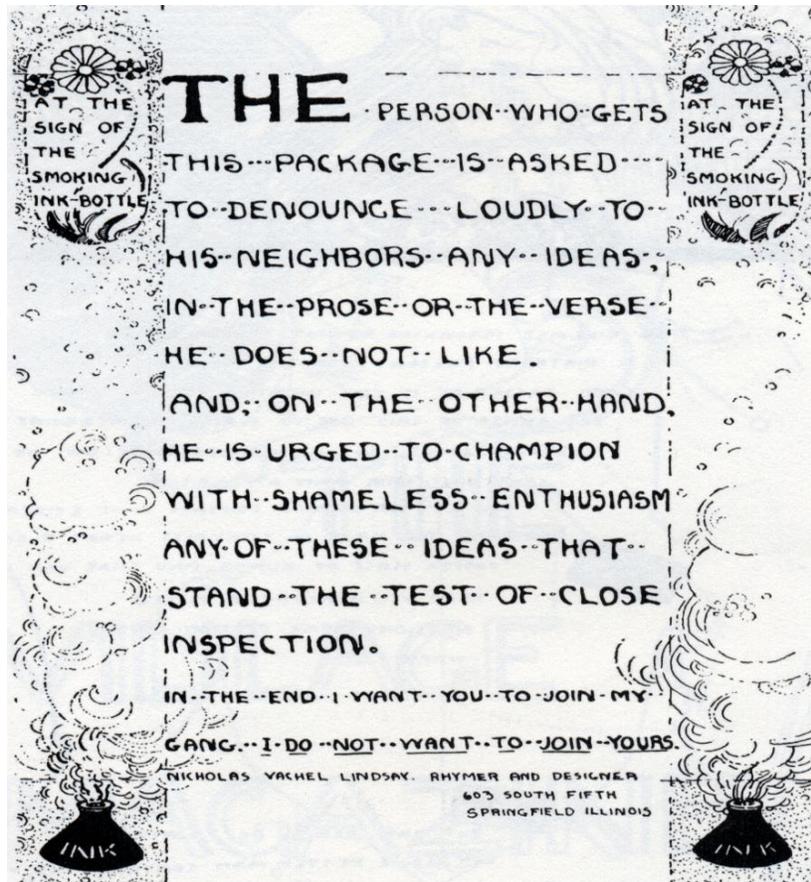


Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Thirteen

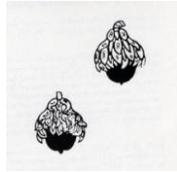


[Vachel's insert introducing his self-published *Village Magazine* (1910)]

by

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[This ongoing biography may be read online at www.VachelLindsayHome.org
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13. NEW YORK: ART FOR SALE I

[Late 1903-June 1904]

“There is nothing like seeing things in print!”

1

Vachel’s seven remaining months as a student at the New York School of Art (December 1903 to June 1904) were filled, emotionally, with more than his usual highs and lows. Among the high points was the Chase school itself, and Vachel’s letters this winter consistently pay compliments to his teachers and express his joy and satisfaction concerning his academic progress. His strong point, as before, was his pen-and-ink drawing; and his work seems especially to have pleased his composition instructor, Kenneth Miller. Typically, a few days after words of praise from Miller, an optimistic student son reported to “Papa and Mama” that he was “making some pen and ink sketches to take up town—the best I have done” (December 6). In New York, as in Chicago, academic success led the hopeful artist to the marketplace, although he carried with him only pen-and-ink sketches. [Note 1]

Painting was another story: “I have done good work this week, and in three more weeks—hope to be No¹, in the Concour[^]—my life-action drawings improve fast. The third painting I made was a success—of a big muscular Swede in a very aggressive attitude. Miller commended the drawing with the brush and the modelling and the lighting—in a rather encouraging way, though not anything after the decided manner in which he speaks of my drawing. He says to me ‘Paint as you draw.’ He gave me a very serious talk the other day—told me I ought to aim high—that I had a very keen sense of Character and freedom of handling that ought to be used in something else than decorative composition. So I shall try myself on Painting every other week—and see if I can make enough progress to justify portrait-painting. I feel very much encouraged over this weeks[^] painting—and drawing also” (“Papa and Mama,” December 6).

Perhaps as a compromise with regard to drawing and painting, Vachel was also experimenting with “colored chalk composition,” as he related to his friend, Mary Humphrey, “—and the result is wonderful—and a bit fearful.” He still imagined, as we shall see, that someday he would be a mural painter, although he professed uncertainty as to his ability along those lines: “Really I am in doubt as to my present success as a colorist. Let me tell you [Mary] confidentially I would like to be a colorist” (December 3, 1903, Lindsay Home).

Vachel’s interest in portrait painting, meanwhile, was stimulated by an ongoing exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “There were 300 pictures in the eight rooms,” he informed his parents, “and over half of them impressed even me as masterpieces. . . . It has revolutionized my view of art. It was the only gallery I ever

entered that dazzled me from the first room to the last. All the people in New York who owned famous portraits of ancient or modern masters sent them to this show. . . . I never knew what a great thing portrait-painting is before. These painters all conquered my respect in spite of me. All other painting seems feeble after such forceful setting forth of personalities” (December 6).

Among the modern painters in the show, Vachel complimented two of his instructors at the New York School of Art: William Chase (4 portraits) and Robert Henri (3 portraits), as well as the paintings of John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), Carolus Duran [Charles Auguste Émile Durand] (1837-1917), Anders Leonhard Zorn (1860-1920), (Paul) Albert Besnard (1849-1934), Pascal Adolphe Jean Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929), and John White Alexander (1856-1915). Vachel also singled out works of Hals, Van Dyck, Velasquez, Rembrandt, Reynolds, and Stuart: “—and others too numerous to mention. There was a perfect flood of the Old English masters—but they fail to attract me. The Velasques[^]—the Vandykes[^]—and the Henris and the Sargents were my special admiration. The big principal room had the Sargents in the place of honor—with a reverent crowd always there sitting down on the long benches drinking them in—if the rest of the galleries were empty—and when the crowd came—there was an awful jam in the Sargent room.”

The “Chase school is practically a portrait school,” Vachel explained: “The afternoon portrait class has a very inspiring teacher—Mr. Robert Henri—whose work in the great portrait show was listed with that of the first four or five. It was very attractive to me—being full of life and boldness. They were just like living beings, and made a surprising impression on me. The students are enthusiastic about Henri as a teacher” (December 6). One week later, Vachel repeated his opinion that “Sargent was king of the show”; then he added a none-too-clear statement of reassurance for “Mama”: “—and in our school they preach Sargent day and night—so it is not necessary[^] to apprehend I am learning what will make me unpopular. Chase, Sargent and Henri paint in essentially the same manner, and are classed and described in much the same way. Henri is the simplest, youngest, most forceful of the three” (December 13).

The heady atmosphere of the New York school excited Vachel, and an excited Vachel was a hopeful Vachel. As most struggling artists, he eschewed anything that might make him “unpopular,” and he identified popularity, quite simply, with publication and sales. “Last night I did two of my best pictures,” he wrote to his parents on December 10: “—one pen and ink—one pencil. I shall go up town with them this morning.” Predictably, his enthusiasm was the result of more academic success: “My teacher in the afternoon class takes an unusual interest in my work and seems very anxious for me to aim high. The fellows treat me as one of them—the best students in the room are interested in my things and I feel I have chances to lead off in the school before the year is out. My last Concour[^] drawing I showed to Miller yesterday he praised more vigorously than anything heretofore. I am practicing[^] on pen and ink at home—learning to draw them straight out with the first strokes without putting down pencil lines first. My eye grows truer all the time and my memory keener. Any drawing I do at school I can do over again from memory at home—and just as effectively in many ways.”

Further admiration for Chase’s teaching is evident in other letters: “I keep practicing it all the time so I can draw from memory what I have seen rather than what I

have drawn. But that is harder. Chase says he never paints a portrait till he can call up every detail of the sitter in a clean cut picture in his mind no matter if he is miles from them” (December 10). In addition to stressing memory, Chase and his fellow instructors encouraged rapid work, and this too pleased Vachel:

They emphasize in this school working with speed, style and accuracy. I have made drawings in half an hour sketch class carried farther, and more accurate than things that took me a weeks^ hard work in Chicago.

They seem to think you do better work and are more inspired when you are rapid. Certainly one does as well. Robert Henri—who is more of a favorite with students than Chase himself—paints the face of a portrait all through in half an hour—but does it over and over ten or thirty times—till he has mastered every passing expression of the sitters^ countenance—then at the last moment he dashes in the expression that he thinks the profoundest expression of the sitters^ personality. The resulting picture is very calm—fresh, reposeful and very life like—and one would not guess how it was done. (December 10)

Initially, anyway, Vachel’s academic success did not carry over into the marketplace. Of course, he remained hopeful, at least in letters to his family: “I have been around the magazine offices this week and the art Editor of ‘Everybody’s’ magazine seemed rather favorably impressed with my work and said to come again soon with more—which I certainly shall do. He said he could not use any of it just at present. The man [Richard Watson Gilder (1844-1909)] at the Century magazine office told me it looked like rather popular stuff and I ought to try the newspapers. The man at Tiffany’s told me that it looked like good sketching and I ought to try the magazines. . . . So I will go the rounds again about next Saturday [December 19] with a new bunch of pictures. On the whole I was kindly treated. The man at ‘the Critic’ offices was so impressed with my work that he gave me cards of introduction to two of his friends—the ‘Everybody’s’ man and the ‘United Literary Beaureau^’ man. I hope next week they will be more anxious to keep me than to pass me along” (December 13). A week later the hopeful artist added: “It has begun to seem the most natural thing in the world to sit around waiting to interview the editor. I brush up and look my sweetest before I start out” (December 21).

The encouraging man at *The Critic* office was (Frederic) Ridgely Torrence (1875-1950), an editor, a published poet (*The House of a Hundred Lights* [1900]), a playwright (*El Dorado* [1903]), and Vachel’s first professional booster. Indeed, on December 21, Vachel boasted to “Papa and Mama” that he had “postponed” his Christmas letter “in hope of more definite news from the Critic. . . . I saw the second editor Mr. Ridgely^ Torrence this morning. He has my pictures and poems in his desk—some of the pictures I was expecting to send you for Christmas. He is tremendously enthusiastic about them and uses language that I will not quote. But the editor in Chief [Jeannette Gilder (1849-1916), Richard’s sister] is a wicked Gorgon who considers it her function to suppress his over plus^ of poetic sympathy. So he is biding his time when she is in a gentle mood to show her my stuff. I have every reason to credit his sincerity and unselfish sympathy. He seems to want to do everything he can to give me a start. I take it for granted that there are more men like him in the literary offices of New York and shall set forth in all faith to find them. Whether he can do anything for me directly he certainly has given me a deal of inspiration by his sympathy.”

Torrence introduced Vachel to several other publishers, including Dodd, Mead & Company; but nothing came of these contacts. Most editors appeared supportive, though in the end all suggested that the impulsive art student should take his work somewhere else. By late December, all Vachel could do was report to his father: “I have been promised work sometime soon by the Booklover [*The Book-Lover: A Magazine of Book-Lore*] and the Critic—but will not be too sanguine till I get it. At least I feel encouraged” (December 24-26).

