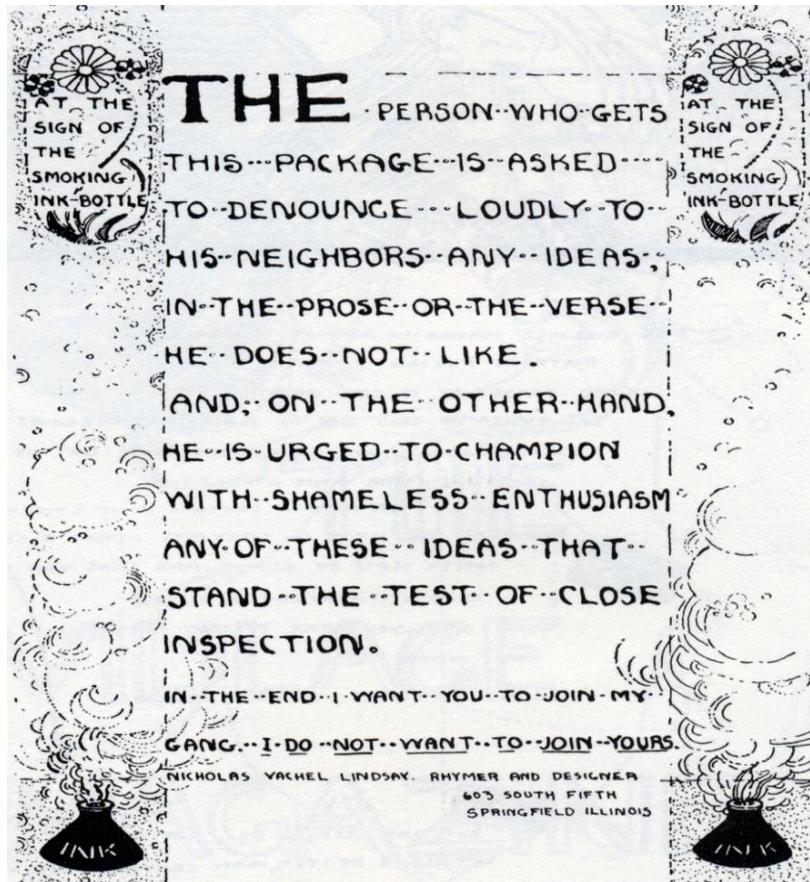


Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Fifteen



[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 Choose "Biography" and then "Uncle Boy: A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay." The biography and the website are sponsored by the Vachel Lindsay Association.]



15. NEW YORK: ART FOR SALE II

[January-May 1905]

“This fellow is a poet—he is a singer of songs.”

1

Vachel considered his first visit to New York City as one more chapter (he hoped it would be the final chapter) in a prophet’s patient life of preparation. In contrast, he considered his January 1905 return as the premiere chapter in his anticipated life as a missionary angel. He sought to publicize the first results, the first good news, of his many years’ study and training. In the Bible, God initiates His creation with one simple command: “Let there be light.” Similarly, Vachel identified the genesis of his missionary career with *Where Is Aladdin’s Lamp?*, a homemade bible designed to illuminate and then ameliorate the chaos and darkness of modern materialism. Put simply, the creator of *Aladdin’s Lamp* sought to flatten the Flatiron Building and all it stood for, at least in his angelic mind (see Chapter 13, note 15). Ironically, the homemade bible depicts imminent crucifixion for a missionary angel; but this ardent angel anticipated enthusiastic welcome, timely publication, literary fame, and financial independence.

In summer, 1900, as we have seen, Vachel proclaimed: “Within the next five years, I must be the biggest man of my size in Chicago, by January 1, 1905” (see Chapter 9). When the awaited day finally arrived, the goal had not been realized but the ambition remained unchanged: just marginally delayed. And the target city was New York, not Chicago. Within six months, though, this zealous angel would be forced to alter his aspirations: he gradually learned that neither the prophetic message of his creation nor the quotidian dreams of its creator would “take” with New York’s publishing houses. Instead of becoming the “biggest man of my size” (whatever that may mean), he was by and large brushed aside by everyone except family and friends. Of course, he was not discouraged. He simply refocused his energies on a new and different means for achieving his hopeful purpose, namely, to “count” for something in the lives of his fellow human beings.

As a practical interruption of the long railroad journey to New York City, Vachel spent Christmas (1904) with Ruth Wheeler and her family in Bowling Green, Ohio—at the home of Ruth’s sister Jane (now Mrs. Olney Mercer). By one of those coincidences more true in life than in fiction, Vachel happened upon his friend and former Art Institute composition teacher, Fred Richardson. “Do you know I finally landed Fred Richardson?” he later wrote Alice Cleaver (he was attempting to bring her up to date on his life): “We met in the small town of Bowling Green Ohio[^], of all places on the Globe, and I read him the *Tree of Laughing Bells*, and it brought him round” (May 2, 1906, Hiram). Since Vachel held Richardson in high regard, the chance meeting provided an ideal opportunity

for the would-be missionary angel to try out his “goods,” as he liked to refer to his creations. Richardson’s response, according to his former student, is summarized in the “January 19, 1903” notebook (a notebook begun in Chicago but used for random comments well into 1906): “December 30, 1904. Advised me to attempt child’s fairy tales for Grown ups^.” On “The Tree of Laughing Bells,” Richardson’s suggestion was “to sharpen significance of bell. Whoever wears bell forgets yesterday and takes no thought for yesterday. Told me to try the Delunator^” [that is, *The Delineator* (1873-1937), an art periodical].

Actually, to temper the boasting of Alice Cleaver’s correspondent, the nature of the exchange between the teacher and his former pupil may not have been as positive as Vachel reports. A Richardson letter of later years survives at the University of Virginia Library. This particular letter was sent after Vachel had mailed Richardson *The Tramp’s Excuse and Other Poems* (1909), a self-published booklet containing many of the poems first written for *Aladdin’s Lamp*. In his response, Richardson acknowledged having read and reread several poems with satisfaction but then commented:

I have so much pleasure of an imaginative and rythmic^ sort—in those I like and so little pleasure of any kind in those I do not like that I feel any expression must be based more on preference and prejudice than upon any clearer judgment I might claim.

Frankly, many of them seem to me so unbalanced—so diseased—so egotistical that I can find no sympathy in them.

Your drawing as I have always said is all of this—it is bad. . . .

I could accuse you of an inflamed ego—but it never does any good. You would talk me to death in your self defense^.

In an attempt to manifest essential good will, though, Richardson signed himself: “Yours in all friendliness” (February 13, 1910, Virginia).

Once back in New York City, Vachel brought *Aladdin’s Lamp* to Robert Henri, another teacher whom he dearly respected. In the same “January 19, 1903” notebook, Vachel recorded Henri’s advice—followed by a few comparative observations:

Jan. 3, 1905.

An interview with Henri. Told me of the undiscovered mystery of the figure and face. Told me my faces were too doll like. My figures lacked action. I ought to get same mystery into face I did into my designs. Then ought to study Beardsleys^ faces and figures. I believe Henri has the simplest way out for me. Richardson reccommended^ the Academy—Henri the human face. Henri is inconceivably right. Richardson is right, but Henri righter. I see that man Henri is the man I need. Richardson is right about the verse. I am bound I will please them both. They are men worth pleasing. . . . I think by Henri’s method I will reach the kind of drawing Richardson wants.

At last, after the preliminary encounters with Richardson and Henri, Vachel mustered his courage and began calling on New York City’s publishing houses. (Several late pages in the “January 19, 1903” notebook are filled with names and addresses of New York City publishers, newspapers, advertising agencies, and other businesses that might employ writers and/or illustrators.) With apparent surprise, the solicitor discovered

that his first anticipation, namely, a warm welcome, was not unrealistic. Richardson had warned him that editors would not talk to authors, but Vachel's experiences proved otherwise. "The sum total of the week's news," he related to his parents, "is I have been hustling and hunting all week. . . . The thing that keeps up my enthusiasm is the courtesy with which I am received everywhere. Before I started out, Fred Richardson told me it was impossible to obtain personal interviews with the editors, that I would be asked to leave my manuscript. But the appearance of it has proved an open sesame. I have talked with men in a dozen leading houses, shown them the pictures, pressed them for work, and received lots of compliments and really enthusiastic interest, but," he added ruefully (in what would be a continuing refrain for the next six months), "no results" (January 21, 1905).

Others besides Richardson and Henri had advice for their aspiring friend. Edward Scribner Ames sent a letter of introduction to his New York City acquaintance, G.W. Reynolds, an executive with the American Colortype Company, publisher of the Osborne Art Calendars. Ames's introduction led to an interview on January 20 (8:30 a.m.), and Vachel observed in his notebook that "Reynolds was very cordial, and began to consider me as an assistant in the designing department." Two hours later, Vachel called on Richard Watson Gilder at the Century Company (publishers of *The Century Illustrated Magazine*, arguably one of the most important publications of its day [1881-1930]): "Mr. Gilder^ was quite interested in my drawings, and showed them to Mr. Drake—3 vols^ of Aladdin's lamp etc^, two leather picture books and two posters. I almost sold a poster. Gilder^ kept second and third volume^ of Aladdin's lamp to read some of the poems. Lots of praise from Gilder^ and Drake, but nobody knows if anything more."

Richard Gilder's encouraging response is not entirely a product of his suppliant's hopeful imagination. Biographer Albert Trombly quotes one of Vachel's New York City friends (likely Willard Wheeler) who spoke to Gilder at this time: "One day I met Richard Watson Gilder, when he was editor of the Century Magazine. I said to him: 'Mr. Gilder, I understand that you have seen some of the writings of my friend, Vachel Lindsay.' The eye of the literary patriarch brightened and he said with animation: 'Oh, yes! I know Mr. Lindsay's work. He has a touch of genius. We should expect great things of him'" (32). Three weeks after the face-to-face interview, however, the budding genius acknowledged Gilder's formal opinion: "Feb^ 14—Letter from Gilder^ turning me down." Typically, the rejected author found something positive in his experience: "An autograph, anyway" (excerpts from the "January 19, 1903" notebook).

The day after his interviews with Reynolds and Gilder, Vachel bragged to his parents that "Reynolds introduced me with flaming indorsments^ to several of his business associates. . . . My book makes a friend of every one^ that sees it, and the next time I go the rounds, with a better book, I can feel my welcome waiting for me. Harper's manager was very friendly indeed, and wants me to call as often as I have anything new." Vachel felt the soundest advice, though, had come from Robert Henri: "Did I tell you [Papa and Mama] Mr. Henri's advice? When I showed him the book, of course he was interested, and he said 'Begin at the top. Show it to the biggest men. You will find as many fools there as anywhere else.' Which was quite like Henri" (January 21).

