hands of angels—as it were, an overwhelming wilderness of divinity” (Fowler 88). “The Witch of Lake Michigan” may reflect Vachel’s developing interest in the poetry of Walt Whitman. In “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” for example, a “Phantom” addresses the narrator from the waters of Lake Ontario.

[Note 8] One of Vachel’s passing fancies was to purchase land for a home on Goose Island: “I am thinking about Goose Island as a place of residence in a few years. I could buy land there and sketch undisturbed, cheaper than I could rent a room in the auditorium, and it would be much more picturesque. A Joke^” (May 24, 1902). (Earlier in this letter he had written: “But the ‘residence’ element in goose-island^ is the most desolate and dialapadated^ in all Chicago.”) Goose Island is the only island in the Chicago River; it was created in the 1850s when William Ogden dug a canal between two points in the river, in order to facilitate barge traffic.

[Note 9] When Vachel returned to Springfield, he discovered that the Art Institute was not alone in experiencing personnel problems. A letter from Paul Wakefield indicated that his father, Vachel’s landlord and Hiram Professor Edmund Burritt Wakefield, was having difficulties at the college. When Paul inquired as to whether or not his father could be considered as a candidate for pastor at the Vachel s’ First Christian Church (Springfield), Vachel responded: “Your letter came today. I am awfully sorry, but we can’t do much for your Father here. There are two men ahead of any others who are being pushed now, but there is no union in the board, and we do not want the professor put up to be shot at.

“Brace him up, Wake. No matter what happens in the Faculty, you ought not to let your father pull out. He has been accumulating prestige there (in Hiram) too long for any one to be able to alter it. If he will play politics and lay low he will get his due sooner or later. Why not send him to congress? Nothing can be done to hurt your father in his unofficial standing in Hiram, and that is the thing that counts” (June 21, 1902, Hiram).

The two men “being pushed” were brothers Hugh Tucker Morrison, Jr. (born 1877), and the controversial Charles Clayton Morrison. The two were finally appointed co-pastors in late summer, 1902. At the time, Charles Morrison was a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Chicago; he commuted to Springfield on weekends. In early 1905, Charles became pastor at First Christian, serving until the end of 1906, when he was succeeded by Frederick William Burnham, 1907-14. Charles returned to Chicago’s Monroe Street church in 1906 and purchased *The Christian Century* in 1908, when he resigned from Monroe Street to be full-time editor of the *Century* (until his retirement in 1947).

Hugh Morrison left the church at the end of 1904, in order to study medicine. (According to Joy Lindsay-Blair, as we already know, Dr. Lindsay assured Morrison that

he was going “one step higher.”) When Morrison returned to Springfield as an M.D., he married Mary (Logan) Coleman (June 23, 1908), and the two remained Springfield residents and lifelong friends of Vachel. Although they were childless, they became the foster parents of the three orphaned sons of the unfortunate missionary, R. Ray Eldred (in January 1914, McElroy 178). Eldred, as we have noted, drowned while attempting to swim a branch of the Congo River and his death helped to inspire Vachel’s poem “The Congo.”

Professor Wakefield continued in a long and distinguished career at Hiram. On October 14, 1928, Paul wrote that his father “has in Hiram now the standing as a teacher that he should have had twenty and more years ago and still his standing keeps on growing. Three times he filled in as Acting President. He refused the office itself, he hated executive work and was not fitted for it. But the faculty and students backed him loyally when he had to fill in” (Hamilton 466).

[Note 10] In his sincere effort to be a dutiful son, Vachel recorded his total expenses for October 1 through December 19, 1902, on an end page in one of two 1903 datebooks: “\$147.00.”

[Note 11] Vachel’s youthfulness is also manifest in some unpublished verses from this time. Dated “December 1902” and entitled “Glory,” the following lines reflect the focus, the enthusiasm, and the mediocrity of the work:

Glory to the rebels of the Earth
Whether bearing rifles old or new, whether two million men or two
Fighting for yesterday or fighting for hereafter! (Ward)