Vachel’s drawings did make acceptable and inexpensive Christmas presents; and he sent several to his relatives and friends, including Ruth Wheeler, his de facto “fiancée” (who was writing to him daily). Four drawings gifted to John Kenyon, all pen-and-inks (two are dated “December 1903”), are collected in the Hiram College library. To his mother and father, though, Vachel wrote: “I feel very sorry I have no pictures to send you. I had some prepared—but that Critic man has them and does not seem to want to part with them just yet” (December 21). Meanwhile, he thanked his patient father for his own presents: a “cheque for \$50.00” and a new handbag. The bag, Vachel commented, “was a very pleasant surprise to your son and I am truly grateful. I have a good picture to sell but havn’t^ sold it yet. I shall have another to sell very soon, and hope to dispose of it some way or other. My room rent runs out January the first. I shall hope to have an income by that time but cannot promise” (December 24-26). Before he completed this Christmas letter, on December 26, Papa’s dutiful son reported that \$5.00 of his present had been spent “on (1) [Sir James Matthew] Barrie’s play—the Admirable Chrichton^, played by William Gillette—(2) Then I bought a necktie, (3) a hat, (4.) some art supplies, and I enjoyed them all very much, especially the art supplies and the Play.” [Note 2]

From Ruth Wheeler, Vachel received “a pair of gold cuff-bottons^” (December 24-26) and, at or about the same time, an ultimatum. According to Vachel’s sister Olive, who counted Ruth among her best friends, Wheeler resolved to break the engagement “within the following year [1904] if Vachel did not find a way to self-support. Our father had protested to Ruth,” Olive added, “please don’t stick to that, we love you as our own daughter; we do not expect Vachel to support himself. Please think better of such an ultimatum.” But, Olive concluded, “Ruth, being a very conscientious person, and knowing how hard Papa worked to do what he tried to do for his children already, was unwilling to add the burden of one more person to his heavy load” (letter to Willis Spaulding, October 27, 1947, Ward).

2

Roommate Willard “Bill” Wheeler (again, no relation to Ruth) was another high point in Vachel’s life during his first winter in New York. “Willard is a jewel and is moving fast toward^ a golden setting!” Vachel affirmed to their mutual friend, Mary Humphrey: “He must have great talents for friendship—we get along so well. He will make an artist of me yet” (December 3, 1903, Lindsay Home). Wheeler’s sustained exuberance especially impressed Vachel, who compared himself to his roommate on several occasions: “I am surprised at [Willard’s] steady enthusiasm. He does not seem to have the up and down days that I have—stupid every other day, or every other week. On the contrary every piece of news seems to strike him in a fresh way” (letter to “Papa and Mama,” December 21).

A month later, when Humphrey asked to know how her two friends were getting along, Vachel answered: "You insist on knowing all about us. I don't know much about myself, so will start in on Willard. As he becomes more accustomed to my angles, he allows me to see his innermost self without reserve. I find him in all things a good comrade and a loyal high minded friend. My impression of him last fall was high and I respected his ability. I find there is a great deal more depth of character and steadfast manhood than is generally found among men of his genius for a wide superficial acquaintance with men and affairs. He takes great delight in the changing surface of things, yet the best of him never changes. To me he is more of an anchorage than I can be to him. Without solemnity or introspection or self-conscious striving he keeps our atmosphere clean and wholesome and his zeal for true gentlemanliness is very spontaneous and childlike."

In brief, Willard was just the sort of man Vachel thought he needed: "My moods are so varied and complex—some days from the very bottom of my soul I seem a new structure from anything before or after. Then such a man is a tower of strength to me—I can have a link between yesterday and tomorrow that will not change as I change. . . . I suppose this is a long way of saying Willard is a darned fine fellow. Pardon the darn. I feel mighty grateful to him tonight. I had a roommate once named Spurrier whose memory I seldom call to mind except as now for contrast. His memory^ [!] makes me now grateful to be rooming with a gentleman." [Note 3]

After an array of similar observations concerning his roommate's character, Vachel resolved: "He works by enthusiasm and fresh delight—I by brooding and intense concentration that holds me for a week before anything really happens—then it comes like thunder and lightning—then I correct it the next day, and am happy as a June grasshopper for half an hour—and dead and disgusted grey and inert for a week. So Willard is a great sunshine for me. I am never blue—but often anxious, sometimes, most always grey. Bless his heart." Finally, Willard's friend concluded, "Always when I start to tell of the outside fortunes of a man, I forget them and climb inside him. It is vexing" (January 17, 1904, Lindsay Home). Vexing perhaps, but very typical, as we have seen in many other Lindsay letters that focus on family and friends.

Thus Vachel himself recognized the highs and lows in his life this winter: from "happy as a June grasshopper for half an hour" to "dead and disgusted grey and inert for a week." Bill Wheeler's good fortune in authoring articles for the afternoon paper, the *Commercial Advertiser*, made his roommate proud; and he was only too ready to give credit when credit was due: "Willard takes to the work like a duck to water, seemes^ never to tire and have^ a fresh interest in each new item. He writes in a remarkably fluent style considering how rapidly it is written without corrections. . . . He is getting in about a column a day now and is paid for space—about five dollars a column. Sometimes there are bad days—and that cuts down the weeks^ average^ of wages, but he makes about \$15.00 now and will soon crowd it up to \$20.00." (As an afterthought, Vachel added: "maybe this is a secret and he don't^ want his present wages published!" [December 10].) Wheeler's success, however, as well as his emotional stability, made his roommate feel renewed pressure to become self-supportive: "Willard has such a good start I feel there is something waiting for me" (December 24-26). Vachel also expressed pleasure in regard to Papa's improving financial situation, but this success too led to a disturbing personal

comparison: "I am glad indeed our money clouds have blown away as it were, with my father's assistance. Maybe mine will soon" (December 21). He hoped, as we have seen, to earn some money by January 1.

On occasion, Willard contributed to his roommate's uneasiness in another way, namely, by offering critical appraisals of his work. As we may suspect, Vachel solicited the criticism. Still, Wheeler's advice was too practical for idealist Vachel and did little to assuage any anxieties he may have harbored with regard to his potential for future popularity: "Willard and I are getting along very well indeed. He is quite the man for me to room with. He is perpetually insisting, quite kindly too—upon my being practical and up to date. He wants me to draw like Howard Chandler Christy—the most popular illustrator in America today—and the pupil and friend of Chase. He seriously objects to angels, fairies etc. and wants people fashionably dressed playing golf or going to Church or making calls. I shall do my best to suit him—some day, maybe" (December 13). In "the meantime," Vachel confided to his mother, he would follow her recommendation and "strive for your ideals of Force and Democracy, striving to combine them with delicacy and elusive unexpected grace" (December 13).

Willard Wheeler's practical advice was echoed, in part, by several faculty at the New York School of Art; and Vachel was forced to admit to his mother that his teachers' advice often conflicted with her suggestions. He assured her that he would pursue "Force and Democracy," but he would also be politic: "at school I shall strive for good drawing that shall make my most spontaneous sketch absolutely correct, and This^ week I shall try at school to avoid sketching—as much as possible and in my half hour work carry the thing into as much detail as possible" (December 13). On a positive note, his drawing consistently earned praise, as well as promises of future employment: "My pen and ink drawings have made a very favorable impression among the students and Miller—at school. Mr. Miller said I ought to get a job somewhere on the strength of my last design, and insisted I start out and try. I have a distinct place among the students as a pen and ink man." His painting, on the other hand, remained a low point and a continuing source of frustration: "I am struggling along with paint—making some progress, but Miller still says 'Why don't you paint like you draw?' and frowns at my canvas. I will let you know when he quits frowning. I hope soon" (December 21).

Typically, when Vachel experienced mixed emotions of elation and what he himself referred to as being "stupid," he felt the urge to write poetry. On December 3, he sought the assistance of his Springfield literary friend, Mary Humphrey, pleading for a critical response to poems that he had "joyfully" copied for her "behalf" during the preceding summer: "After all I am selfish, and just want your impressions of my verses—I desire some adverse criticism—as painstaking as you think worth while^ or have the time to exercise. I want a very long letter from you about those verses. There are not so very many opinions in the world I would copy those verses to gather—not very many critics whose whips I solicit." Then, after relating general news, he returned to his theme: "If you have any laurels for my brow—wait till we meet.—I find adverse criticism even when I can least accept it's^ face value—is one of the most stimulating and suggestive things in the world. That is when it comes from an earnest mind, of your sort. Now my dear—on the other hand, praise even from the most judicious is seldom so keen^ cut and alert—and besides you know—no one ever praised me with half the zeal with which I

praise myself—when I am alone with my verses. (I think that last sentence will disarm you of all desire to laurel me.) . . . Please—let us have the whips, Simon Legree,” he concluded: “Uncle Tom bends his patient sentimental back for you to smite” (Lindsay Home). [Note 4]

The combination of poetry and art at least opened doors at several New York literary magazines, a happenstance that gave Vachel further consolation. “I appreciated the courtesy of the publishing houses,” he confided to his parents, “for all the Art dealers I tried were savage. . . . I asked them each one to tell me just exactly the place to go with my work and they would tell me places saying they were ‘exactly what you want’ and when I would get there they would seem surprised that I called. These art dealers are accustomed to dealing with millionaires I presume, never mind, I will land one of them some day. There are about a dozen Literary illustrated reviews published in New York of the same tenor as the Critic and I shall try them all with some hope” (December 21).

On the afternoon prior to this letter, however, Vachel’s private and personal fears found expression in a new poem, a poem that graphically depicts the despair of one who feels trampled in the mire:

The Knights That Ride

“The Knights that ride” passed over me
 With jingle and clang and yell.
 Their black young horses shod with wind
 Their banners black from Hell.
 They rode me down and trampled me
 And broke my bones and I moaned agast^.
 Yet I knew, yet I knew that they meant me well
 And their shout rang back against the blast:—
 “Good luck” cried the Knights that ride.

The wind still broke the bending trees
 But the hoofs were far away.
 In the mire I prayed for Death to ease
 My pains that mighty day.
 Swift on the blast passed over me
 In a bubble-whirl of Autumn-leaves
 A singing rose-bud, good to see.
 Against the blast as the twilight died
 Her song came back and made me whole:
 “Good luck from the Knights that ride.” (Lindsay Home)

The poem “was based on a dream,” Vachel informed Susan Wilcox when he sent her a copy (January 4, 1904, misdated “1903”): “I woke up suddenly one Sunday afternoon with a vivid impression that—“‘Good Luck’ cried the Knights that Ride’ was the last line of a poem by Browning. But I could not remember the poem and had to write what the lines implied. They carried with them an impetuous current of air and black riding figures, and a curious minglement of disaster and goodwill. Before I was awake enough to see the paper in the twilight I had ground out this that I humbly send” (Chénetier 1). The poem manuscript, in Vachel’s hand, is dated “December 20 [Sunday], 1903”

(Lindsay Home). The source of the poem, as Marc Chénétier suggests, is likely a cloudy, dreamy memory of Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (p. 2).