By the first of May, 1905, even an optimistic Vachel was able to review the initial four months of his return to New York and discern a pattern. Confidentially to Susan

Wilcox, he admitted: “I have written and drawn nothing of importance since I have been here, addressing myself to the question of finding a place for myself. They are lavish with praise and short on positions. That is the summary. I have met open doors of appreciation everywhere, but when it comes to results they say ‘Go to the next neighbor, it isn’t our line.’” Nevertheless, the chronic starter was still in harness: “Well, something will happen yet. I never was more hopeful or clearer in conscience and ambition” (Lindsay Home—cf. Chénetier 6).

Personal letters and notebook passages that chronicle Vachel’s 1905 interviews with publishers are indeed “hopeful.” The following passage is typical:

I havn’t[^] talked to a single man but I will approach again with something new with the greatest confidence of an interested hearing. There are a lot more to see. Scribner’s Business Manager read the Angel Frozen Wings through with great leisure and much praise. Mr. Dodd, of Dodd, Mead and Company, did the same. I have bound it in a leather cover with embellishments. I put on my card—“I have a book which I have written, Illustrated[^], decorated, bound and designed.” That brings them in a hurry. I have found what calling cards are for at last. I feel I am beginning to build up a permanent presitige[^] with these houses, for I will only need to go the rounds often enough, with welcomes like these, to be remembered. I gather from the publishers and art Editors[^] that they are all for me to a man, that is—the public is to blame, the public can’t be interested. Harper’s art critic talked to me like a proud parent. He said to keep on, my success was sure in the end; that the old magazines were too conservative for my stuff, but the new ones were bound to rise and use me. (To “Papa and Mama,” January 21)

The hopeful Lindsay son also summarized one art critic’s advice in his “January 19, 1903” notebook: “The man in[^] Harper’s art desk told me that work like mine was sure to win its way in time.”

When, after several months, the work did not “win its way,” someone seemed only too ready to explain why. An “old friend from Chicago Harry Stacey[^] [Stacy] Benton,” Vachel related, “looked over all my stuff and said what they all said—that I had a line of my own, bound to succeed in time.” Benton was an amateur photographer and artist, and his work had appeared in magazines such as *Collier’s*, *Harper’s*, and *Outing*. Benton praised his friend’s “goods” and, according to Vachel, offered some advice: “But as to the everyday chores meanwhile he gave me some good advice I hope to profit by. With the advertising houses and Commercial Engraving houses I have to begin by submitting samples of lettering of a certain very rigid style which I have never produced but once, for the second Hiram Annual Cover—the 1900 Annual. There is a large demand for that sort of a thing, and by doing it I can get acquainted with the houses, and get larger contracts. The houses don’t do any of their own drawing, but give it out to Artists that call and solicit it. So I must get together several samples. I am going to letter the fly leaves[^] of *Aladdin’s Lamp* for a sample and maybe make a poster—and begin to call at the Advertising houses. It is hard to get started, but I know after I do I will make things hum. Harry says I ought to have all kinds of success in an Advertising house, once I am started” (January 24). Indeed, the title page of “Volume One” of the surviving copy of *Aladdin’s Lamp* boasts “very rigid” lettering. A second title page records the author’s 1905 address: “304 West 56th New York City.”

Vachel's 1905 boarding house on West 56th was a favorite place for many of New York City's youthful intellectuals. "The dining room," he related to his parents (January 1), "is half as big as Loper's Restaurant" (a substantial Springfield establishment that would play an important role in the city's 1908 race riot and, consequently, in Vachel's future life). In a follow-up letter, Dr. Lindsay's son added: "Our meals are very good, the landlady very kind. The dining room^ holds about thirty little tables, each one seating four. Our table generally has one invited guest or two, we strolling in at different hours. Sometimes there are five men there at once, always two, and always a pleasant and profitable discussion, or else a merry one. There is always some ambitious man who has seen or heard or done something remarkable during the day, or else has a remarkable yarn to spin. So much happens in New York, and we are in touch with such different phases, there is always something of interest. . . . I have a great deal of good company to be thankful for, thrust upon me, so I need not hunt it, and all the fellows like me, and I like them. . . . So now you know the manner of my life. . . ." (January 21).

Jack Jones occupied one room; Willard Wall Wheeler (again, no relation to Ruth) and his Williams College friend, George Mather Richards, shared another. Vachel's "little room" was "next to theirs." With board, the room cost Dr. Lindsay \$8.50 per week. Among the rest of the tenants, Vachel mentioned Ruby Kelley, who was actress Julia Marlowe's understudy and "an old friend of Fred Bogardus"; a man named (John H.) Duffey, "a leading singer with Schuman Henk or Hink [operatic contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink] or whatever it is"; and "other notables." Vachel also assured his parents (who remained concerned about his eating habits) that his landlady was "an interesting uncultured Frenchwoman" who set "an excellent table" (January 1). Then, three weeks later, he used parental concern to hint that he needed additional funds: "I have almost finished the cod liver oil" (January 21). [Note 1]

The house, according to Vachel, was conveniently located: "just across the street from the Y.M.C.A. only the South door instead of the North." Pastor Denham's 56th Street Church (Disciples) stood next to the Y, and the Lindsay son, as we may expect, attended regularly, although he had little praise for Denham's preaching. At the same time, Vachel's interest in Catholicism continued; and he informed his parents that upon occasion he was attending services at the Church of the Paulist Fathers. Also, at the urging of his new friend, George Richards, he joined the young-adult-male bible class at New York's Rutgers Presbyterian Church (Broadway and 73rd). The class members commonly referred to themselves as the "Rutgers Club"; and, as we shall see, both the "Club" and its teacher, the venerable Frank Ferris, were to play an important part in Vachel's life over the next few years. Meanwhile, Vachel was gratified to witness Richards' "religious^ turn" and with Willard Wheeler's decision to join the "Club" as well. Wheeler's membership appealed to Uncle Boy's missionary instincts: "Bill wanted to go, and far be it from me to interfere with his leading a different life" (January 1). [Note 2]

In George Mather Richards, who was a first-year student at Chase's New York School of Art, Vachel found a soul companion and, as it happened, a lifelong friend.

Richards “is with me more than the others,” friend Vachel explained, “because he is an art student and man of letters”: [Note 3]

He has the same weakness I have for writing and drawing, his writing has distinction, and his taste in books is excellent. He has in his hand at present a book on the Tunic[^] Legends. His book case[^] contains Yeats, Le Gallien[^], Lafcadio Hearne[^], Dante, Swinburne, Stephen Philips[^], Whitman, Poe, several of the Mosher books, the Chap Book—and others of a like atmosphere. He is an enthusiast in the matter of the middle Ages, and draws knights and ladies, especially well done as to color. He is a student in Chase’s, that is, [Edward] Penfield’s Illustrating class. He reads me many verses of his own writing, or other peoples[^], late and[^] [at] night, and we criticise each others[^] work. He is withal a very quiet and agreeable fellow, who had honors at Williams as a man of letters. He illustrates College annuals, etc, and has just landed the cover design for a new magazine. [Note 4]

Best of all, from Vachel’s perspective, Richards enjoyed long walks: “Richards and I take a walk generally, every day, in the evening. At last I have found a man who wants to walk” (January 21).

As weeks passed, Vachel’s optimism easily outlasted his money. “My Dear Papa,” he wrote on more than one occasion, “I will need some money in a little while for current expenses. . . . I will have to ask you to keep me for another month. I hope no longer. I have been all around the town and shall keep going. I am learning a good deal that may help me in the end.” In the margin, he noted: “Ten dollars will do at a time. The Landlady will cash your checks” (January 24). Predictably, sometime later, another letter begins “My Dear Papa. . . . The \$25.00 came this morning. Thank you very much. I am working hard. I have the chance to print advertisements[^] for a Baker’s magazine and doing some specimens I hope will be accepted” (February 11).

Life, however, was not all work, although Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay may not have been thrilled with some of their boy’s New York City pursuits. They knew about these pursuits, of course, because their candid boy told them: “The New Colonial is only a moments[^] walk around the corner, on Broadway. It is high class vaudeville which does not interest me, but is good and clean of its kind. I may go for the sake of the dancing and costumes which is the only part of vaudeville that can interest me. I need to get more action into my drawing. If I can make my fashionplates dance the time will be well spent. I was extra good on action in my school work, and must get it into my imaginative stunts. Well—hurrah for the Flour Trade News! And the Baker’s Review! Let us hope for the best.” Without further comment, he pasted an anonymous news clipping to the front of his letter. Entitled “**ARTIST’S AFTERNOON, \$2,000,**” the article is something the Lindsay son hoped his father would find encouraging. The newspaper reports that the Corcoran Gallery of Art (established 1869, New York City) had just purchased William Chase’s “oil painting of a codfish on an English platter.” Chase is quoted as claiming his “three feet by two . . . fish picture, as he calls it, was the work of one afternoon, and was done with no selling object in view, but just for the pleasure of painting so fine a fish” (February 11). [Note 5]

Whether or not the *Baker’s Review* (founded in 1898) or the *Flour Trade News* (1902-07) accepted any of Vachel’s journeyman drawings (presumably for something

less than \$2,000), we will likely never know. Vachel's surviving correspondence to his parents ends abruptly with this February 11, 1905 letter—and does not begin again until April 4. Coincidentally, the epistolary hiatus occurs at the very time the Lindsay boy was involved in an unusual experiment to learn what “goods” (if any) the American public would be willing to purchase from a poet/artist. For their part, it was one of their boy's memorable experiments that Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay did not care to remember.

3

After listening to editors and critics blame “the public” for his lack of success, Vachel borrowed money from George Richards and self-published “We Who Are Playing Tonight” [“Sweet Briars of the Stairways”] and “The Cup of Paint” (see *Poetry* 25, 28-29). The New York printer was Louis W. Goerck, and Vachel carefully noted the delivery of his “goods”: “It was on March 20, 1905 That[^] Gorek[^] finished the 100 copies of ‘We Who are Playing,’ Illustrated[^], and twenty seven[^] extra copies of the Illustration slightly damaged on the upper edge. It was on that date also that he delivered 100 copies+ of the Cup of Paint done on Red Paper, with the border upside down alas. . . . The Bill[^] was \$13.00 Which[^] Richards kindly paid, or loaned, rather” (“January 19, 1903” notebook). [Note 6]

Four days after Goerck's delivery, Vachel carried several copies of “We Who Are Playing” into the streets of New York City, perhaps answering what a year earlier he had referred to as the siren call of “all the streets” (see the previous chapter). He was determined to discover whether or not the public would show any interest in his work, and he believed that the illustration for “We Who Are Playing” was his best to date. As we shall see, he was also contemplating a career change. His art and poetry had failed to bring an income, and he knew his father's patience would not last forever. In order to buy time to stay in New York, he was about to announce to his father that he planned to abandon the arts temporarily in favor of learning to become a free-lance journalist, in the manner of Willard Wheeler and George Richards.