A few days later, on Christmas night, 1903, Vachel poured the melancholy side of his nature into a second new poem: "To One Who Was Almost Forgotten," later entitled "To Matthew Arnold" (*Poetry* 24). An early copy sent to Mary Humphrey includes a note: "You may apply this poem to Milton or Arnold or Maeterlink^ as you please!" (*Poetry* 834). The work itself, though, suggests another great and neglected "poet," someone with whom Vachel often identified: Jesus of Nazareth, who "wrote and lost dear songs in sand" (l. 14). Composed on the evening of the day of Christ's birth, the new poem was intended for all neglected poets: "Never a song you sang / Is praised in the dusty road or street" (ll. 1-2). The poets' only solace is that their words will influence future poets and save, perhaps, a few hard-core sinners: "Grey poets use your groaning words / To make their secret prayers complete" (ll. 3-4); "Some spendthrift sage," in a faraway land, "the husk of sin / Shall find too bitter for his lips, / When echoes of your songs begin" (ll. 25-27). As he would for much of his creative life, Vachel sought escape from present distress by immersing himself in consoling memories of the past and/or in optimistic visions of the future. In its temporal escapism, "To One Who Was Almost Forgotten" anticipates some of Vachel's better poems, including popular works, such as "General William Booth Enters into Heaven," "The Congo" ("Part III"), "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight," "The Chinese Nightingale," and "The Ghosts of the Buffaloes."

3

About the time that Vachel depicted himself as one trampled in the mire, Orville and Wilbur Wright, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, were preoccupied in introducing the world to new heights. On December 17, 1903, with Orville at the controls, the two brothers accomplished the first powered and controlled flight using a fixed-wing machine. The long envisioned airplane had become a reality; and, characteristically, Vachel's imagination also began to soar. On New Year's Day (always an important day for a chronic starter), 1904, Vachel dashed off "Let Us Rise and Sing" (*Poetry* 796), a poem that predicts an America of 100 united states, as "Haughty South America" joins the North American eagle to form a spectacular Western nation. Like the proposed Panama Canal, which Vachel had commented on with enthusiasm in his *Christian Century* column, the airplane suggested another technological means to enhance the potential for world political unity. The essential idea of "Let Us Rise and Sing," after all, was as old as Walt Whitman's "Passage to India." Like Whitman before him, Vachel was intent on

Singing my days,
Singing the great achievements of the present,
Singing the strong light work of engineers. ("Passage to India," ll. 1-3)

Campbellite traditions also contributed to Vachel's dream. In fact, "Let Us Rise and Sing" reflects the author's particular sense of secular ecumenism: his belief in a distant, world-political unity, as well as his conviction that the poetic imagination may and

should surpass scientific achievements. Orville Wright could fly a few thousand feet in North Carolina; Vachel's imagination soared over all of North and South America.

Looking ahead for a moment, we may note that this ecumenical vision remained important for the rest of Vachel's life. It is a theme in several works, including "A Vision, Called: 'Lincoln in India,'" an essay collected in *The Litany of Washington Street* (1929), a book published just two years before the author's death. In January 1904, however, the dream was expressed in accord with the author's mixed feelings of happiness and despair—and his hope that the future would bring a better day:

Maybe we will doubt our song,
 Maybe we will grieve,
 Maybe we will sing until
 We joyfully believe. ("Let Us Rise and Sing," ll. 15-18)

At the same time he wrote "Let Us Rise and Sing," Vachel was working on a second poem depicting imaginative flight; and this work proved to be of decisive significance during the next few years in his life. "The Wings of the Morning," finally entitled "The Tree of Laughing Bells" (*Poetry* 159-163), was subtitled "A Poem for Aviators" at a very early date, suggesting that the author's intent, in part, was to relate the Wright brothers' success to his continuing meditations. On January 4, 1904, Vachel advised Susan Wilcox that the poem reflected their "little talks of last summer. . . . 'The Wings of the Morning' is a direct descendant of 'The Last Song of Lucifer'—the first heir I think. There is no pretense at symbolism or allegory, no dream of anything sermonic, all my sinful energies are directed to produce music, swift motion, and the sense of laughter and happiness, with entirely new costumes and scenery and a new 'Star' [an allusion to his earlier poem, "Star of My Heart"]" (Chénétier 1).

Years later, in a very rough typescript entitled "Notes on 'The Tree of Laughing Bells'" (Virginia, c. 1909-10), Vachel again insisted on an affective rather than a symbolic meaning for his poem: "Is it not enough to feel, and hear and see, and enjoy to the utmost, rather than to find a deeper meaning? If you read Nansen's TALE OF FARTHEST NORTH, if you read, when he returns, the story of Peary's adventures in that cold and forbidden land, will you ask of him the deep philosophy of polar exploration? Will you ask of him an Emersonian essay, when he brings you a traveler's story? There was an editorial in the New York Times, when he started, attempting to glorify polar explorations. Yet the conclusion was that after all, it was merely a race for the pole, an international sporting event on a magnificent scale, done for the skill and the daring, to test the mettle of a man. It represents in Science the same spirit that FOLLOWING THE GLEAM, does in art; in a minor way, stands for in art. It's just the attempt to go the limit, and return." [Note 5]

In addition, Vachel's "Notes" hint at his original intention for writing the poem, namely his conviction that poetry must outsoar science and technology, must outsoar, in other words, experimentalists like the Wrights: "But in this matter of going the limit, art has the advantage of Science, and that is the issue of this paper. . . . In the first place, defiance is necessary. Let us take for illustration Mark Twain's story of a Yankee in King Arthur's court. All the poor old magic of Merlin was outdone by an ordinary Connecticut electrician, and Merlin became a mere juggler. The adventures of King

Arthur and Merlin is[^] one of the great events in imaginative history, yet the pitiless electrician outdoes it all. There is no chance for Merlin if he submits. He must gird himself for battle, and unless he is to die, he must lay hold on a greater witchcraft and make himself greater than this scientific age or the age will utterly destroy him. It is my affirmation that Merlin can do this thing, that since all the art and the magic of the past is outdone by the commonplaces of science, art must rise on new wings with a proud defiance, the reach of our dreams must exceed the grasp of our realities. Defiance is the only thing possible.”

Indeed, in the conclusion to his “Notes,” Vachel is emphatic about his own defiance: “He who would set himself against science must approach from the outside. We must use the old words of poetry and the old ways of dreaming, yet in a stranger [stronger?] style. I seriously affirm that those of us to whom dreams are the breath of life, must set ourselves to such a warfare as has not been waged since the world began, for since that time the dreamers have never faced so strong a foe” (Virginia).

All things considered, “The Tree of Laughing Bells” is one of the more enigmatic works in the Lindsay canon. The author commented on his poem on many occasions, sometimes offering seemingly contradictory remarks. For example, less than two years after relating to Susan Wilcox that the work contained “no pretense at symbolism and allegory,” he wrote in a 1906 notebook: “After much reading and explaining of the Bells, to many people, I have arrived at the definition of a symbol. It should reflect the experience of the man reading, as a pool reflects a passing cloud. It should be like a flower, the basis of many metaphors, yet always a flower in the end. It should be intricately significant for the mind desiring meaning, it should be simple, for the mind desiring a story. It should have more thought, rather than less, in its make-up, than it appears to have. It should have not only a vigorous decorative organization, but a philosophic anatomy” (*Poetry* 850). Then, for “the mind desiring a story,” Vachel offered an interpretation to Burriss A. Jenkins in 1928, an interpretation, by the way, that also illustrates Vachel’s later confusion in regard to dating his own poems: “The Tree of Laughing Bells poem is a poem for aviators, written two years after the Wright Brothers made their first flight. The Tree might be called a symbol of Japan and the poem a prophetic poem about a non-stop flight to Japan and return, but it is just as good a metaphor of Columbus, if you want to put it that way” (Chénetier 428).

Editor Chénetier doubts Vachel’s claim, as in 1927, Chénetier notes, Vachel also maintained that “the idea was a preview of Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight” (429). In spite of Chénetier’s doubts (he misses the point, it seems to me), Vachel was only repeating to Jenkins ideas that were published a few weeks earlier in an essay entitled “The Real American Language” (March 1928): “I had written in New York a poem for aviators, called ‘The Wings of the Morning, or, The Tree of Laughing Bells,’ a sort of parable of a non-stop flight, to Japan and return, from the banks of the Sangamon river. Japan or Asia, if you please, were symbolized in the poem by an entirely decorative storm-tossed tree called the Tree of Laughing Bells, which was on the edge of the Universe. The idea of a Tree of Laughing Bells was just too abstruse for words! I made many pictures of the tree and gave them to many people in New York—just a tree with a multitude of bells on it, shaking in the winds of chaos, but oh, what an abstract idea! Oh, what a strain on the mind! That and other experiences caused me to turn beggar” (259).

And so on: Vachel's comments on his poem range from "just a tree with a multitude of bells" to his insistence on a symbol with "a philosophical anatomy." [Note 6]

Ultimately, we need to recognize that "The Tree of Laughing Bells" is a vision, and it cannot be reduced to scientific reality, although the primary images are anything but abstract ideas. The poem illustrates, in part, Vachel's propensity for associating technological exploration and achievement, on the one hand, with artistic endeavor, on the other. Initially, the inspired artist struggles to discover beauty, after which the discovery must be communicated to ordinary people both through the medium of art and the language of democratic ideals. The poem reflects not only the circumstances but also the nature and purpose of art and the artist, all from the author's particular perspective. A few of this early work's obvious points, then, are worth considering, even if we have to resort to the cold light and everyday language of analytical reason.

First, the entire trip to the star of laughing bells and back takes only an hour (l. 145), a circumstance very much in accord with Vachel's new belief that art must be done rapidly. Second, the star is surrounded by chaos, just as the artist, in Vachel's mind, is surrounded by the chaos of industrial America. Third, the star is a seemingly impossible goal: it is located in the remote west and can be achieved only after a strenuous "flight" undertaken with the wings of the morning. Similarly, Vachel felt that artistic life, at best, represents a remote value in modern America: it is a way of life that is difficult and frustrating, since it can be achieved only with delicacy and a love of beauty and not with the iron grooves of industrial society. Technological values, on the other hand, are respectable and safe, but they are mortally opposed to art. Scientific technology ("cold philosophy") "will clip an Angel's wing," Vachel's beloved John Keats laments (*Lamia*, ii); and Vachel himself depicts his artistic tree as growing "from a bleeding seed," "the heart of a fairy, dead" (ll. 48, 55). Fourth, since the profession of the artist is held in contempt by most Americans, the life of an artist, at first, appears threatening, potentially even suicidal. How many American fathers would prefer that their sons study art rather than medicine? How many American fathers would not accuse their artistic sons of wasting their lives away? And so Vachel's tree of laughing bells, initially, appears uninviting, even threatening:

The leaves were tangled locks of gray—
The boughs of the tree were white and gray,
Shaped like scythes of Death.
The boughs of the tree would sweep and sway—
Sway like scythes of Death. (97-101)

Fifth, and seemingly to the contrary, the tree is "beautiful" (l. 102), but its beauty is known only to those who are courageous enough to gather its fruitful bells firsthand. Sixth, and perhaps the most important single factor in Vachel's vision, the red bells prove to be mercifully and joyously affective. After carrying two laughing bells next to his body, the aviator-narrator discovers a third bell within his breast (ll. 140-141), and finally he feels himself at peace:

And the bells had quenched all memory—
All hope—
All borrowed sorrow:

I had no thirst for yesterday,
No thought for tomorrow. (131-135)

Although the artistic way of life seems frustrating and even perilous in the present, it is the single way of life that offers the promise of future consolation. For poet-missionary Vachel, “The Tree of Laughing Bells” illustrates the conviction that art, not materialism, is the means to happiness. And the pursuit of happiness, he knew, is what is promised in the one document that materialistic, servile Americans generally are afraid to observe: the “Declaration of Independence.” Freedom and independence can be achieved only by brave, adventurous people, people who have courage to “escape the earth” (l. 26).

The star of laughing bells, then, represents the remote place of the artist in an amorphous society inspired by flying machines but not by flying imaginations. The tree of laughing bells is the art spirit, the goal of the artist; the bells are individual works of art. The difficult poetic journey is Vachel’s vision-voyage of discovery. The flight itself suggests his preparatory struggles; the triumphant conclusion is the dream of a successful future for the artist and his art. However, the poem also reflects the essential loneliness of the artist’s struggle to achieve his goal. Indeed, on a manuscript copy sent to Mary Humphrey in January 1904, Vachel included, as an epigraph, Job 28:7—“There is a path which no fowl knoweth and which the vulture’s eye hath not seen!” To follow this path, we need something other than the iron and steel of technology, something other than the wings of the Wright brothers’ machine. The “wings of the morning” (Psalm 139:9), as Vachel imagined them, are made “From all things fragile, faint and fair” (l. 164). They are the beautiful and delicate materials of art. [Note7]

To conclude, we need to remember that “The Tree of Laughing Bells” is a dream; in fact, the work vividly suggests Sigmund Freud’s description of the typical male daydream, as described in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1908). The male narrator undertakes his hazardous journey under the inspiration of the beautiful Indian maiden, to whom he returns in triumph. As with most male daydreams, the poem involves an escape from present struggle, an escape that turns into a difficult but successful mental journey into a never-never land where all obstacles are overcome, where the impossible goal is achieved, and where the maiden who inspired the dream is finally won. “The Tree of Laughing Bells” is Vachel’s first important daydream poem; it would not be his last or his best. The best, in his own judgment and in the judgment of many others, is “The Chinese Nightingale.”

4

January 1904 continued to bring Vachel emotional highs and lows, several involving his parents and his sister Olive. Dr. Lindsay’s new financial success, largely realized during the preceding year, was a bright spot for the entire family. As a result of fortunate investments in real estate and in oil exploration, the doctor considered purchasing two lots in a growing Brooklyn development, Kingsborough, located a mile or more south of Prospect Park. The lots were planned as an investment, although, at the appropriate time, the doctor intended to build a home as a wedding present for his son and bride-to-be, Ruth Wheeler. [Note 8]

On a snowy afternoon, January 3, Vachel and Willard Wheeler set out to examine the property, and Dr. Lindsay's son sent a number of concerns to his father. First, the property was adjacent to the Manhattan Beach division of the Long Island Railroad. The realtor claimed that a law had been passed to force the railroad to change from steam to quiet electric power "inside of two years," but Vachel professed to being skeptical. Second, the development had no sewers, and none were planned for several years. Third, the development was, in Vachel's view, "highly limited. . . . One of the restrictions is that on my two lots I must put up a house costing no less than \$4000.00. Since all my neighbors will do the same it will make it a fine neighborhood!" Among the positive aspects, Vachel listed cement sidewalks, city water and gas, and two uptown streetcar lines located only three blocks away. "I think the whole section has a chance to boom," he advised his father: "everything points that way to my childlike eyes, especially in the hands of the [real estate] agent." Still, he had his doubts: "As an investment for fifteen years Kingsborough looks good. As a place for me to start—I cannot say tonight. I thank you with all my heart, but I must think it over a great deal more" (January 3).

Three days later, real-estate research was postponed, as Vachel had other news for "Papa and Mama," exciting news of professional success: "Your son has arrived at last. Janette^ L. Guilder^ was much taken with my verses when Mr. Torrence showed them to her, and took my pictures home to her brother, Richard Watson Guilder^ editor of the Century Magazine—who used in describing them the dreadful phrase 'young genius' or something like that. Mr. Torrence assures me I will find a warm welcoming waiting me when I get around to the office of the Century Magazine. He is all congratulations, has presented me with a volume of his poems—*El Derado*^ [*El Dorado* is a tragic drama].—And he has given me some very good advice. He insists I put forth my best efforts and make the first impression as favorable as possible. He has given my bunch of poems a thorough going over and selected five which will appear in the near future—"The Song of the Garden Toad"—"The Dream of King David in Heaven," "The Comrades" and two or three others, all my best work. And three of my printed verses—"The Queen of Bubbles," "Ghosts in Love" and "Fairy Queens" printed by hand you know and embellished."

In addition, Torrence promised, according to Vachel, "full liberty to manufacture head and tail pieces for the *Critic*—a new set, and as many as I please. I shall get in my best work here. It is all I want, and means more to me than all the other opportunites^—for in that little inch of space I will be given absolute liberty. . . . My work will begin to appear in the *Critic* about March or April. Then I will strike for the *Century*." Typically, though, youthful Vachel recognized his tendency to ebullience and normally made some effort to temper his enthusiasm and pride: "I shall buckel^ down and work my hardest, and be as equal to the occasion as I can. Please do not publish this glad news too far till my work appears. Seeing is believing. . . . I shall strive earnestly these next few months to suppress vanity, speak discreetly, work conscientiously, and be worthy of my father and mother and sweetheart as near as I can, and not do anything I would be ashamed for Mama to know" (January 6). On the envelope, "Mama" made no effort to temper her enthusiasm and pride. "Vachel's first real success!" she wrote: "PRESERVE!" [Note 9]

Within weeks, Vachel learned that Wisconsin writer and sometime editor, Zona Gale (1874-1938), had backed her friend Torrence's judgment on the manuscripts. The timing of this "first real success," then, lends credence to a story that Vachel related to

Sara Teasdale in January 1914: “When everybody and everything in the whole world was against me—Ridgeley[^] and Zona overwhelmed me with unsolicited congratulations and told me the Century Magazine was just weeping for my work, that the whole office was afire as it were. . . . You may be interested to know that the ‘Tree of Laughing Bells’ was written after receiving his first overwhelming letter of praise and wild prospects. Now that we have gone thus far—read the [‡] Tree of Laughing Bells again imagining yourself receiving the greatest possible news of public approval, after having all your drawings denounced and despised by everybody, and even your closest and dearest treating you like a helpless idiot because you write OBSCURE verses. . . . Well—dear lady—you are about the only person in the Universe who can get this tale in all its bearings, etc.” (January 20, 1914, Yale 28). He had, we know, started his poem before receiving Torrence’s “first overwhelming letter of praise,” but it is interesting to speculate that the “Tree” was finished while the author was emotionally, as well as imaginatively, flying high. Certainly, this comment to Teasdale leaves no doubt that “The Tree of Laughing Bells” is related, in some very big way, to an artist’s feelings of success.

Tangible evidence of this success became evident in March 1904, when “The Queen of Bubbles” (*Poetry* 37-39) was indeed published in *The Critic*—after the author, he told his parents, “finished embellishing” it (January 9). He was paid five dollars. A second poem-drawing, “At Noon on Easter-Day” (*Poetry* 735), appeared more than a year later (April 1905). The *Critic* editors refused the remaining submissions, and the *Century* accepted nothing. On June 16, 1917, Vachel himself recorded his disillusionment on the same envelope that Mama had earlier written “PRESERVE”: “This was mostly false. Only ~~one~~ 2 poems were printed by the Critic after two years. The drawings were turned down. The Century had nothing to do with me. The Guilders[^] didn’t know me from Adam. After about five years the rest of the poems and drawings were returned with an insulting letter by the Critic” (Virginia).

Three years earlier, the spurned author had vented his frustrations to Sara Teasdale: “As for Torrence and Zona Gale—I met them long ago—when the Queen of Bubbles appeared in the Critic. Therby[^] hangs a long story—of one of the bitterest disappointments of my life—that made literary disappointments and wounded vanity of the conventional utterly impossible thereafter—though it seems a child’s[^] nursery tale now. It was the first and last time I put my trust in princes. . . . But after all the Torrence-Gale Hullabaloo—and I have not given you half—the Queen of Bubbles was all that saw the light. . . . I don’t blame Torrence a bit, mind you—but it was about my only spiritual Waterloo till Wagon Mound [where he lost his nerve and abandoned his 1912 tramp]. I had hung my happiness on an external thing—and it had failed me. Torrence was just a confused and busy poet—with many irons in the fire. But his name brings it all back. . . . (Victory and vindication in sight—then it was later withdrawn an inch of a time, till it utterly disappeared.) Now Don’t[^] be sore on Torrence,” Vachel finally pleaded: “I was all unready for success. It would have ruined me” (January 20, 1914, Yale 28). [Note 10]

In January 1904, though, there was only high hope as regards publishers and professional achievement. And, predictably, the exciting prospect of publication led to two new poems: “To the Archangel Michael” (*Poetry* 54, 56—dated “January 12, 1904”) and “Midnight Alleys” (*Poetry* 796-797—dated “January 17, 1904”). In fact, the emotional lows this January were personal, not professional; they began with the death of

Dr. Lindsay's mother, Martha Ann Cave Lindsay, on January 4, at age 78. When Vachel learned of his grandmother's death, he sent his condolences to "Papa and Mama," along with a few of his thoughts: "This is late Saturday night. Grandma's funeral in Springfield I have been thinking of tonight. Yesterday I wrote Ruth a letter about Grandma and what a noble woman she had been all her life. She has now the reward of the faithful and the loving. I am thankful to have such a grandmother to remember, one for pride and emulation she was. She was always so kind and gentle with us all and so supremely unselfish and so able to to^ deny herself. To think of such a woman is to strengthen ones^ sense of the immortality of the soul, such souls must be serving somewhere still in a happier land." On a less ethereal note, he added: "The list of thirty in the Concour^ has just been published. I have second place. That is equivalent to the second place in drawing in the school. But I have no such place in painting yet. But Miller says my last painting shows extrordinary^ progress—so I feel encouraged to prophecy^ some success by next months^ exhibition. Two of my best drawings are in this months^ exhibit today and tomorrow" (January 9).

A second personal low point this January was the report of a quarrel between Olive and her fiancé, Paul Wakefield. The couple planned to wed in June, but Paul requested a postponement. His father, Professor Wakefield, felt the marriage was premature—and said so with vigor. Olive objected to any change in plans, and when Vachel learned that the professor planned a trip to Springfield, he left no doubt as to where his sympathies lay: "I hope the Professor gets to Springfield before a crisis. He and Papa were born to be friends and with fair chances all will be well. Too many letters merely mess things. The Professor is a very kindly man, but terribly short on courage, and he has probably been waiting a long time to express himself, without really understanding Springfield and you people, merely accepting his wife's [Martha's] account probably highly colored of our pride and wealth and social brilliancy!" In fact, Vachel believed that Martha Wakefield was the cause of the dispute: "She is a woman with a chaotic irresponsible imagination, not neccessarily^ spiteful or jealous. But always wrong about everything, full of sentimental or gorgeous visions. She is very easy to manage by merely treating her kindly, she forgets her last vision very quickly sometimes. I have been in the houshould^ for years with her pleasantly, and enjoyed her, yet never thought of accepting her version of anything. As soon as the Professor sees for himself," Vachel predicted, "all will be well, as far as he is concerned." [Note 11]

Olive's brother then focused the discussion on Paul: "Paul and I were friends when he knew I was bitterly opposed to his engagement with Olive—so he owes me no grudge nor I him as long as he tries to behave. He is probably hard put to it trying to suit his Father and Olive both, and messing it with both. I will not feel too badly no matter how the thing is decided. I have survived both processes, and stand ready to congratulate and sympathize in either case, whether Paul is accepted or rejected. I know Paul like a book and he is Probably^ getting everybody more mixed up every day. . . . Paul is in just such a mess as this about every three months with somebody over something, especially if he is overworked or tired. He generally leaves the battle licked, and resolving to be good, and succeeding for a while." Charitably, friend Vachel added: "But that is the worst I know of him." He seemed ready to drop the subject: "You know the best of him. I used to argue that that kind of a man was beneath Olive's dignity. She didn't think so.—

He has a big heart after all, and that won out. The best of him is his rare heart, the worst is his timidity, and occasional cowardice. . . . Well—enough of Paul. . . .”