In keeping with his revised plans, Vachel sought interesting occasions to write about. Peddling poetry door to door was, in part, an attempt to create such occasions. To this end, the would-be journalist recorded his experiences in extensive detail in his “gathered information on Art” notebook. A few days after the initial writing, he sometimes inserted even more detail. In what follows, the later additions are in parentheses; the erratic capitalization (and lack thereof) is typical of Vachel's notebook entries. Finally, by way of introduction, these passages are quoted in full because biographer Edgar Lee Masters' presentation of this material is filled with typographical errors:

New York. March 24, 1905.

An Account book of sales of Poetry, and of Distributions. I mailed the Cup of Paint and We Who are Playing to about twenty five of the leading actors and ten leading preachers of New York. Each envelope contained the announcement that the pictures were sermons, in the case of the preachers, and tragedies in the case of the actors. Also that my name counted for nothing, but that I wanted the work considered.

About eleven o'clock in the Evening, in accordance with a design matured for some weeks, stimulated by Riis[^] Life of Rossevelt[^], and also the example of Ancient Trubadors[^], I put twelve copies of We Who are Playing in my overcoat pocket, and made a plunge for tenth Avenue. I started at tenth Ave and 58th, on the West Side of the street. There Were few places lighted up along the street—only the bakeries, the Confectionaries, the Drug Stores Saloons and Delicatessens. About one place in ten in my nights[^] walk was lighted. [Note 7]

Well I tried a sleepy big shock headed Baker first. I tried to give the poem to Him. He considered the thing for some time as I explained it, but finally handed it back saying he had no use for it. I thought there was a touch of Class Pride and the resentment of my Alms, and irritated independence in his manner.

So the next place I said to the proprietor—(Charles Sues 881 10th Ave.) “I will sell you that for two cents.” At once I saw the thing take. My customer smiled, and said “Newspapers cost only one cent—with lots more reading matter than this.” But he took two cents from his till all right. I said “You can see me, the author—that is why I charge the other cent. I made that myself.” He said [“]It looks like it.” And laughed, and we parted, I promising to come again sometime for another.

Next man I tried was a block down. He was frying fish in a little all night lunch room, a Sea food place, I think. There were three or four men sitting round. But I tacked[^] the boss. (Klondyke fish market). He was a lean tired little man with sympathy in his face. He only looked at the thing—I stated my price and he bought it quick as a wink. His manner plainly said “Poor devil, you are trying to earn your living, and I wouldn't hold you back from it, knowing how it goes.” I charged him to give the verse to some other man or woman, if he did not care for it himself, because it was the best I could do, and I didn't want my work to count for nothing.

Next place was a confectionary. Here was a pleasant looking young man, but stony hearted in the matter of poetry. His manner plainly said “Get out, beggar.” The whole tour, the candy shops turned me down. They deal out sweets for the flesh, not the spirit. I must land a candy man yet.

Two Chinese Laundries had their doors locked, and the busy Chinamen only stared when I shook the latch.

The last Laundry door I passed was unlocked. I said By Jove—I will land one of the Heathen—I will capture the Yellow man by his heart strings. So I marched to the desk. “Good evening Gentlemen.” But the five swishing flat irons swung like gliding pendulums. Not a Chink turned round.

“I have here a beautiful and unworthy little poem for your exalted and celestial eyes.” But the Heathen kept on ironing.

“Awake, oh Slumbering China—here is a message for you.”

But it was no use. The only thing I said that got an answer was “Goodnight Gentlemen.” And they all said “Goodnight” in Chorous[^]—and with extravagant politeness. I must land a Chinaman yet. I will begin by saying Goodnight next time, and spring the poem gradually.

I walked down to 10th [and] 42nd st. Then over to 9th Ave. and 42nd. I met some prowling soaks on the cross street, and most of the saloons on 9th and 10th Ave. had three men sober and one man drunk loafing in front of them. It was just cool enough to be pleasant for a soaked loafer. There were a few Bad women standing at the foot

of stairways, but not the obtrusive kind. Tenth Ave[^] was for the most part very still except for the intermissions that every city must Have. 9th Ave. was still, except for the Elevated. On this street I sold only to druggists. The Confectioners and Delicatessen's[^] refused. But with this difference. The Confectioner is cold as ice cream in his refusal. But the Delicatessen man is so genial you feel he has a kind heart anyhow. He is generally German.

"Every Cent counts with us" one said. But he laughed like a big brother, bless his heart.

A customer in the same store stared straight in front of himself as I approached him. He outdid the Chinamen. He seemed to think I was one of God's American Volunteers or a shoestring peddler. I tried wit, persuasion—everything I could, for two chilly minutes—but he wouldn't even say good evening when I left. The Chinamen well—he ought to attend a finishing school kept by Chinamen and get a Domestic finish put on himself. Even a Chinaman can say goodnight.

For the rest of the evening—of the hour, for the walk extended from 11:15 to 12:15—I decided to try drug Stores[^].

The first druggist refused me as though he was afraid I would whine and hang on his coat tails[^] and weep into his hand, if he was not firm with me. But I bad[^] him cheerfully Goodnight, and he looked up surprised. The druggist on the next block said he didn't see much Art in that. Just then we were interrupted[^] by a Drunk. "Beg pardon Gentlemen, but I am a poor bricklayer. I am not often in this condition. All I want is just five cents—five cents to get home on."

Did he want it—? The druggist ordered him out.

I sort of began to feel for my pennies—when he was gone.

This interruption past, I presented my verse—and received my two cents and wondered if I ought to help that poor devil on the car. Where was he? I didn't see him anywhere.

The next druggist refused me, but an old doctor who was talking to him bought two of the verses for five cents and told me to keep the change. This made five sales.

Then I said—now for Broadway. So over I went to Broadway. The first drug store three men were talking, in a loafing sort of a way.

When I laid my poem on the show case before them, two of them backed away in a very confused state. They were embarrassed[^] by their own hard heartedness. They didn't like the insinuation that there was any such thing as poetry in the world. Poor confused things. One of them backed against the wall, another turned his back and leaned his elbow on his hand on the show case. The third looked straight at me, and made a great appearance of not listening.

But as I pressed the matter and read the first verse, he grew so confused that I pitied him and withdrew. Those three men did embarrass[^] themselves dreadfully. They must have been plotting mischief. Maybe they had a notion that poetry is only found in books.

Well—the next drug-store[^], near Broadway and 53rd—there was a boy of about twenty sole possessor. I said to him as I handed the picture to him [" "]Did you ever do any drawing? Here is a little idea of mine—I am trying to earn my living—I sell these for two cents." But he only gazed at the thing, silent as a Chinaman. At last he

strolled behind the till and threw out two cents and said—“This is a hell of a time of night to bring around these things.”

I gratefully put my two cents in my pocket, and took his hint and went home to bed rejoicing.

The next day, as we may suspect, Vachel analyzed and speculated on the significance of his personal experience:

Now let there be here recorded my conclusions from one evening—one hour of peddling poetry, and that hour midnight.

First I am so rejoiced over it and so uplifted I am going to do it many times.

Secondly. There is more poetry in the distribution of verse than in the writing of it. It sets the heart trembling with happiness. Thirdly—The People like poetry as well as the scholars or better. Those that bought under all disguise could not conceal from me that they had hearts full of dreams and some of those that refused were dreamers too shy to confess it to themselves.

Fourth—I must use more art and more persuasion upon these people. I did not make any effort to stir their souls—I only let my work speak for me. But I must get a fire in my heart that will kindle them in spite of everything. Oh they are my friends and I have loved all those that bought my work and some that did not. It is a perfectly natural relation to society, as far as I am concerned. It is a situation in which I am much more at ease than peddling manuscripts or drawings from publisher to publisher.

In this book I must record the names of those hereafter who give me the warmest Welcome.

After carelessly misquoting Vachel’s story over some eight pages, biographer Masters brushes aside his subject’s experience with: “The conclusion is inescapable that Vachel was feeding his vanity on these Quixotic jaunts at night about the streets of New York, and betraying something of an exhibitionism” (132). In her copy of the biography, Olive Lindsay-Wakefield expressed her anger: “Horrid. Evidently E.C.L.,” meaning that Elizabeth Conner Lindsay, Vachel’s wife and the person who chose Masters as her husband’s official biographer, influenced Masters’ interpretation. Olive then added two comments regarding her brother’s experience: “For the sake of adventure not the money” and “Vachel was trying to find out whether anyone would like his picture & poem not trying to make money as ELM says” (both comments are penciled in the margins on p. 124).

A few years after this March 1905 night, Vachel himself suggested at least one other aspect of his nighttime “jaunts.” On October 28, 1909, he wrote to Nellie Vieira that he had just seen a dramatization of George Barr McCutcheon’s novel *Graustark* (1901), and he remarked that “In the second act something in the music or the situation on the stage—and the laughter and attention of the crowd around me, brought down the purple mist from the sky—to speak in parables”:

Oh it has been a long long time since my heart has been so full of love for my fellow humans—the whole theatre seemed one dear family. My life is so hard and cold and dry, and I do not know it till these hours when I really love my fellow human. And I remember back dear rare hours in New York when the multitude was

really dear, and seemed to flow into me like a splendid ocean. And somehow a phrase of that old squint eyed Altgeld came back to me, his farewell to the Illinois Politicians—“Respond to the Cry of Humanity and you will write your name upon the skies in letters of glory, and win the blessings of all generations to come! Again—Let us build for the Centuries!” (Fowler 229-230) [Note 8]

Viewed in the light of this letter, the would-be angel, heart full of love, set out to wander among the stars—to speak in accord with his own parable—on Friday night, March 24, 1905. He was answering the call of the crucified angels who preceded him, the call of the purple mist. He was carrying a message of salvation for the benefit of his fellow human beings, and he likely expected rejection—a kind of mental crucifixion—but he hoped for requited love. Instead, he was gently tolerated or simply ignored. Nonetheless, his willingness to speak about his efforts in later years reveals that the door-to-door missionary trek was a positive experience. By 1909, for example, when he was writing to Vieira, Vachel’s memories remained vivid, though he claimed that his perspective had changed: “When my heart comes back to me so, I know other men, in other places must have had that joy, and because of one hour of ecstasy[^], gone out for endless days of plodding for mankind, even tho men seemed little better than swine for many days. I do not in the least promise to go out to do wonders for my fellow human, but I can say that for an hour I have loved him, and held him to be above all. . . . The religon[^] of Humanity! It is wonderful when it is with us. . . . With me most times, God is very near, and man very far away” (Fowler 230).

4

On Saturday night, March 25, 1905, with a heart still full of love, Vachel returned to the streets. He sought out Charles Suess, the first person to respond to his missionary message. Again, he recorded his experience in his notebook and again he paused in his narrative for moments of introspection and contemplation:

New York. March 25, 1905.