Characteristically, though, Vachel found it impossible to stop writing when he felt emotionally charged: “I feel that if Olive breaks off with Paul it will be to her advantage in several ways—it does not look like a disaster to me. The only mistake is to keep the quarrel buzzing. It ought to be decided in a clean cut way mighty quick, for good and all, with no afterthoughts. He must either stick to her plans or go—and go for good with no little trick of playing at ‘friends’ and ‘acquaintainces’^ till the whim strikes him to begin a new wooing of Olive. He has put her through all that over and over again already, and she has never had the nerve to turn him squarely down, yet never the will to make him mind.”

Finally, Vachel closed with some tentative advice for his sister—and a statement of self-deprecation: “Paul wants to get married on the date set and has no notion of anything else. But as to the rest of the plans he is probably willing to keep them in the air. Olive must rule him with a firm steady hand and she never does. He regards her whims and forgets her earnest decisions, sometimes, because she does not enforce them. Well—this letter is no help—but you are welcome to it—With love Vachel” (January 19, 1904, misdated “1903”).

Meanwhile, as time passed, Vachel had no success in placing any additional work. In 1914, he explained to Sara Teasdale: “when I went around I received the conventional pass-him-on treatment—that always deceives the youngster—which after two bitter years I learned was merely the New York Publishers’ brand of good manners” (January 20, 1914, Yale 28). Again, though, it was a different story in 1904. He was not discouraged because he hoped that the *March Critic* would provide “sufficient advertisement^ to open up work . . . in several quarters. . . . But I must wait and see. The Critic does not pay more than five dollars a poem—it is a magazine of high literary standing but not so high financially. The privilege^ of appearing there I regard in the nature of an advertisement^ and an introduction. They will accept some of my tail-pieces and probably other work from time to time. Still my Connection^ with the Critic is not exactly a sure income yet. I hope to make it the beginning of an income, and by June be fully started in several magazines. I have not half gone the rounds yet” (to “Papa and Mama,” January 30). When editor Torrence introduced Vachel to Zona Gale, there was more reason for hope, since she, in turn, suggested that the new poet, in his words, “get into Harper’s if possible, which I shall attempt next time I go up Town” (January 30).

Vachel had no success at *Harper’s*, however, and the *Century* continued to reject everything he submitted. Nevertheless, his spirits remained high, and the enthusiasm spilled over into his academic work: “At school I made a good bunch of drawings in the Concour^ Life, and the last was my best, which I was glad to note. I have been afraid I was losing interest in it, but am waking up again, and my hopes for first place have revived. It is pretty hard to stir up enthusiasm over matters of rank, it has always been so for me, but I feel I ought to want first, having gained second. After I get first once I shall not try for it again, but make the class the means of studying out things I specially need in my home-work^. This will probably get me a good place—but not first.”

“It is a great satisfaction to be treated as a good student among the art fellows,” he proclaimed: “It makes it much easier to be friendly among a heterogeneous set, they are more willing to talk art, which they were not in Chicago, without me making special effort at friendship. Artists seem to be more that way than anybody else I have known—the poor students unwilling to know the poorer, and anxious to know the veterans! I find myself the same way, only anxious to know the men two or three years ahead of me—but I try to remember how I was often snubbed in Chicago by Philbrick and Richardson and be decent to all comers.” Once again, though, he confessed to his nemesis: “I am a terribly poor painter, but Miller keeps encouraging me and I hope some day to paint better than I can draw. That will be none too well” (January 30).

5

As we may suspect, Vachel’s modest success with the *Critic* strengthened several of his temperamental tendencies. He enjoyed a renewed interest in art and poetry, and a renewed tenderness toward his supportive family, the tenderness that we have witnessed before, particularly during his Chicago years. In a heartfelt letter to “Mama” (January 31), he promised that he would soon send a copy of “The Wings of the Morning” to his sister Joy: “In one verse I have a place for her idea of the Music of the Spheres, which I admire very much. I shall get it as near to her point of view as the poem will allow.” (The reference is likely to lines 137-139: “The bells would throb to me / And drown the siren stars / That sang enticingly” [*Poetry* 162].) Thoughts of Mama herself, though, were primarily on his mind: “I have been looking a long time at my Mama’s picture which Grandma gave me when I was in Orange [Indiana]. It is my favorite by far of her. It is when she was about twenty five, and very beautiful. I wish I could talk to the lively and brilliant young lady she was at that time, who did not take things quite so seriously, and was fascinated by Art. I would like to have her for a fellow-student at Chase School.”

The letter continues in this spirit, as an adoring son shares his recent art experiences with Mama, just as though she indeed were his fellow-student: “Saturday morning [January 30] I went with Allie Dean to the Greek Sculpture Gallery of the Metropolitan Museum. I enjoyed it deeply. I hope to find more place in the work I do, for the Greek Spirit. My sense of the flow of form is not strong enough. I feel the flow of planes, and their contrast, but the totality, the content as well as the surface, as a great beautiful sustained unit—I cannot yet feel when I work, as I feel it in the Greek marbles—or Plasters. I must learn to see it in the living form. I have so much, so much to learn from the Greek—and my Concourse class is just the place where I can develop the sense and use it. It will save me from the Grotesque, and the hysterical, which are the sins of the Japanese.”

However, Vachel stressed, he did not disdain all aspects of Japanese art: “I have a special permit to study the priceless books of [Kitagawa] Utamaro [1754-1806] and Hokusai [Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)] and the rest at the Lenox Library, and shall try to use it once a week. From the Japanese masters I can learn delicacy, spacing, and composition and delicacy of color, and beauty of line and of texture—everything I want—except the Greek repose and contour—and the spiritual majesty of Angelo. One who studies Greek too hard draws plaster instead of flesh, and stony draperies, and ghostly ghostly black and white plaster. One who studies Angelo too exclusively runs to

distorted muscles[^] in the effort for grandeur[^] and exaggerated muscles[^] in the effort for strength. The Japanese sins are hysteria as I have said, and grotesque. But their delicacy, when they are best, is incomparable. I hope to avoid all these sins and strive for all these virtues” (January 31).

A little more than one week later, Vachel responded to praise from his parents, and he was still in a tender mood: “I am awfully glad Papa and Mama, that you feel I have a start. It is indeed a great comfort to be vindicated in your eyes. A great many have been faithful in their hopes, though I have been merely a promise for so long it is a wonder that any one[^] stood by me. Paul has always been loyal to my work, and Aunt Fannie, and Miss Wilcox and Olive. Ruth was always more interested in me than my work, and I am glad something has happened to give her and her people a first hand[^] interest in it. There is nothing like seeing things in print! . . . The people one thinks the least of are apt to see what one means first of all, but I have been unusually blest with sympathy all along, from my dearest friends. Poor Ruth. She used to try so hard to like my work when she couldn’t. I always tried to spare her, but often found myself showing her poems and pictures that I know would have bored her to death, if they had not been mine. It has been a hearty satisfaction all along to know it was the man, not the Artist, she was interested in.”

The Lindsay son was also was grateful to his Papa and to his sister Olive: “I want to thank Papa for the fifty dollars. I can take it with better grace now than I used to, though I shall hold on to it tight as I can. My father has been very loyal to me for a long trying time and I am deeply grateful and will never forget. It is good to feel I will have a recognized place in the world, not an Ishmaelite. I would be most glad to hear from Olive on the Poem [“The Tree of Laughing Bells”]. She is a blessing. In the matter of Poetry she is my second self, and always ‘understands’ when I in the least deserve to be understood.” Mama, however, was his special “art friend,” and he was genuinely pleased when she praised William Chase: “I am very glad Mama approves of Chase. I am puzzled to know what particular phase of him strikes her as being so sensible. He is an earnest, gentlemanly unselfish teacher, with a gallant attitude toward[^] those artists whose methods are most remote from his. I have heard him praise Gerome [Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)] most sincerely, and no two men could differ more in Art method. He is most inspiring and unselfish” (February 8).

Vachel’s revived enthusiasm extended to his new friend, John Price Jones, who was Willard Wheeler’s associate on the *Commercial Advertiser* (renamed the *Globe* in early 1904). Jones, Vachel reported, had just rented “the next room. . . . He is a man who worked his way through Preparatory School and Harvard college, and has been secretary for two years for a Congressman in Washington, then took a trip to Europe. He has had considerable newspaper experience on the *Washington Post*. He impresses me favorably” (January 31). In later years, “Jack” Jones remained a friend (see *Poetry* 966), but in early 1904, Jones’s travel experience proved to be an especially valuable asset in Vachel’s efforts to show gratitude for his parents’ support. Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay, with daughter Joy, planned a summer trip abroad, following Olive’s June wedding. Jack Jones helped his friend Vachel make all the necessary travel arrangements.

Vachel's tender mood soon changed, again largely as a result of circumstances at home. "Tell me about Olive and Paul," he asked his mother: "when things are settled. Which way?" (January 31). He learned that, as he had predicted, the tempest had abated and the wedding was again scheduled for Tuesday, June 14. He was expected to be the best man—and that meant leaving New York at the end of term (the final day was June 4); and, to say the least, he did not want to return to Springfield. Typically, instead of refusing outright, he sent home his own ideas on how he ought to spend the summer: "I have my plan for the summer. I don't want much of a holiday this summer, would be content without any. I can take an occasional day of recreation here. My experiments in pen and ink last summer did me great service all this year, and will continue to do so. They have helped me to give a decorative finish to my work, and the drawing that made the hit with Torrence owed most of its attractions to last Summer's work. This summer I shall experiment in color, in much the same independent way, but besides, I expect to take all I have learned in school and carry it farther. I am impatient to develop my own methods."

His plans, Vachel insisted, were in keeping with Chase's art philosophy, a philosophy, after all, which Mama herself had praised: "I have studied Chase and Henri and listened to them so long I know about what they would say about any picture of mine. It is the object of the Chase School to get you to the place where you can criticise your own work, and they encourage you to start out independently as soon as possible. I will have friends among the artists and call them in to roast my work from time to time. But the main point is that I feel now able to build myself up as an artist just as I have as a verse-maker, without attending a 'school of poetry.' It will be a great joy to my soul and I am impatient to begin." He even anticipated any inquiry as to why he could not pursue independent work in Springfield. Why must he remain in New York?—"I want to take the Summer as a sort of intermission in which to do it, get settled in the best methods. I want to do it here in New York for many reasons. First, because I study the Metropolitan Museum at least twice a week, one morning on Sculptures, another on pictures. And I am very apt to spend another morning at the Lenox library on Japanese work if I am not too busy. I study the Japs for delicacy, the Sculptures for form and line and good anatomy, and the pictures for a hundred other things."

He did confess that he "would like to go to see Ruth a week or so," though he admitted it "would be pretty expensive and I don't know whether it would be too self indulgent or not." The main thing was to take advantage of present opportunities: "My appearance in the Critic may stimulate the demand for some of my work. I am hoping to make some more successful attacks on the offices of magazines immediately thereafter. But I cant be sure. I don't see where I can find the money to come home on, or that it is right, seeing I must come right back to work. If Papa has that much money to spare it ought to go into my wedding present for Olive. . . . I would like very much to come home," he emphasized, "but I cannot pe[r]suade myself it is a sensible thing to do. I would much Rather Paul and Olive buy a book case or a dustpan or a house and lot with the money" (February 19).

A few days later, Vachel wrote a similar letter to Paul, first alluding to the fact that the wedding might have to be simplified because of the concerns of Paul's parents. The Wakefields were unhappy anyway, in that they felt their son's marriage plans were

premature. They also believed that the proposed ceremony was overly ostentatious, as the following excerpt from Vachel's letter suggests: "No doubt, under the circumstances you will have so simple a wedding that you will not need me to cross the continent to pull you through. You and Olive will be sufficient company for yourselves there and thereabouts. I have planned my summer's work and am impatient to get at it." As to past disagreements, Vachel promised: "I shall not remember anything that has happened between you and Olive, and having drawn the mantle of chairity^ over you, hope you will do the same over me when I say my work is paramount in my own eyes. . . . I will be mighty glad to visit you sometime when we all have time and I am on my feet. The main point as far as you two are concerned with me, is that you will be happy and prosperous together. I will do anything that might help your lives, but mere attendance on the ceremony doesn't strike me as a neccessity^ to your welfare, and as a luxury, it looks too brief and expensive. . . . Write me frankly just how you feel about my attitude," Vachel concluded: "Is it a blow? I hope you will not be cross" (February 25).

The stratagem was not effective. Kate Lindsay wrote "frankly" just how she felt, and although her letter has not survived, we may judge its contents when we consider her son's answer (dated March 16). Normally, the Lindsay son's letters home were addressed to "Dear Mama" or to "Dear Papa and Mama." Beginning with the opening words, this letter is different:

My Dear Mother: My one object in staying in New York is to make my living and be some assurance of support to my family. It is not to avoid a visit. As soon as I have an income it is my hope to visit you very often. I would like very much to be able to live in Springfield for that reason. Not once a year but at least twice a year I hope to come home. Last June when I was fully determined to come to New York I promised myself that I would not leave the town if ever I got there, till I made my salt.

You must not put this to lack of sympathy with home ties. If I did not feel that I had been over indulged^ already, and not sufficiently stern with myself I would not be so determined to stay here in the face of so much misunderstanding. I am here because it is my duty, and you ought not to call it an excuse or be hurt by it. The thing I like best in your letter is where you say "You will decide this question of coming home as you think best." Are you the only person who can possibly have a high motive when there is a difference of opinion? Hasn't your son a right to a conscience of his own? Why do you call it a manufactured excuse? I am on the track of two positions neither of which will be so easy or agreeable that I will be happier there than at the wedding.

He did not indicate what the positions were, but he did speculate on why he and Mama found so many occasions to argue, especially during the past few years:

My dear mother, I know for a long time we have not been as close as when I was a seventeen year old boy. It has taken me a long time to find out why. The reason is not much of a comfort. Still I think it is the reason. Then we were together in everything. Now it is impossible for us to be joined in ~~everything~~ anything, but heart. If you had read the same books, seen the same people, worked under the same Masters, we would have kept in accord. But this was impossible. Now, when we instinctively try to reach back to the days of '97 and perfect agreement I am very much vexed with myself to find it is impossible. I give you my word that every time I start home I humbly pray that we may be brought together. I do my best to control my

conversation, and put everything on which we can possibly disagree on the top shelf. But the old habit of teacher and pupil comes back, and I have followed too many masters to be ever able to follow any one as implicitly as I would like to follow you. This at least ought to be a comfort to both of us—that everything I have since learned I have conscientiously built upon the ideas and standards of '97.

Any new views, he continued, were built on foundations that his mother had laid; some seemingly new views were nothing more than her “own thoughts in new forms.” Their “whole mistake” was in trying to get back to the “perfect understanding” of 1897:

We must be satisfied to live in our hearts more, in our lives, and intercourse with each other, and be satisfied to live our intellectual lives apart. As long as we don't try to think together we get along very well. We are both imperious, aggressive, determined. My methods of thought I have developed for my own use and I use them as energetically as you do yours. I shall certainly do my very best to keep all possible themes of disagreement in the background. I feel sure that if you had traveled the paths of art and letters as I have, the same paths, the same experiences, you would be about the same person I am today, and hold about the same views. I feel I have been true to the start you gave me in all important literary and artistic decisions of my life. My conscience is clear on this point.

The decision to stay in New York, he insisted, was not “to study art, or to enjoy myself, or to be selfish, or to avoid my family. I am here to work and sweat for the honor of my family, and it is absurd they will impute to me every motive under heaven but the true one. It is an important test—whether I can be trusted, even a little while to have a conscience of my own. If you thought it was wise for me to be here you would not make such haste to call me selfish. If you called me fanatical, you would be more exact.”

Meanwhile, he was grateful for “fifty dollars from Papa. . . . It is mighty good of him to stand by me when he misunderstands me so and thinks me such an ungrateful child. I would like awfully well to come home. I dread going into business many times, it will take all the sand I have. I hope you all struggle through the wedding and have a good time, I think it will be beautiful. . . .” And, in spite of everything, he claimed that he was appreciative of Mama's criticism: “I have taken your letter very much to heart my dear mother and I shall do my best to profit by it. But you must not make it too imperative that I come home this very minute. I am not hurt by it. Your letter is the sort of an appeal I need. I do not think a man can think too much on the debt he owes his mother.” As some kind of consolation, he promised to vote for Mama's candidate for president, Republican Theodore Roosevelt: “You might as well tell Papa now, lest he again hand my name to the Democratic committee!” [Note 12]

After discussing politics, Vachel closed his long letter with a reference to religion. In January of this year (1904), he had joined the Fifty-Sixth Street Church (Disciples), although he was not enamored with its pastor, one B.Q. Denham: “He is an energetic but unspiritual person, a good executive preaching a rather forceful and impressive sermon, but out of the pulpit^ he is unattractive” (February 8). On the other hand, the church was located only one block from where Vachel lived, and the membership included his friend, Allie Dean. In regard to religion, though, Vachel had one more surprise for his mother: “I am studying the Catholic Religon^ hard on Sundays. I go to the Paulist

Father's Church and have purchased a Manual of Prayer. There is lots more good and lots more bad in the church than I dreamed. I have made up my mind to understand every church. With love . . . Nicholas Vachel Lindsay" (March 16). [Note 13]

The Lindsay son's rambling apologia was ended, but he did not put this letter in the mail. He slept on his statements for two nights. Then he penned his resignation across the top of the first page: "(March 18—I have decided to come home.)" In the left-hand margin, he added: "If this letter makes you impatient throw it in the fire quick." He also agreed to be Paul's best man at the wedding. In succeeding letters this spring, he did not even hint that he needed to sweat in New York for the honor of the family. He knew that he would be spending his summer in Springfield, Illinois.

7

With the disagreements between Paul and Olive finally resolved, Vachel turned his attention to his own relationship with Ruth Wheeler. Ruth planned to attend a summer training school for YWCA secretaries in Geneva, New York, after which she would take "a permanent position for a year or so" in some YWCA office. In this respect, Vachel indicated, "she finds it will act much against her prospects if she is even rumored as an engaged woman, just as it was with Olive at [Springfield] High School. . . . I told her that I would be perfectly willing to reduce the engagement^ to an 'understanding' if it would save telling any white lies about it. An engagement^ is an absurdity in my eyes anyway, and as long as she loves me I don't care whether we are engaged or not. We are both dead sure we will be married as soon as I get an income, which is the main point" (March 17). He was also doubtful about future thoughts of living in New York City, as he related on March 29: "While I have been deeply touched at the plans to give a house to Ruth and her humble servant your son, it is a thing I can hardly reconcile myself to. If I had my own income for my work I might not be so sensitive about it, or if I had the immediate prospect of one. Finally it occurred to me that we might spare everybody's^ feelings by giving it to Ruth sometime when the wedding is immediately in sight or at any proper time. I do not know how it had best be arranged in detail. Either make it over to me with the permission to give it to Ruth, or as I would prefer, Papa give it to Ruth directly as a wedding present. It will be a great relief to my mind, and I will consider it a great favor if you can smile upon this plan. Please be frank with me if you think my idea unkind I will withdraw^ it. I feel deeply touched at all your plans and kindness to us, I hope to bring you happiness in all I do."

Besides, he continued, he and his bride might wish to live in Springfield or in Akron, rather than in New York. And even if they chose New York, they might not want to live in Brooklyn: "the question of location of the home is not easy to settle. A flat in the heart of the city may not be ideal, but more so than such a home as we can afford to buy or Rent^ in the suburbs. If I could establish a regular market or a regular dealer, the advantages of living in New York might not be so great but what we could afford to live in Akron or Springfield or somewhere nearer home. If we are in New York we ought to be within easy access to those things that keep us there, the Museums, the publishing Houses^, and the artists^ studios, and as I see the case now a flat would be more to the point than a district where we could afford a house and lot. But I cannot say until my ship comes in and I find out what form my success takes and what will be needed to keep it

going. It will make a great deal of difference whether I have a steady demand for my work, or whether I must keep pushing it with the public as well as working hard to improve its quality. Or if I should make a sudden success as a writer and my prestige[^] should hang entirely on my hold on the literary people, I would have to think it out from that standpoint. I am giving myself entirely up to the business of keeping at my work, and these things we must leave to the future. But I wanted to state the case plainly so that if Papa invests here next fall, it will be purely an investment from a business standpoint, it will be two years or maybe three before I can tell you whether I want to live in New York or Illinois.” Then, as an ironic afterthought, he noted: “If I become famous as the poet of the Sangamon River, and the public refuses to regard me in any other light, why I must build my hut on the Sangamon like a little man, and fish on its banks for minnows and inspirations!” (March 29).

Having just lost one battle with his parents, Vachel was not ready to engage in another. On April 2, he reported to Mama that it would be “very hard” for him to enter into a study of New York real estate, even if he had the time: “From art to real estate is a terrible jerk, it takes me a month to make up my mind to break away for anything so vague and enormous as a study of the suburbs of New York and Brooklyn, in which I have no friends and have no time to really understand them. If I could live in such a place as Hyde Park, Chicago I would be happy. I took the time to study Chicago, but I am so deep in my work I havn’t[^] the time for fourteen mile walks, etc. I may by June find the time.” However, he was not looking for a fight:

I hope these few remarks will not provoke a reply to the effect that I am too much interested in my work. I have my good sized periods of rest, regular exercise etc[^], but for the very reason they are rest periods I can’t find much room in them for such tremendous questions as enter into a New York investment. The methods of work at Chase’s are very intense and leave a man flabby and drained after half a day’s work, and with not sense enough to think hard. The school puts a premium on intensity, dash, enthusiasm. I stand as high as any for putting these qualities into my work, and it costs me something to keep up my record. I make progress all the time, and keep my health, but I hope I will be forgiven if I am not able to display average[^] alertness out of working hours. I do not want to be reproved because for once I have succeeded in conserving my energy, and concentrating it on one given point. In times past I have been a source of anxiety because I could not do this, now that I have done it temporarily, in a good cause, I do not welcome any hints that I am forgetting my family or “losing interest” in important matters.

As a clinching argument, the Lindsay son proclaimed: “For once I have ‘one unwavering aim’ and I desire congratulation, sympathy, not reproof. And you have not spoken unkindly, but I feel you are unnecessarily[^] puzzled. I am in a long strong dash till June, I dare not let any week slip by without the full quota of progress” (April 2).