This evening at Nine o’clock went to the man Charles Suess, who bought my first poem on the two cent plan. I gave him a copy of the Cup of Paint saying—as he woke up from his daze on the table at the back of his store: “there is another poem for you. I throw this in. I think I pulled your leg on the last one.[”] “All Right” said Charles Suess, with sleepy cheer in his voice, bless him. He understood.

At the Klondyke fish market a block south, there was no sign of my sympathetic customer, as I looked through the window. A stranger officiated at the frying pan. Some evening I am going in and find that man who gave two cents so cheerfully. He had a large Adam’s Apple, a lean neck, a little cadaverous face sooty from burnt cookery and the eternal fumes of frying fat, but he gave me my two mites and I must not be ungrateful. He was a sad, sympathetic little man bless him.

Having thus borne in mind the warmest welcomes of my last trip, I started East for third Ave. About fourth ave. I decided to try the silent treatment. I walked into an Italian Confectionary—Marini, I believe was the name. No customers present, all well. The folder found itself spread out before the eyes of the ugly, stolid Italian girl at the Cash desk. She looked up. I looked at her—solemly[^] turned slowly—upon a

dramatic heel, walked out with silent mysterious stranger stateliness. I'll bet that detained her a few par[a]sangs.

Next a prosperous grocery. The man at the back of the store, evidently the proprietor didn't want that picture for two cents. Very busy not interested. So to the stolid woman at the cash desk, with the red moon face and the flour barrel shape did I whisperingly present the picture for nothing at all and walked out before she could give it back to me, or unbend the startle from her brows. When she shows it to the proprietor, how pleased he will be! At last third Ave. and 57th! A bright street thronged with busy middle class shoppers in shawls with arms full of bundles, children skipping rope and having the time of their lives. A sort of a continuous street picnic, and family reunion festival. Big bright stores, in strong contrast to the shadowy side streets and contrasting most dramatically with 10th Ave at midnight two evenings ago. Here the places where there were no customers were as far between as the lighted stores were on tenth Ave. Another difference between 3rd and 10th, 10th is very wide and cheerless, three times as wide as 3rd, and tenth has low narrow sorrowful stores, and a more drunken and less prosperous Saturday night. And 10th Ave. the only happy people are the children. 3rd Ave everyone is happy, 3rd Ave is cosier too, for the elevated sort of roofs it over, and the trains go by with a rumbling and comfortable drum music.

There is no use talking to people in a store where there is a customer. Time is money, as long as customers are present. And besides, the business atmosphere is not the poetic. And it is impossible to talk poetry to ones^ best friends, if there are more than two present, and one at a time is best of All. Poetry is distinctly a question of individuals, and a constituency is but an accumulation of individual isolated voters. There is no communal cult, at least I do not conceive it so.

And when you meet a man alone it is no longer a question of business, and he is not able to entrench himself behind market place conventions, it is man for man, a duel of personalities. And there may be something in the fact that those who are susceptible to verse are likely to be those with limited business talent, who are passed by by the Saturday throng.

The first empty place looked prosperous enough, a Greek firm with two dreadful names, 924 3rd Ave., two or three blocks from 57, as I walked south.

There was just a boy in the store. I wondered as I entered, if the Greeks still loved poetry, and if that really was a greek^ name over the door. There were beautiful things there—ferns, carnations, splendid roses. But the boy of twenty or twenty five was best of all.

I have not yet learned to approach men with art, to radiate poetry from every pore. I am still a bashful suitor, and pleased with a gracious smile. And the fellow smiled with the sweetest good humor, he was really handsome, a brown boy, dark haired, with dirty thumbs from handling potted flowers. I said the picture was a gift for him. And he laughed with strong human good nature. It was plain he had a soft heart and a high spirit. I must call on him again. There was gentleness, and a wholesome willingness to take me at my word.

I have come to this conclusion—to poorer people—it is better to present the thing for sale. That takes the air of patronage from the transa[c]tion. They take it for refined

proud begging, which is a thing they can understand. It is a sort of carrier's greeting to them.

To the rather prosperous middle class however, it is better not to ask for money. They are not fearful of charity. They are more impressed by generosity, when it is proven absolutely genuine.

Well, the flower man is my friend. Just for the sake of his hearty smile, I will bring him another poem someday.

At 880 3rd Ave. at a delicatessen there was the proprietor and his wife, a middle aged tight faced, that is tight skinned shiny foreheaded red cheeked woman, not unpleasant in her manner, who greeted me with some curiosity as I briefly and awkwardly stated my business. She took the picture in her hand, plainly interested, and as I left the store I called from the door "I made the thing myself" and with her curious humorous and wholesome smile in my eyes, I left her laughing. It puts laughter in the heart to see them take up with the thing so naturally, for all my awkwardness. The[y] exhibit an honest curiosity, but the situation is not forced or strained. It seems perfectly natural. I flatter myself that the people who smile so kindly will not throw my picture away so very soon.

I peep in the windows for kindly faces, wholesome faces. This woman had a fine looking husband, and I hope he liked the poem. He looked like he taught a good Sunday School class somewhere every Sunday, yet was a sound steady business man, fond of selling cheese and olives and crackers and the like.

Next I tried a cigar store, a most forbidding looking man. It is a pleasure to see this kind melt, but this one didn't. I said: "I made this picture for you."

"I didn't ask you to make it for me."

"Don't you like it pretty well?"

"No."

"I want to give it to you."

"I don't want it. Don't care for it at all."

His manner was hard as nails. He evidently resented the proposition that there were any gentle strangers who were not bunco men. His whole manner expressed a man who expected to get everything he got by pulling and squeezing, and there wasn't any room in his heart for things freely given. Oh, he was business business business. No one had any right in his store but a man with a yearning for a cigar and a piece of money to buy it with. I wonder if he is always so? He was a most foreign looking man, but whether tartar or Hun or Arab I know not. I do not understand that type of face. High cheek bones, the skull protruding under the skin in many knobs, yet clothed in full sized, tense facial muscles, and a set expression of the mouth and eyes that makes no compromise, a sort of bandit face that neither gave nor asked for quarter, with vain upturned long dark mustaches, and if I remember, hair semi-pompador.

Now the treatment I received from this man was the sort my friends rather expected I would meet every where. As a matter of fact—it comes only once in a half dozen times, and is never disconcerting. The man affronts himself. I have nothing to lose. He has bitterness in his own inner spirit because he refuses.

The next place was a German Pharmacy at 3rd. Ave. and 53rd. There was a German with a prosperous look, evidently the proprietor, and it was a large house. He

had an Emperor William look, slightly Americanized, with a little grey in his hair and mustache. He was the taciturn but affable kind, and I was on informal good terms with him. I saw that if I did not invade the privacy of his opinions and tastes, he was willing to take what I offered and consider it. I explained a little more at length how I sold these pictures to the poor, and gave them to the prosperous, and he listened so well, I gave him also a copy of the Cup of Paint, and bade him Goodnight. Now all my pictures were gone—half a dozen distributed—and about four Cups of Paint.

These I had given along the route in a rather colorless manner to persons of no memorable interest and negative appreciation, their only distinguishing mark being they were alone in their stores. I have not yet developed a method for passing the cup ["Cup of Paint"]. I must tell a long story to make it interesting, since it has no picture, and I have never yet found the conditions where I feel I could wear out my welcome long enough to tell a story.

I tried one on a Swede girl waiter in a Confectionery. When I told her it was a present for her she said, "and what?" implying there was something to pay. But I said "nothing" and we smiled goodnight. (From the "gathered information on Art" notebook)

Thus, Vachel's account of his second night of "selling" art in the streets and shops of New York City comes to an abrupt end. Years later, Albert Trombly cites the comments of one of Vachel's New York friends, again likely Willard Wheeler: "Vachel's idea of New York at that time was that it was a place to be converted to the love of poetry. During the day he either wrote or called upon the editors with his poems. In the evenings, during a period of some months, I recall his going from shop to shop, along dismal 8th, 9th, and 10th Avenues, trying to interest little-shop men in his poems. He had nothing to sell to them, nor did he wish to buy anything; so he must have been an enigma from their point of view. He read his verses where he found a willing ear and then passed on to another shop" (31-32). Willard's friend may not have fully realized it, but he was learning to observe and to write about the behavior of human beings. He was preparing for more extensive journeys afoot, more extensive journal entries. He was preparing for his tramping trips and for the two successful volumes that resulted from those trips: *A Handy Guide for Beggars* (based on 1906 and 1908 tramps) and *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty* (based on a 1912 tramp).

5

Several days after his second evening venture, on the afternoon of March 30, Vachel viewed the paintings of Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928) at Macbeth's Art Gallery. "[Davies] is of the school of Blake," he reported approvingly ("January 19, 1903" notebook). Although he was unaware at the time, the Macbeth visit came just as Vachel stood on the threshold of his career as a poet. In fact, the very next day he had scheduled a second appointment with art teacher Henri. The occasion was to ask Henri's opinion, not of a drawing or of a painting but of a poem, "The Tree of Laughing Bells." Vachel discovered that the "Tree" was the one poem in his developing canon that his intellectual and artistic friends seemed to respond to with interest, some even with enthusiasm. More than 20 years following the appointment with his former student, Henri wrote to thank Vachel for some belated but generous praise of *The Art Spirit* (1923), Henri's one

important book. In turn, Henri had a few good words for Vachel—and a significant reminiscence: “I have always had a great delight in your poetry—have the books and very often read them. . . . But one of my great memories is the day long ago when you came to my studio on fifty-seventh[^] street across from the school and read to me ‘The Tree of Laughing Bells.’ That was a long time ago but the impression remains fresh always and as I have followed you in all the great work you have done I have a kind of pride about that moment because I said to myself then,—‘This fellow is a poet—he is a singer of songs.’” In the bantering tone used between friends who respect one another’s views, Henri added: “I don’t agree with you on prohibition. I’m for temperance but I’ve never known a really great fellow who is perfect” (April 29, 1926, Virginia).

Teetotaler Vachel, meanwhile, made certain that he would not forget the details of the Henri appointment. He recorded the event in one of his ever-present notebooks:

March 31, 1905.