Ostensibly, Vachel’s “one unwavering aim” was to develop his art to the point where he could make enough money to support himself and his future wife. Certainly his parents understood his goal as such, and they inquired whether or not they could expect more good news from the *Critic*: “You ask me if they will publish any more of my work in the *Critic*. They will, sooner or later, but their plans vary so. Miss Guilder[^] seems to have so many other things on her mind that it is not certain just when she will boost me.

She will sooner or later, but I shall not hang any too much hope on that book. It was last November I first interviewed Torrence, and at that rate it will be July before they get ready to do anything more for me. I will not look a gift horse in the mouth. I will try to get an even better grip somewhere else quick. Torrence is my constant friend, but he says of Miss Guilder^ ‘You never know when you will suit her.’ So I am glad to have pleased her even a little. Torrence intends to publish my Easter poem [“At Noon on Easter-Day”], but I can’t be sure.”

In the meantime, Vachel thanked his mother for a \$50 check and his father for a \$25 check: “I shall stretch them all I can.” And, of course, he remained optimistic: “I am beginning to see some splendid opportunities just ahead of me. I found a store quite imposing on fifth^ Ave^ where they sell drawings like mine, and where I feel sure I can arrive after while, the proprietor said he would be glad to look over my work. I have enough chances now—but it will take time to realize them. It will take a while to give the editor of the Booklover just what he wants—I hope to suit him by June. That will make two magazines, and it will be about as hard to land two more, but I will land them. I shall try for magazines of that same general character I think. If by November I could land two more magazines, making four, especially if they were the kind that watched each others^ work, as the Critic and Booklover do, I could make my living, and once making it, it would be only a question of time, say a year, assuming my work will ‘take,’ when I will be able to support more than one The Booklover is a practical certainty,” Vachel maintained, “but I can’t say how soon. It takes time to produce good drawings, and many will be rejected” (March 17).

For the time being, he decided to focus on his pen-and-ink drawing; and, to that end, he postponed his study of painting, informing his patient parents: “My work has been unusually successful at school this week, both drawing and sketching. Ruth is quite a little disappointed that I set painting aside, but I had to do it. She is even more ambitious for me to be a mural painter than I myself. I feel quite certain I shall be, some day, but this illustrating will come first. . . . It is my opinion, that I will have a place among the best magazines as an illustrator within a year. Then it will take an indefinite period for my glory as an illustrator to rise to its zenith!” Also, once he achieved fame as an illustrator, he thought that he would be able to find a market for his “best” poetry, although he admitted that “it will be pretty well along when I can get a real opening for my non illustrated^ verses. . . . They will succeed at last among the elect better than the rhymed pictures. I never intend to illustrate my best verse. It is my purpose to put as short a rhyme as possible under a picture to explain it, writing the verse after the picture is made. But my genuine poetic inspirations are produced without reference to pictures. I may embellish them, but not illustrate. Either the picture or the rhyme must dominate in a given production. My unillustrated verses will have a later hearing, but a successful one, I think.”

What is remarkable here is Vachel’s matter-of-fact statement that his “genuine poetic inspirations are produced without reference to pictures.” When finally established as a nationally known poet and platform performer, mature Vachel insisted, usually in a combative tone, that *all* of his poems began first as pictures. The poems were *always* secondary, and they could not be understood unless readers considered their pictorial

value. The following quotation is an especially acrimonious but forceful statement of mature Vachel's pronouncements:

Museum tours and years of Art Study and pen and ink drawing are the very substance of Literary Concentration with me. I have said in everyway I know how, (to yet be polite) that nearly every drawing in the *Collected Poems was done one to five years before the poems it illustrates and nearly every one illustrates in some fashion three or four poems [~~drawn after~~] written afterward. Look at the Cencer^ Drawings ["The Soul of the City Receives the Gift of the Holy Spirit"] for the beginning of The Golden Book of Springfield. I drew for years in all fashions, however crudely "The Boats of the Prophets" and finally it came out in the Congo Climax:—

"There where the wild Ghost Gods had wailed
A million Boats of the Angels sailed."

Booth goes all the way back to a 1902 Chicago drawing I made, which was a variation of Jacob's Ladder—long lost by whoever I gave it too. It was then called "very obscure" a picture with crowned and robed saints climbing a ladder to the sky. Booth at least is not "obscure" till it is very carefully read. And Booth began in an "obscure" drawing! [Note 14]

But now we are ahead of the story, and we need to return to 1904.

In March 1904, art student Vachel was filled with typical anticipations, not with acrimony toward non-responsive audiences. Having once achieved fame as an illustrator and as a poet, he averred, "the time will come to use my presitige^ as artist and poet to secure opportunities for mural painting. I hope to be sufficiently prepared in color to use them when they come. All I need is a start in color. I have the drawing and the decoration started. My mural paintings will be just like my rhymed pictures, only larger, and colored. There shall be a rhyme under each painting, just as under my pen and inks now." In concluding his dream of the future, Vachel announced that he had "made a discovery, an observation. . . . That is I am much more practical and worldly minded during a drawing fit than a writing fit. As a poet I do not fit [!] this world very well. As an artist I can be quite businesslike. That is as it should be, for pictures are my business. An artist is more apt to find rest, pleasure and diversion in the surfaces of things" (March 17).

By late March, the first stage of Vachel's plans seemed to be advancing nicely: "Good news this morning!" he boasted to Springfield: "Yesterday I did my very best design of my life for the Ladies Home Journal. Everybody around agrees it is an advance. I did it in pencil last week, and spent all day yesterday from 9 A.M. to 9 P. M. putting in the color. I hope to get another penciled in today. The figure is ready, drawn from memory, from last week's pose" (March 29). Under the enlightened editorship of Edward William Bok (1863-1930), the *Journal* had announced a \$3,000 cover-design contest in its January 1904 issue. Prizes of \$1000, \$750, \$600, \$400, and \$250 were promised to the five winning contributors, with May 1 as the deadline. Vachel (along with many others, we may presume) was excited; and on April 22, he informed his parents that he had "two magazine covers started on the wall. They will make five. I hope these two will be my best. I have had no practice in color and it is a risky thing to try to compete with colorists of year's^ standing." Then he added (rather obviously): "Still the

only way to begin is to start.” When the *Journal* acclaimed the winners in its July 1904 issue, however, the name Nicholas Vachel Lindsay did not appear.

Vachel also contributed a pen-and-ink drawing for the June issue of the *Sketch Book* (an issue dedicated to the work of Chase and Henri’s students). And he continued to claim that his teachers approved his drawing: “These two weeks I have made great strides. My two Ladies Home Journal covers are the finest by far I have done, and the life drawings at school Mr. Miller praised till I blushed under my toenails. Miller is very anxious to get my drawing way beyond the Chase School standard, he says very few men have the sand to push on to the exhaustive work he is giving me, but if I have the grit he will do his level best for me.” Although the work was “exhaustive,” Vachel insisted that he was grateful to be in New York: “If my letters home have been stupid and unresponsive or in any way uncomprehending, you must remember there isn’t much of me left when letter time comes. There are a hundred interesting things I could write you, about my teachers, my fellow students, in all of which I am very much blessed. The barrenness and sternness of the Chicago Art Institute and the endless old fashioned methods of drawing from the antique with no word of appreciation, no fellowship with artists, nothing but stern exercise of eye and hand, all this prepared me to appreciate the excessively modern and intimate methods of Chase and Henri.”

Of these two teachers, Robert Henri, for Vachel, was the more important: “Mr. Henri yesterday met me by accident for the first time in a month—(since I am back in Miller’s class.) He immediately congratulated me on some pen and ink sketches exhibited [in] last month’s Concour^e. It was my highest honor yet—to have a man like Henri remember some grotesque little pen and inks about two months back. He is a terribly frank man. It was the character-study in the pictures he liked. I said ‘Mr^e Henri I want to get as much more drawing into them as possible and retain the loose free line.’ Mr. Henri looked at me as though he wanted to pitch me into the street. . . . ‘Havn’t^e I told you drawing isn’t anything? Drawing isn’t^e anything! Drawing, why, drawing is nothing! Say you are going to put more and more character into the things, and make them live. More character— that’s^e what you mean!’” [Note 15]

“I tell the story since it is the whole of Henri,” Vachel added, “his Democracy, his positiveness, his frankness. When I showed him my Ladies Home Journal Cover he said,—‘Well I despise decorative design, but I am forced to admit your work is sincere, you put your own quality into it, it isn’t an affectation, it is from a genuine love of oriental things, and you are not copying anybody. But I like the loose grotesques exhibited two months ago much better’ etc.” Henri’s own portraits, in Vachel’s opinion, “absolutely live and breathe. Chase has many elegant qualities, paints silks satins velvets etc^e so any woman can tell them apart, he is a much broader man than Henri, in life and art. But Henri is electrical, intense, fascinating” (April 2).

Finally, in preparation for his return to Springfield, Vachel announced to his parents that he would need “to mend my ways, and my trousers as it were. . . . One of the peculiarities of the Chase school is a Bohemian way they have of wiping pallate^e scrapings at the end of the day on the walls, and sometimes on the chairs. The paint is two inches thick from floor eeiling to the highest a man can reach, most of it dry, but you never can tell. It is in great close velvety gobs, laid on by the knife full^e, and indeed a

curious sight to a stranger. And every Chase student has an accidental patch of red paint on the braw [best] of his pants.”

He had no further comment on this odd form of mural painting, perhaps because his mind was focused on his loved ones in Springfield. “I know things must be in an awful buzz at home. . . . We are living the strenuous life also and scarcely have time to note each other’s success from day to day, Jack [Jones] and Willard and I.” Willard, Vachel prophesied, “is a future Joseph Addison. . . . He will be of great service to me after I have succeeded in the magazines. He will have many friends who will buy my work. And I hope to be able to extend his standing among the literary elect” (April 22). In later years, with obvious nostalgia, Vachel described how, “about 1904,” he and Willard Wheeler “laid siege to New York City as though we were one Macedonian Phalanx . . . we were in the same boarding houses on Fifty-sixth and Fifty-seventh Streets. The same crowd of newspaper men, artists, singers, actors, musical students and young writers were around us. Bill was the local center. He dug them out from everywhere. The pageant of the ‘younger generation’ poured before us and past us” (*Poetry* 966). [Note 16]

Six weeks after the April 22 letter cited above, the now-published artist/author stood up and scraped his last paint on the walls of the New York School of Art. Several days later, sporting a new dress suit, he was back in Springfield, preparing to serve as best man in his sister’s wedding party. He was on the threshold of one of his most important artistic efforts: an attempt to integrate his personal values in a visionary depiction of the universe. The resulting productions would excite him and renew his determination to seek publication. They would also cause further frustration. [Note 17]

Notes for Chapter Thirteen

[Note 1] Kenneth Hayes Miller (1876-1952) enrolled at the Art Students League of New York in 1892, when William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) was one of the faculty (1878-1896). The League was (and still is) an independent art school, founded in 1875, “for artists by artists.” Most of the founding faculty had been associated with the National Academy of Design, where Chase himself had studied (1869-1871). In 1896, Chase left the League to found his own school, finally called the New York School of Art. Miller soon followed Chase, first as a student, and then, in 1899, as a member of the faculty. In 1911, when the New York School of Art closed, Miller joined the faculty at the Art Students League, where he was an instructor until 1951. Miller is generally known for his interest in urban scenes, but his early work, during the time Vachel was one of his students, features romantic themes, especially pictures of nudes and semi-nudes in dreamlike landscape settings. For the record, the Chase school, like the Art Students League, had no set curriculum and offered no degrees or diplomas. Students enrolled in order to enhance their artistic interests and abilities, at their own pace, and remained or left at their own discretion. Once a week, the best student work, in the judgment of the faculty, was exhibited in the *concours d’élégance*, generally referred to simply as the *concours*.