An Interview with Robert Henri, by appointment. I arrived at 1:30 P.M. He had not had his lunch. After one reading of the Tree of Laughing Bells he insisted I read it to Mrs. Henri as they ate. I went to him to help me further the process of shifting from drawing to writing. He had given me my highest praise as a draughtsman. So he could help me turn. I was gratified to find he thought me at present better at writing than drawing. He certainly gave me a big brotherly boost, and braced up my confidence a whole lot. Our engagement lasted to 2:30 but he talked on till three. My Confidence in the Tree of Laughing Bells is by this time well established, owing to it having pleased such different temperaments as those of Henri and Richardson. (“January 19, 1903”)

Directly after the interview, Vachel and Jack Jones went to visit Gutzon Borglum’s studio at 166 East 38th Street. Borglum was not in, but Vachel’s enthusiasm is manifest in yet another notebook entry: “March 31, 1905. On this day my soul was born again. I saw the group of Borglum’s[^] ‘I have piped for you and you have not danced, I have mourned for you, and you have not wept.’ Gutzon H. Borglum[^] was not in his studio, but he gave me a new soul.” Vachel decided that Borglum must hear “The Tree of Laughing Bells.” Henri and Richardson had approved the poem; now it was time to seek the opinions of other great men: “If I can have a talk with Kenneth Hayes Miller and Borglum[^] on the same poem—I feel I can make the art secondary at least for a time without doing violence to my own nature” (“January 19, 1903”). Although Borglum’s art made Vachel feel that his “soul was born again,” the new soul would not be dedicated to the visual arts. It would be dedicated to poetry—at least for the next few years. [Note 9]

About the same time he was determined to change the artistic focus of his life, Vachel also decided to end his uneasy relationship with Ruth Wheeler. Immediately upon returning to New York, he had sent his parents a matter-of-fact account of his Bowling Green visit, parts of which hardly reverberate with romantic fervor: “The Christmas pulled through without one jarring note. Mrs. Wheeler evidently made an effort at cheerfulness, and succeeded outwardly, without strain or breakdown. Olney cracked all sorts of jokes and kept her laughing. Ruth and I went to the station with me[^] [!], and after

a few palpitating words of gentle esteem and mutual farewell, we parted, we said goodbye, we climbed the heights of sorrow, and I climbed on the train and she climbed around the corner and disappeared from my dimming eyes” (January 1, 1905).

In spite of their son’s insouciance, Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay apparently did not anticipate what happened three months later. In early April, quite suddenly, they were informed that the engagement had ended. And the news came, not from their son but from his ex-fiancée:

My dear Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay:—

It is some time since I have heard or written to any of you in Springfield and today I feel that I must write a little letter and let you know that tho’ we may not regard each other in the future as we have in the past year or so, yet the kindness and the love you have given me I will always remember and the many happy times I have had in your household and with your family will always be very high spots as I look back upon them. I had a letter from Vachel this morning asking that our engagement to come to an end, and I have written him, that I am perfectly willing, if he feels this way, and that as far as I am concerned I take it, as a most positive and direct answer to many prayers. Ever since I have been engaged to Vachel it has been my constant prayer that we may be led to do what is exactly the best and wisest thing and tho’ I have felt for some time we were not filling the place in each others^ hearts, the future husband and wife should hold toward each other, I have been praying that we may be led of God in the right way.

I do not know of any reason for Vachel’s writing as he did except that he has been led to do so, by a Higher power and I feel it is infinitely better to know exactly the relation we stand in toward each other, than to try to deceive ourselves or the other one. I myself have felt for some weeks past that we may have made a mistake, but I put off saying any thing^ to Vachel about it, knowing he was making a hard struggle and meeting with many discouragements in getting started in New York. But this letter of today has made it very easy for me and very plain. Neither my family or I will hold any ill will towards Vachel, but my family I know, will all feel it is vastly better that we cease to regard each other as lovers and become friends. I hope you understand how I feel and that you will blame neither Vachel or I, but will believe that we are doing what God wants us to do and are being led by him alone.

I have loved you all very much and you have been most kind to me and I hope you will always remember me kindly and with love as I will you. As ever, I am

Very Sincerely Yours,
Ruth May Wheeler

April third nineteen five. (Virginia)

It was not until a day or two later that the Lindsay parents received a note from their son:

My Dear Papa and Mama: Ruth wrote me that she would write to you that our engagement is broken, and whatever reasons she gives will be as good as any I give, and maybe seem more reasonable to you. I don’t want to argue or discuss the matter at any length, we both are satisfied it is the wisest step. If there are any questions you would like to ask, I will try to answer them. We part with mutual serenity, without

loss of inner dignity, and if my people take the decision as kindly as hers have done, all will be well. If there is any blame in the matter I will take it.

With love

Vachel. (April 4)

And, as far as the Lindsay son was concerned, the engagement had ended.

Kate Lindsay, though, demanded an explanation, and although her letter is lost, her son's response (April 8) strongly suggests the nature of what she had written:

My Dear Mama:

The letter that came from you this morning was one of the welcomest you have written for many a day. I have watched for it every day this week, and now that I have read it I am much lighter of heart. I feel very grateful to you for putting your protest into such patient terms. Ruth and I parted without an unkind word in entire self respect, and our only dread was not from each other, but how others might misjudge.

I have wanted to write and show you just how I stood, but its[^] pretty hard to explain. That is, the inside of it. As to the outside—If I could marry Ruth tomorrow, with work on hand that would provide an income, a place to live and a reasonable prospect of a steady income ahead, I would do it. But the strain of waiting waiting waiting with no definite time to stop, is too much. I rob the girl of her youth, yet do not get anything even in a selfish way, to justify her devotion. She is faithful, yet her faithfulness does me no good.

As for the “inside of it,” he complained that Ruth did not share or even comprehend his values: “She does not understand my most ordinary ideas or moods, there is no companionship.”

On the one hand, he argued that he was acting in Ruth's best interest: “I am convinced that Ruth should be absolutely free. Then if a man appears on her horizon that can fill her life, and is a good man, there will be no barrier set up to keep him away.” On the other hand, he again alluded to Ruth's lack of understanding:

We have to blow in the time as it were trying to find mutual thoughts and ideas, and our inner structures of brain are so different we miss each other with the gentlest and best of intentions. We have both tried hard, but the patience and forbearance[^] has been the plainest thing to both. My religion[^] is absurd to her, hers is to me. My notion of success and usefulness are utterly different from hers. The only things to keep us together are affection and patience, and I think we have a good deal, but we get no reward for it. We merely impose upon each other. I get vastly more free intercourse and understanding from Richards here, from Miss Wilcox, from Robert Henri, from Paul or Olive, when they have been with me a little while. Ruth feels these things keenly, no matter how I try to guard them. Richards and I read books together that would put Ruth to sleep, and all her family, yet they are books most of my real friends read. How can I write my real self out to her? She demands my real inner self, yet when I send it, I feel it is merely an imposition. The Wheeler ideals are three—orthodox religion[^]—style, and money. They cling close to their religion[^], and it is beautiful, but that is about the only place Ruth and I can get together. But we can't stick to Religion[^] every day and every letter. It isn't human, and besides my sincere

and honestest religion[^] sorely tries the Wheeler soul, because it includes a worship of Pagan art and beautiful poetry, and Ruth herself acknowledges she has little in common with these. To perfectly satisfy the Wheeler family I must abstain from all ideas that are new, all points of view not fully expounded in the Ladies Home Journal—I must confine my restless mind to saying my prayers, dressing my manly form in style and making money. All books are barred, all the restlessness of the dreaming mind must be curbed. These three: Prayers, money and style are the whole gauntlet of human endeavor.

Vachel conceded that Ruth was “a modified Wheeler.” That is, she did make an attempt to share his values, but her “whole training” worked against her. “If she understood or enjoyed with a whole heart, she would leave her whole past training behind her.” Besides, he added, “with several states between us, with nothing but Wheeler’s[^] around her, how can we live together in spirit?”

Turning to the subject of Mrs. Wheeler, Vachel claimed that she had not been “in any way cross with me . . . on the contrary she has been very kind. But she has let me understand from the first to the last she considered the match unwise. And I received word to that effect again about two weeks ago, and I thought it over and decided to put the strain to an end. It did not come hard, because since Christmas we have been more friends than sweethearts, and because we have always been very frank with each other. But it has been hard since” (April 8). He did not tell “Mama” what had occasioned Mrs. Wheeler’s letter. For that story, we need to turn to October 30, 1909, and a letter that Vachel sent to Nellie Vieira:

Today I was thinking. I was thinking of Bernard Shaw’s impudent and sassy novel, the *Unsocial Socialist*. Many many years ago I spent Christmas with my fiancé[^] and her married sister and mother and brother in Law. It was a beautiful time—the last I ever saw of her. Well, about February I sent the *Unsocial Socialist* to Sister-In-Law to-be—as an acknowledgement of her hospitality. She wrote me a letter of thanks without reading the book. But Mother-in-Law-to-be read the book, and sent me word that if I approved of such Literature, the sooner Our[^] engagement was broken, the better. Also my own dear sweetheart did likewise. The more she read the book the more she hated it. She took it as a personal affront. She saw in it all my crank ideas and fool ways exaggerated. Now I didn’t approve of all the doings of the hero. But it was Shaw’s caricature of himself, not me. We have never met, you know. All the literary world was reading Shaw at the time, and is yet. But these dear folks seemed to think he was a special crank of mine, for which I must needs be reproved. (Fowler 231-232)

The fifth and last of Shaw’s early novels, *An Unsocial Socialist* (1887) concerns the adventures of Sidney Trefusis, “the unsocial socialist,” who marries a Jewess and then deserts her after five weeks of wedded bliss, because he was “surfeited with endearments” and could not live his own life and do his own work. It is hardly a novel that a tactful man would send to his fiancée’s family, at least not without some kind of demurral. Interestingly, though, even in 1909, unrepentant Vachel was still recommending that the women in his life read *An Unsocial Socialist*. Vieira was advised:

So if you have odd time some time read the book. Then my acquaintance[^] with you will begin where the other left off. I kept at the lady in letters for several weeks till she cooled off, and confessed herself in the wrong. Then about a week later, after I had begged and whined for work at the door of every publishing house in New York in vain, I broke the engagement, purely on financial grounds. . . . But I have often thought that that little row about Shaw had a deal to do with my not renewing the engagement in hours of agonizing loneliness, or—since you insist that I say it—attempt renewing.

Any woman who cannot forgive a man for reading literature of reasonable standing is not the soothing soul mate that I would turn to when my mind is hungry for soothing company, and reasonable open-mindedness. (Fowler 232-233)

Writing about the Wheelers to his mother in 1905, though, Vachel chose to use sweeping generalizations. He made no reference to Shaw: “Poetry, Art, Literature, the movements of real thought and action are barred. If I have any ideas as to politics they must conform to things written in partizan[^] papers. Independence is inconceivable. Nothing based on deep reading, personal observation, or a study of the real masters on any line is understandable. I must be mediocre, middle class, avarage[^] in everything. Of course it will be pleasant to have things that I write and draw appear in the papers. If they are printed, they must be all right. But the appearance is the thing. The soul and the dreaming and the life that go behind these things is absurd. It never entered the Wheeler imagination” (April 8).

A week or so later, Vachel explained to “Papa”: “Ruth said, in her last letter to me—‘I have felt for some time that I must write you a letter in substance very similar to the one I had from you today but put it off from day to day, dreading to write it knowing that you were having many disappointments and discouragements’ etc. . . . ‘All our family feel it is vastly better that we never marry’ . . . I don’t like to quote this to you. But this is the substance of what Ruth has said many times. And only a week before, she said something to the effect that her mother said the sooner our engagement came to an end the better. I tore up the letter so I can’t quote it to you exactly. . . . Now I do not think I have been either treacherous or unkind. It has been just as painful for me as for Ruth to break the engagement, and if it had not looked so painful it would have been done last fall. We neither of us like to back out without due consideration, but I have taken my stand. I have taken the Wheeler family at their word, with a clear conscience and all respect to everybody concerned” (April 14). [Note 10]

Vachel also shared his pain with his mother, predicting that his immediate future would be dark and lonely. Constitutionally, he needed to write soulful letters to an understanding woman, not on occasion but almost each and every day, the very kind of letters that he had been writing to Ruth for several years. In fact, he admitted to Mama, “I am much heavier of heart and lonelier, and it would be easy under impulse to write a letter that would bring us into correspondence at least.” However, Kate had admonished her son not to act on impulse; and although she had in mind his actions concerning the engagement, he adroitly adapted her advice to his own purposes: “You have warned me against impulse, and this is the special one I am trying to avoid” (April 8).

Finally, in a moment of intense feeling concerning man’s relationship to woman, the Lindsay boy redirected his impulsive introspectiveness to Mama herself:

I have written all this out because your letter gave me an opportunity to relieve my mind, which I have been very glad of. I want you to consider now that I have laid bare my heart to you. Now I hope I will not regret it. We can begin over again to understand each other. I am sorely in need of real intercourse with your mind, but it is a real exchange I want. This is a letter you could understand better than any other person in the world. I do not want a prefunctory^ answer, nor a hasty answer nor a sermon. I am just as good at sermons as you are. Set aside your tendency to write me orations, and get down to the real heart I give you. It is an opportunity to both of us that may not come again. My heart does not open every day. Get into the mood in which you used to make your pictures or write your best verses, when you were a girl of seventeen. We can be sweethearts again, if you will get back to seventeen. I am not able to stand a Moses and the Prophets tone of voice from you.

Writing to his father, Vachel punctuated his plea: “A good long letter just came from Paul, and one from Mama, both written before my last letter to Mama [April 8]. I want her to read that one a great many times, and I want you to read it a great many, for it is all I can say on the subject. I might write that letter over again, this morning, but it is a painful theme” (April 14).

7

After finishing his affectionate letter to Mama (April 8), Vachel again answered the siren call of “all the streets.” This time he deliberately chose “Hell’s Kitchen,” one of New York’s more desperate neighborhoods. His purpose was not to sell poetry, as before, but to follow through on several promises he had made, to Mama and to himself, that he would do something to help the world’s poor. For Vachel, to help meant to preach; and for his message he chose the “Cup of Paint,” his first temperance poem. In the “Cup,” he expressed his belief that urban misery was the predictable product of an artless, alcoholic society. The spirit of art amounted to the one viable substitute for the spirits of liquor—and for the suffering caused by alcoholic overindulgence. “The Cup of Paint,” Vachel explained in his notebook, “is for the dissipated—well-to-do, the ‘We Who Are Playing’ for those outside Hell’s Kitchen, not for those in it.” The “Cup of Paint” was just the message for New York’s “children of sorrow,” if they would only listen. On this particular evening, however, the would-be missionary angel had trouble finding an audience:

April 8, 1905.

Upon this Saturday night I left Broadway at 9:30 and walked to Eleventh Avenue, seeking out that region called Hell’s Kitchen, south of 53rd st. I found it. I had in my pocket four copies of the Cup of Paint, but I could not find any one to give them to. If I had found any little Gospel Mission going, I could have left them with the Evangelist. If I had met a single Salvation Army worker, I would have left one with him. But not one did I meet. Finally on tenth Ave^, I found a big slatternly Congregational Church fair where they were holding a rummage Sale. All the old women looked like fat pigs, and there was a greasy faced stolidity and self satisfaction^ about the young folks that took the heart out of me. These people were too stupid for my message. On the other hand all the people in the streets—either

looked too miserable to be scolded by my little red sermon, or else too busy with Saturday night shopping to look for the free wares of the Spiritual market.

Every grocery store was crowd[ed] till after Eleven o'clock by women with market-baskets, every butcher shop was full. The crowd was the usual evening crowd, everywhere else. (The Coffee and Tea stores were crowded also.) I suppose the Saloons were too, but I have never had the heart to go in one. I am going to do the saloons sometime. I walked down to 35th on Eleventh Ave. Then over to tenth, and north on tenth. I passed a Saturday night market that is always interesting, a wagon market, backed up against the sidewalks both sides of the street for several blocks. Wagons full of Onions, of small apples 5 cents a peck, of fish, of Potatoes, of meat; Onions were the most conspicuous.

There was a good deal of grape fruit[^] sold. And the peddlers! Their work made them dirty, the trade was brisk, and such horrible specimens of men! There is a whole epic of dirt and crime in that rank of curbstome traders. Their customers were many of them wholesome-looking people. They were aristocracy in comparison.

It is quite the reverse in the stores. There the customers have a pitiful dirty look, compared to the prosperous butchers and grocers behind the counters. Butchers and grocers look clean and prosperous, their stores are bright places in the huddling streets.

Finally, finding no place for me and my cup of paint, I started home, leaving my cups in a desperate ineffective way at four places, that probably got little good of them, at a

Drug Store—48th st. and 10th ave.

Florist—709 tenth ave. And near there, a dry goods store—J.W. and C.O. Foster, then last—a Confectionary at 739 tenth ave.

And I resolved that some day I would go into those regions with something bright and cheery, not ominous, something they would all love, something that would cheer their eyes from the start. Some picture like a rose bud[^], some picture like a violet.

(From the "gathered information on Art" notebook)

Although Vachel did not report his street-missionary efforts to his parents, he did send several copies of his two private printings. Kate Lindsay, in turn, shared the works with two of her Springfield literary groups: the Anti-Rust and the Authors' Clubs. She reported that her friends found the works interesting, and Kate's boy was well pleased:

You do not know how glad I am that the Springfield people liked my work. It will seem to you and Papa more like I am really doing something. You have a good deal to keep you anxious, and sometimes these people will help you to bolster[^] up your hopes. As I succeed with them, so I will with the rest, in time.

I do not want you to think though, that I expect to depend upon you till I am a real literary and artistic success. I feel it is best to talk about that side of it when I am short of a present job. I am hunting most any kind of work, and sure I will get it in time. I have promise of work next week, but will wait till I see it before I am sure.

But it behooves us when we see the uncertainty from day to day, to look forward to the certainty of the ultimate[^] goal. I think that everything points to permanent success, however we may struggle meanwhile. This permanent success will not be a money success. I will have an income, a living, but that will be all. The men close to the bottom in Art and Letters make about as much as the men close to the top. I have

seen a great deal and had a pile of experience in these few months, and they all are scratching for a living, and I am going to get in and scratch too. But once I have a bare living, I want to bend my soul to really being something to my time, to count for something, to have a career of my own, and not be a mere scratcher for money.

Although Kate approved of her son's creations for the most part, she did question the appropriateness of the pen-and-ink drawing he chose to illustrate "We Who Are Playing." Her son agreed: "The criticism that the drawing was not quite in harmony with the poem, is correct. I have felt it myself all along. I brought them nearer together by rewriting the first stanza, and making the border tragic. My reason for bringing them together was personal. It was my best grotesque, as such, and one that had attracted a great deal of attention last year among the students. I seldom get a picture and a poem any closer together than these are, it is hard to get good pictures and poems on the same theme. These are my best work, however disconnected. I would say that the picture merely illustrates the first stanza, and the border stands for the ill-omened future. . . . Since my work has been expounded to both the Authors' Club, and the Anti Rust[^], I ought to be started with Literary Springfield." [Note 11]

Literary New York remained a different matter. Although no one wanted to pay for his artistic efforts, at the least, Vachel reported, "I am associating and advising with three fellows who are Christian gentlemen in the best sense. The only occasion to be really anxious is the question of my income, and I am worrying all I can over that. I feel square with the world in everything else, with a free conscience and a clear mind" (April 8). Now relieved of the burden of planning for two, Vachel redoubled his efforts to find a publisher, although he had another temporary setback. He needed a different kind of relief. He was cutting a wisdom tooth and another tooth had broken off. He needed \$25 in order to see a dentist. Papa, of course, obliged; and one more time Dr. Lindsay's son wrote to Springfield to express gratitude:

My Dear Papa: I write to acknowledge the receipt of the \$25.00. Thank you very much indeed. I have just been down town[^] to interview Mr. [Charles Hanson] Towne, editor of the Smart Set. He talked to me very kindly, expressed considerable interest in my drawing, and urged me to keep sending poems to him, and assured me that it was only a question of time when they would some of them be accepted and appear in his magazine. He insisted I keep at it, in such a personal way that I feel constrained to do so. . . .

About two dozen people in New York have "taken my address" because they might want my kind of work sometime. It is an easy way to get rid of a man. They don't write, and when I come around again they are merely surprised.

But I have faith in my work, and myself. I am going to hit this town yet. There is something here for me to do, and I am going to find it. Courage! (April 14)

A little more than two weeks later (May 1), little had changed, and Vachel repeated his sad story to Susan Wilcox: "New York has not yet surrendered, but there is still a great deal of hope. Whenever I look at my book [*Where Is Aladdin's Lamp?*] I remember our evenings together, and my debt to you. Whatever the fate of the volume as it stands, the whole experience was of tremendous value, it was inevitable, it had to be done, whatever came later. It has been the means of winning the good opinion of many people not publishers, and the principal stories always take when I tell them, with the

assistance of the book. I think though that when they are published, it will be in verse. The story of the crucified angels—and several others, are going into verse sometime.” He related how Richardson and Henri, along with “lesser lights,” had been taken with “The Tree of Laughing Bells,” but he also admitted: “I have written and drawn nothing of importance since I have been here, addressing myself to the question of finding a place for myself. They are lavish with praise and short on positions. That is the summary. I have met open doors of appreciation everywhere, but when it comes to results they say ‘Go to the next neighbor, it isn’t our line’” (Lindsay Home—cf. Chénétier 6).

The continuing rejections forced Vachel to think about the state of poetry in America. He observed to Wilcox that even “books of poems that have been reviewed with flaming endorsements by every principal critic in America, that have been given ample space in critical columns, and have in one way or another been worthy of the praise—have been passed by the public. No amount of advertisement can force the public to buy more than the most limited edition. The whole fashion of the times is against it.” Since publishers considered *Aladdin’s Lamp* mainly poetry, and since the work included illustrations that would be expensive to reproduce, even optimist Vachel was beginning to realize that his book would not be accepted. What kind of poetry would Americans buy? Vachel had his speculations, and he wished to share them with his Springfield teacher and friend:

I have invented a formula—but I don’t write that kind of verse. The formula—two thirds Kipling, one third W[illiam] J[ennings] Bryan. It might not be poetry?