[Note 2] Vachel’s Christmas drawing for Aunt Fannie and her family is preserved in the first of her two scrapbooks. About the size of a typical Christmas card, the drawing depicts a modishly dressed young woman and the words: “Hello Boys!” On the verso, Vachel has written: “For Aunt Fannies^ Boys From Cousin Vachel Christmas 1903”

(Hamilton). Vachel's four drawings for John Kenyon, all of which are collected in the Hiram College library, include: (1) a fanciful representation of "Mouseratta the Indian Goddess of mice," entitled "Christmas in India or 'Why is a mouse when it spins?'" (for related verses, see *Poetry* 750); (2) a well-dressed woman in an elaborate hat; (3) an imaginative depiction of Shakespeare's Jacques; and (4) figures at "The Sunday School Picnic," including a boy and girl climbing a hill and the verses—

Jack and Jill go up the hill
To meet a handsom^e stranger
Whose sturdy glance and stylish pants
Seem likely to derange her.
He wears a ragged cloak of blue—
Prehaps^e he is a soldier true.

"Christmas in India," of course, alludes to Rudyard Kipling's story of the same name.

[Note 3] Vachel refers to his combative and disrespectful Hiram College roommate, Whitelaw Reid Spurrier: see Chapter 7. Since Vachel was writing to Mary Humphrey, "memomary" is likely an intentional pun.

[Note 4] There are two Humphrey collections, one at the Lindsay Home and one owned by the heirs of William Humphrey. Many of the manuscript pages include the note: "Copied for Miss Wilcox, March 22 [1903]." The Wilcox manuscripts were likely "corrected" and returned to Vachel. In *Collected Poems* (1923, 1925), "Section IV" is entitled, "VERSES OF AN ESPECIALLY INSCRIPTIONAL CHARACTER: Being songs of my art-student days, written for my drawings. Most of the drawings are the property of citizens of Springfield, Illinois" (xi).

[Note 5] The title is written in Vachel's hand: "Notes on 'The Tree of Laughing Bells.'" What follows is a typescript likely created in late 1909, as Vachel prepared for his first speaking tour in the Northeast. I have quietly corrected obvious typographical errors, such as "unmost," "Schience," and "muxt" (Virginia). Norwegian adventurer Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) details his extensive explorations in his two-volume work *Fram over Polhavet* (1897, translated as *Farthest North*). Robert Edwin Peary (1856-1920) set out for the North Pole in 1908, perhaps achieving his goal, perhaps missing it by several hundred miles, during the following year. Peary describes his effort in *The North Pole* (1910); however, as I write in 2010, there is growing scholarly consensus that Peary was confused or, more harshly, that he did not tell the truth about his explorations.

[Note 6] In her autobiography, *My House of Life*, Jessie B. Rittenhouse notes that, in later life, Vachel "tried to attach modern meanings to some of these fantasies, to pin down these exquisitely imaginative poems, whose reality was of the spirit, to literal fact." Rittenhouse cites one of Vachel's letters as an example: "'The Tree of Laughing Bells,' now entitled 'A Poem for Aviators,' was written in 1904, before aviators were ever heard of. The actual existence of the flying machine may now make it clear to the laity. It is the one thing I ever did that pleased Robert Henri, written when I was a student in his school" (299-300). Vachel's letter, dated "November 10, 1913," is in the Rollins College library.

"The Real American Language" is an edited excerpt from Vachel's lengthy manuscript *Why Don't You Talk United States?* (Virginia). It was published in *The*

American Mercury 13 (March 1928): 257-265, and is available online at: www.VachelLindsayHome.org

[Note 7] According to Olive Lindsay-Wakefield, Vachel wrote Job 28:7 “on the flyleaf of his Bible” while he was an art student in Chicago. Vachel added:

Who cares for the man who is right?
 The man who is not a fanatic is
 useless as a tombstone.
 The fanatic who is wrong
 is the Wrath of God—
 burning the stubble—
 The fanatic who is right—
 is the Love of God—
 the baptism of the
 Holy Ghost for society. (83)

[Note 8] On March 29, 1904, Vachel wrote his father: “I am glad to hear of the new gusher. If I could only strike a gushing publisher, and get the public to gushing over my work, I could declare a few dividends myself.” As early as December 24, 1903, Vachel promised his father: “I shall look up the real estate and transportation matters soon.” Then, on January 3, 1904, he described the property in which his father wished to invest: “Our special lot is the only one anywhere in that corner unsold—and ticketed. According to the map, not one twentieth remains unsold in all Kingsborough.

“As to our two lots—they will make a lot forty feet wide and 179 feet long at the shortest. That would put the back door of a^ the house about 120 feet from the railroad. If that isn’t the right way to figure it you can easily determine for yourself, how you think the back yard^ would size up. Having arrived at that you can decide how near the railroad can come to braking^ up housekeeping in a 4000 dollar house. . . .

“Our lot is the largest lot in the block. On East 18th and Q Ave^, near Q Ave., in the block marked 6800, lots 10 and 11.”

[Note 9] Vachel’s sister Olive happened to be with Ruth Wheeler in Akron, Ohio, when Vachel reported the good news concerning *The Critic*. To their parents in Springfield, Olive wrote: “Yesterday Ruth got word from Vachel that *The Critic* has accepted some of his drawings and poems. We all yelled for joy,—and Ruth and I felt so happy we wanted to cry. It means a beginning for Vachel,—recognition from the outside world” (January 9, 1904, Ward).

[Note 10] Several years later (on July 16, 1908), Vachel summarized his frustrations with the Gilders in a personal letter to Richard Watson Gilder (see Chénétier 22-23; also see Vachel’s further remarks in *Poetry* 949-950). Olive Lindsay-Wakefield advised Willis Spaulding that Vachel “At last . . . accepted the ultimatum of the many publishers, who said, in essence, what Ridgely Torrence, (then on the staff of the Critic) said of the pictures Vachel took to him. (The pictures had verses to explain them, the verses being an after-thought^) ‘I like the verses, but we can’t use your pictures.’ Vachel refused to separate the poems and pictures. After three visits, he finally persuaded Mr. Torrence to ask Miss Gilder to allow one poem, picture and all; this he did by convincing her that the picture wasn’t big enough to hurt the magazine much, so it finally appeared in the Critic

for March 1904, to the joy of us all here at home, and of Vachel's fiancée[^], Ruth Wheeler, who then had a gleam of hope that she might not have to stick to her resolution of breaking their engagement. . . ." (October 27, 1947, Ward).

[Note 11] A surviving letter from Olive to her parents suggests another reason for Professor Wakefield's annoyance: "It seems that Professor has gone to worrying again over Paul's going to Springfield. It hurts his pride dreadfully to have you do so much for him and he feels that Paul should go somewhere and make his way alone, that he should not accept so much from you" (January 9, 1904, Ward).

[Note 12] Vachel added: "I certainly will not vote for [William Randolph] Hearst, nor for [Alton Brooks] Parker. . . . John Sharp Williams is about the only possible Democratic Candidate I would vote for, and he is only a remote possibility. I would vote for any good Southern Democrat, but not for Hearst. Williams is the only Southern possibility I see. [Charles Edmund] Gorman is a mere trickster. Rossevelt[^] is a better man in my eyes" (March 16, 1904). Parker (1852-1926) ran as the Democratic presidential candidate in the 1904 election and was soundly defeated by Republican Theodore Roosevelt.

In later years, Kate Lindsay changed her mind about Roosevelt. In a letter to her daughter Olive, she wrote: "The flags are all at half-mast in honor of Theodore Roosevelt,—a great man, if it were not for his jealousy of anyone who had anything that he felt he ought to have; his meanness[^] toward Pres't Wilson made him so small that I could not hang a flag at half mast in his honor. He's done more harm in the U.S. in the last few years than any other man in this country" (February 5, 1919, Ward).

[Note 13] On May 18, 1904, Vachel advised his Chicago pastor and friend, Edward Scribner Ames: "In New York I have been attending St[^] Patrick's and the Church of the Paulist Fathers. I have on my table here the manual[^] of Prayer for the Catholic services, and about one thousand pages of Catholic tracts in the form of two books for converts. I am determined to sooner or later understand this church as it sees itself, that is, in as great a degree as I have time and leisure of Sundays. I am willing to be rather considered a backslider for a while, if it must be, for the sake of this new knowledge" (Chénetier 2). In later years, Vachel claimed that his poem, "At Mass," reflected his experiences in "the Paulist Fathers' Church" (see *Poetry* 64, 840).

[Note 14] Written to Sara Teasdale on March 21, 1931, the entire letter is edited and published in Carpenter, *Sara Teasdale*, pp. 297-302. I quote from the original letter, which is collected in Yale University's Beinecke Library.

[Note 15] One of the "grotesques" is the drawing that Vachel includes with his poem "Sweet Briars of the Stairways" (see *Poetry* 28-29, 835, and below). In her essay, "Vachel Lindsay, Artist," Dura Brokaw Cockrell reminisces: "It was at Chase Art School in New York where there was freedom for the individual that Lindsay was allowed and encouraged to follow his natural impulses. . . . At the Monday morning concours selected work from the different classes was hung on the line and William Chase, that most American of all American art teachers, gave his criticisms for the students. On the particular morning that I have in mind the irascible Chase entered the room, the ever-present white carnation on the lapel of his frock coat, and made a dive at a pen and ink drawing in the center of the line. 'What do you mean by that!' he roared, and a rather retiring young man, tall, thin and blond, arose to answer the challenge. The drawing in

question was called ‘Sweet Briars of the Stairway^’ and preceded the poem, ‘We Who are^ Playing To-night^.’ The remainder of the period was given to this startling and original type of self-expression. Lindsay’s fellow students did not understand the significance of this occurrence^, nor the type of art to which their attention was being called. They were surprised and in a way impressed for anyone whom Chase called out at concours was at least to be taken notice of and envied or esteemed according to one’s individual attitude of soul” (126-128).

[Note 16] Vachel and his New York City friends were not always serious artists, writers, and students. One happy night, mature Vachel remembers, they “undertook to push the Flatiron Building over with the help of John Price Jones.” Lest anyone be alarmed, Vachel adds laconically: “It still stands” (*Poetry* 966). Located at 175 Fifth Avenue, the “Fuller Building,” better known as the “Flatiron Building,” was one of New York City’s tallest structures when it was finally completed in 1902. Standing on a triangular-shaped lot, formed where 23rd Street joins Fifth Avenue, the building faces Madison Square. For Vachel and his friends, the building manifested the excesses of materialism, hence the symbolic attempt to flatten it, so to speak.

[Note 17] In 1913, Vachel summarized his year’s study for biographer Peter Clark Macfarlane (see “Works Cited”) as follows: “Winter of 1903-1904 spent in New York School of Art under Chase and Henri. . . . Won some recognition for line-sketching—being supposed to be good at half-hour sketching from life. Was never started in oil. Became something of a water-colorist after I left school. Am best in pen and ink decorative design at which I practiced three years hard—on the college annuals before I left college.” Perhaps, Vachel simply forgot, or he was unwilling to admit, that he had, indeed, “started in oil” but that lack of success had led him to drop painting in order to concentrate on “line-sketching.”



“Sweet Briars of the Stairways”