The state of American Civilization becomes a surprisingly personal matter, since I am forced to reason about these things. My own selfish interests are at stake, and I am amazed to realize for the first time what Europeans mean by American Hurry, American restlessness, brashness, lack of tradition, omnivorous industrialism. Things go at a hotter clip every minute. Of course there is poetry in this. But can I respond to it? And ought I? Can I stride the steam engine and go puffing over the prairies?

There is a whole lot that Whitman did not put in. It is the Metallic roar, the terrible overhead railroads, the harshness of it all, that dulls every fine sensibility for the greater part of every day. What little time is left for the soul to live is so little a man cannot read a poem twice. He can scarcely read a novel. He leaves them to his wife, and crams short stories in a quick-lunch sort of way. The only way to make him read a poem twice is to construct a jingle haunting as a popular tune, a jingle that can almost be whistled. And that is a forlorn hope. I am going to think it over. (Lindsay Home—cf. Chénétier 7-8)

He did, of course, “think it over,” and in subsequent years several of his popular poems were written in accord with the “formula” outlined in this significant letter. In early May, 1905, however, he felt torn—between remaining true to his principles, on the one hand, and attempting to please the public (and realizing financial gain), on the other. His notebooks manifest his divided perspective. A few days before sending the above letter to Susan Wilcox, for example, Vachel defiantly recorded the following manifesto in his “gathered information on Art” notebook:

New York. April 26, 1905.

After much idleness and hesitation it comes to me that there is more independence in unskilled labor than in Commercial Art, more freedom, more rest. And since I must

work, why not try for a series of jobs at various unskilled avocations? If I should then write more poems of the Garden Toad and Earth Hunger sort [see *Poetry* 17, 26], it would be with more assurance, more justification, certainly with experience, not merely sentimental unsympathetic observation.

How then—poems of unskilled labor!

Certainly it is better to dirty ones^ hands with coal or with ashes, than to do cheap and vulgar advertisements^ according to another man's cheap notions, to conform to vulgar mannerisms, to please a vulgar popular taste, to play the fool for an indefinite period, till a cheap popularity is at last attained; to suit commercial engravers forever and forever, to cringe and plead with publishers for permission to print drawings that they cannot understand—

Better than this, is to heave coal. Better than this is to dig ditches.

Five days later, on the same day that he wrote his letter to Susan Wilcox, Vachel speculated on what sort of poems Americans might buy. In fact, this entry immediately follows the above:

New York. May 1, 1905.

These are songs that ought to be written in America, if a man could write them. They ought to be written in Brass Band style, harsh, popular, marching forward.

1. The songs of crashing iron.
2. The Songs of men in a Hurry.
3. The Roars of the Street.
4. The rivers of money—tracing the little springs that are gathered together in creeks then in great rivers. And one man who says—the river of money is mine.
5. The train that ran over the Witch.
6. The Fairies^ Killed by the noise.

Some books in this spirit would be befitting the occasion, and the times. An eternal splendid antithesis—the proud roar of machinery against the whisper of Fairies. Moor the boat of the Prophet in a factory yard. Let him pour down his mist, and the next day let the smoke destroy it. Let a magician stand on the railroad track and derail the engine, let the world of magic cut square against the roar of material fact. Join the issue with tremendous power, let the fairies be no more driven into the corner, state the inevitable conflict, and in this war, prophets angels, demons and witches make common cause against the enemy. Let them be no longer driven into the corner, and let us be impartial. There is one glory of the angels, and another glory of steam, there is one glory of the fairies, and another of money. Let us be dramatic, impartial, splendid. Can this be done? Some one ought to do it. Some one should lead the hosts invisible into the inevitable conflict. Rouse, ye demons, suffer yourselves to be no longer driven into the corner, come forth beautiful witches, and challenge the electric light, tear it from the pole, dash it down, leave the city in darkness, let the city know there are powers invisible. (From the "gathered information on Art" notebook)

The unpublished lyrics and dream visions of *Where Is Aladdin's Lamp?* served an interesting purpose. Their rejection led Vachel to consider a new artistic perspective, namely, a popular, "Brass Band" style of poetry—but still a poetry designed to convey a message of moral, social concern. The artistic idea of depicting Christian themes in

newspaper-style cartoons had changed to embodying broadly moral, apocalyptic themes in popular songs. And although Vachel advised Susan Wilcox that he had written no new poetry since returning to New York, characteristically, he was absorbed with his new inspiration. Notebook entries during May 1905 hint at ideas he would develop in future years. Primarily, he wanted to maintain his artistic principles, but he had discovered firsthand the futility and frustration of preaching a message that no publisher would make available to the very people who most needed to know. He set out to find ways to deliver the same message, hopefully with the same artistic principles, but in a manner that would encourage publishers to print and, what amounts to the same thing, would encourage ordinary people to buy, perhaps even to read. In a few years, he would learn that the recipe for success needed one additional ingredient—an animated platform performance. Then: “Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM.”

8

Several notebook entries this May amount to seeds that lay dormant for seven or more years. The “whisper of Fairies,” for example, was incorporated in the closing lines of “The Santa-Fé Trail” (written in early 1914): “Listen . . . to . . . the . . . whisper . . . / Of . . . the . . . prairie . . . fairies / Singing o’er the fairy plain” (*Poetry* 183). “The Santa-Fé Trail” itself reflects Vachel’s earlier speculation on “An eternal splendid antithesis—the proud roar of machinery against the whisper of Fairies.” Thus, the “Trail” is one of many songs intended to “let the city know there are powers invisible.” As early as 1905, then, Vachel was taken with a theme that he would develop in one way or another over the decade to come, a theme that would characterize some of his best-known poems, such as “The Congo” and “The Chinese Nightingale.” In 1905, though, the thinking was mainly commercial: Dr. Lindsay’s son sought a way to merge social criticism with an oratorical style of poetry that Americans might pay some attention to, with special emphasis on *pay*.

In his notebook, he pondered another idea, an idea that would also blossom in later years: “For instance lead the Souls of the Buffaloes against Chicago. Bring them down from the Sun, made of molten gold, led by the Indian Girl on a mustang of yellow fire. Lead them roaming across the continent, till they shall outroar the city—and beat it down, and leave it a heap. Call it the vengeance^ of the Buffaloes” (from the “gathered information on Art” notebook). In a second notebook (“January 19, 1903”), Vachel considered an alternate title for his work: “The Ghosts of the Buffaloes,” the title he finally chose when writing the poem during late summer, 1914. [Note 12]

Along with apocalyptic themes this spring, Vachel considered poems addressing the frustrations of an American artist, a personal concern, of course, and one that dates back to Hiram and the unfortunate Lucifer/Lindsay. On May 8, this particular American artist was reflecting on an earlier era, and he jotted down a notebook entry that would be the seed of yet another future poem:

A Poem—to Edgar Poe in Hell. Let the title be the most lurid part of it.
Morally Poe is to be damned. There is no other way out. He knows it, we know it.
We admit that and pass it by. Omit sulphur and furnaces, but deal rather in smoke,
Winds, memories and the immortal part—the Poet of Poe.

Homer is High in Heaven—do you think of Him? Does your terrible pride burn you when you think of Milton, kneeling before the Mercy Seat? Do you see afar off across the great gulf—the harp of David and of Israfil?

But in your heart of hearts a demon whispers consolation—and all the other demons gather to comfort—saying—“they were singers—they were many.” You are the magician—the only one that ever lived or sung. You are alone forever. That is your glory. Let it heal the flame of pride. (“gathered information on Art”)

With modifications, these observations, concerning one of boy Vachel’s most beloved authors, evolved into “The Wizard in the Street” (*Poetry* 93-94), written during the winter, 1909-10.

Not all insights this May were new and different. Vachel was not about to sacrifice the inspirations of *Aladdin’s Lamp* to the popular god of the New York publishing world. In the notebook cited immediately above, we find passages that reflect the old imagery as well as the new, and a mixture of the old and the new:

Story, meet a prophet—let him tell me the story of the Crucified Angels, and hold the Jar to my lips, saying—Drink!

Let the angel be crucified upon a cross of iron. Let him be beaten with rods of iron. Let him preach against noise and money lust. . . .

God bless all beauty, and keep it pure, all Love, and keep it wise, all passion, and keep it unselfish. We are in this world to redeem Beauty from shame, Love from stupidity, passion from selfishness.

Vachel also speculated on a theme he would toy with throughout the coming summer, a theme we will return to. The truly creative, imaginative poet generates the lesser gods in his personal pantheon. “Great Jehovah,” an early notebook entry reads, “help me to make my little gods.” Mary may be the mother of God; but, for a time at least, Vachel viewed himself as nothing less than a father of gods. (“gathered information on Art”)

Discoveries this eventful May, 1905, were not quite finished. Vachel gained one more insight, one that ultimately would lead to his success as an artist and one that in the end would lead to consuming frustration. In the midst of his internal struggles, he managed to save enough of “Papa’s” money to buy a ticket to Ibsen’s play, *A Doll’s House* (1879), likely a ticket for a seat in or near the top row of the second balcony (see below). Ethel Barrymore (1879-1959) played the lead role and, Vachel noted, “She made a decidedly Scandanavian^ impression.” Several aspects of the performance Vachel found haunting, but he especially was struck by the difference between literature as it is merely read and literature as it is performed: “I went to sleep over the book but the play is big. There is much that is stimulating in this man Ibsen. The rebels for mine^. They plough things up and under and show new Jewels from the subsoil.”

As a matter of fact, Ibsen and Barrymore gave Vachel temporary courage as he waged his own battles:

It is not the rebellion that is the essential thing, but the refreshment and stimulus of new impressions, the surprises that rebellion brings in its wake, the whimsical magic of its accidental combinations, the surprising organic life of new combinations. And here comes the one big thing I see in tonight’s^ story—the necessity^ for quarreling.

Quarrels bring insights, if they are absolutely frank, and divorced, from mere wind and passions. Let the soul quarrel when it must, let it state its case fearlessly. There is a passionate uplift that comes from looking the worst in the face. There is an eternity as deep as the eternity that comes with ecstasy[^] of love, and after the storm—what peace!

Ibsen seems to say Courage Courage Courage: Be honest, see, and understand. Let us go forth into the world, and be bold, and speak what we see.

If a man should go forth and look, and write absolutely what he thought of each passer by[^]? (“gathered information on Art”)

Five days later, on May 16, Vachel recopied a line that is first recorded in his Hiram notebooks: “God Help ‘us’ all to be brave” (see Chapter 8). The line would become the refrain of another future poem: the “Litany of the Heroes” (*Poetry* 435-441, with a first draft written in winter, 1907-08). And less than four years after the “Litany,” Vachel would apply the Ibsen experience to his own poems, proving to himself once and for all the dramatic difference between literature as it is performed versus literature as it is merely read. Now, however, we are ahead of the story.

The more Vachel meditated on Ibsen, the more he felt that he had found an answering voice. He grew introspective about the surface timidity of himself and others, how, in Vachel’s words, “we always omit from our conversations and writing the very things that we think.” He resolved to “dive deep [giving himself another image for the future] to find the central stream of ‘what we think indeed’. . . . This old world spends half its time loving and the other half quarreling. The quarreling always looked like a sin to me, an intrusive Demon, to be scrubbed and forgotten as much as possible. Ibsen seems to say that quarreling is essential, necessary[^] and sometimes beautiful, and as worthy of high idealism as Love is. Shall we reconcile ourselves to the noise in the world, and listen for revelations rather than stop our ears?” These considerations brought him energy to continue his own fight, and he went so far as to consider a story that could “be written on the Peddlers of New York, the Unlicensed Peddlers. The men striving to get music, plays, poems, pictures accepted who go the same old rounds, and get the same old refusals over and over. They are the beggars of the attics.” Where would one look for these “Unlicensed Peddlers”? Vachel’s answer is revealing: “On Saturday night they occupy the top rows of the second Balconies of the shows really worth while[^],” that is, shows like *A Doll’s House*. [Note 13]

In the end, Vachel put Ibsen’s rebellious ideas to practical use. In January, 1905, when he first returned to New York, he had consulted Robert Henri, who advised his former pupil “to study Beardsleys[^] faces and figures” (see the opening pages of this chapter). On May 16, after some five months’ frustration, Vachel concluded:

3 A.M.

The time has come to centralize. I have tried everything and done nothing since January first. If I draw—let it be from a point of view in regard to men—a point of view that will make Beardsleyism impossible. I will do nothing real till this Beardsley poison is out of me. I must let drawing alone untill[^] I am passionately possessed[^] to describe something I have seen in the street, describe it in line. I have too many points of view, too many openings. Let me take one and stick to it. Hammer away till something happens. (“gathered information on Art”)

He had new, old plans for his life struggle; that is, he resurrected an idea he first considered in Chicago. He would postpone his art studies in order to write free-lance articles for New York City newspapers. When he achieved success (hopefully in a few months), he would seek a permanent position as a journalist. To realize his goal, he would need to remain in New York for at least four more months. Papa consented, and extended his support, but that is a story for the next chapter.

Notes for Chapter Fifteen

[Note 1] Mme. Ernestine Schumann-Heink [née Tini Rössler] (1861-1936) played the role of Lina in the comic opera *Love's Lottery*, which opened at New York's Broadway Theatre on October 3, 1904. The *New York Times* reports that John H. Duffey sang the role of Jack Kite (October 4, 1904).

In 1904, Julia Marlowe (1866-1950) and E[dward] H[ugh] Sothern (1859-1933) began their distinguished performances of Shakespeare's plays. Their version of *Romeo and Juliet*, presented at New York's Knickerbocker Theatre, is reviewed in the *New York Times* (October 23, 1904). Marlowe and Sothern were married in 1911.

Perhaps another boarder was a young man named W.S. "Seymore" Dunbar. In a letter to his sister Olive and her husband Paul Wakefield, Vachel disclosed that, in his story "The Lady Poverty" (published in *The Outlook*, November 25, 1911), the heroine was based on Alice Cleaver and the hero on Dunbar, "a man I knew in New York. . . . They never met, but they're married, just the same. I hated to marry them—but I had to, to finish the story" (December 10, 1911, Ward). To mutual friend Witter Bynner, Vachel described Dunbar as a "print collector, Stogy Smoker and Universal Statesman" and later as the author of a four-volume set of books on travel (*A History of Travel in America*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1915): see Chénétier, pp. 42 and 53. For Alice Cleaver, see Chapter 12, Note 8. "The Lady Poverty" is online at: www.VachelLindsayHome.org Choose "Biography" and then "Essays & Stories."

[Note 2] In his "January 19, 1903" notebook, Vachel reported: "Feb^ 20 [1905]. Letter from Father Harvey of the Paulist Fathers, recommending^ a book of the Stonyhurst series—Natural Theology, by Father Boedder S.J. . . . An Interview a week later with Father Conway: the second of the evangelizing pair, about to close the meeting. He gave me the names of three men I might like to know, permanently located with the Fathers. The first was Rev. Henry O. Reef—Editor of Catholic papers, and a busy man. The second Guilbert^ Simmons, man of Leisure and the best read in New York among Priests. The third William Hughes. Absent at present, but apt to appear later on." Bernard Boedder (1841-1917) first published *Natural Theology* in 1891; the second edition (1902) is included in the Stonyhurst Philosophical Series.

[Note 3] George Mather Richards (1880-1958) was one of Vachel's lifelong friends and the first person other than the author himself to illustrate Vachel's poems for a commercial publication. Richards' work appears in Vachel's *Johnny Appleseed and Other Poems* (1928) and *Every Soul Is a Circus* (1929); Richards also designed the cover for *The Golden Book of Springfield* (1920). Two of Richards' early drawings inspired Vachel poems: "The Queen of Butterflies" and "The Mysterious Cat" (*Poetry* 32-33); and Vachel's *Art of the Moving Picture* is "DEDICATED TO GEORGE MATHER

RICHARDS IN MEMORY OF THE ART STUDENT DAYS WE SPENT TOGETHER WHEN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM WAS OUR PICTURE-DRAMA.”

Trombly interviewed several of Vachel’s New York friends, and Richards is the likely source of the following quote: “He [Vachel] was a most delightful friend of my early days in New York City. His force of character and thought singled him out from the majority. The first time that I met him, he had just risen from a nap taken near a window on the pane of which a snail was crawling. This had inspired him to make a drawing of the snail’s dream, and perhaps he wrote a poem about it as well” (36). (See “The Song of the Sturdy Snails,” *Poetry* 73-74.)

In later years, Vachel was fond of recalling his New York years with Richards. To Nellie Vieira, for example, he wrote: “Richards was my roommate awhile, our fortunes were joined most of the time we were in New York. Richards was cold and Sleek^ and Blinking^ and panther-like. He looks like the Prince Regent of China. Not that he looks like a Chinaman. The Chinaman looks like a New Englander. Richards comes of a line of scholars and educators. In mental equipment he left Williams college an exquisite pedant, head of his class and gentle critic of all things literary, and a learned writer of good verse-form” (November 17, 1909: Fowler 293). To Sara Teasdale, Vachel wrote: “George M. Richards was my hearts^ best brother for my four years [1905-08] of up and down in New York and I would most weep to see him” (December 18, 1913, Yale 13). On July 9, 1921, Vachel advised Christopher Morley: “Richards and I began together, as men of letters and artists, correcting each others^ poems and pictures, writing poems for pictures and pictures for poems. He is essentially a New England man of letters of the oldest tradition and the highest grade, leaving Williams College with all the literary honors that Williams ever gives a youngster” (unpublished letter, Haverford College).

For further Vachel memories of and praise for Richards, see Melcher, p. 47; Chénétier, pp. 70, 166, 401; and *The Poetry of Vachel Lindsay*, pp. 940, 966. Richards’ memoir, “Lindsay in Bohemia,” is listed in “Works Cited.”

Finally, Vachel’s poem, “Some Balloons Grow on Trees” (*Poetry* 484-485), was written for Richards’ daughter, Elisabet “Betsy.” Elisabet Richards married John Harter, and their son, William G. Harter, has discovered a substantial collection of unpublished Richards’ work at the family home in Rocky River, Ohio (July 2010). One work, a painting of Betsy as a child, is beautifully preserved.

[Note 4] Vachel refers to W.C. Sawyer, *Teutonic Legends in The Nibelungen Lied and The Nibelungen Ring*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1904 (available online at Google Books). Additional references are to English poet and novelist Richard Le Gallienne (1866-1947), whose early work reflects the fin de siècle aesthetes; Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), a journalist and novelist whose major works reflect his last 14 years as a teacher in Japan; Stephen Phillips (1868-1915), English poet and playwright; and Thomas Bird Mosher (1852-1923), publisher of the “Mosher Books” (cheap editions of literary works largely unknown in the United States). The semi-monthly periodical known as *The Chap Book* (1894-98) was one of the first of the “little magazines.” *The Chap Book* published works of American authors Henry James, Hamlin Garland, and Bliss Carman, as well as European authors H.G. Wells, Max Beerbohm, Robert Louis Stevenson, William Ernest Henley, and William Butler Yeats.

On June 1, 1913, Vachel advised fellow poet, Californian George Sterling (1869-1926): “Do not speak disrespectfully of the Wine of Wizardry. I w[e]ll remember when it

came out how I and my room mate[^] Richards (in New York) gulped it down” (Chénétier 70). Arguably Sterling’s best-known poem, “A Wine of Wizardry” was first published in *Cosmopolitan* (1907) and then collected in *A Wine of Wizardry and Other Poems* (1909).

Art teacher Edward Penfield (1866-1925) is recognized as an early proponent of the Art Nouveau style.

[Note 5] This is one of Vachel’s earliest references to drawings that he named “The Fashionplates from Fairyland.” Even in the mid-1920s, he cited these twenty or so “Fashionplates” (drawings of elaborately gowned young women) as his best artistic work: see *Poetry of Vachel Lindsay*, p. 831. For late examples, see *Poetry*, pp. 2 and 55. The plates may well have been Vachel’s reaction to his parents’ distress when their imprudent son brought home drawings of nude Chicago models. The deferential son’s impassioned response, we noted, was insistence that his “specialty” was drawing heavily draped figures (see Chapter 12, pp. 8-9).

In his “gathered information on Art” notebook, Vachel pasted a brief clipping advertising the melodrama *Hearts Adrift*, which was performed on Monday night, March 13, 1905. Following the clipping, Vachel recorded his somewhat ironic observations: “This was a great evening. The crudity, the human appeal of the illogical melodrama was plainly exhibited. The people got their money’s worth. Pistols, detectives, one flying machine, two orphans, two villains[^] and one villainess[^], and after many trials of the soul and body, the heroine defending herself with a chair at one time, another time electrocuted, another time tempted insiduously[^]: she is at last heriss[^] to a mansion on the Hudson. And in the programme of from Rags to Riches [the theater’s next melodramatic offering], the mansion on the Hudson figures again in the last act. This is the last touch of glory, the millenium[^]—the Mansion on the Hudson.”

[Note 6] Vachel listed the following address in his notebook dated “September 28, 1906”: “Louis W. Goerck, 925 Sixth Ave.” Extant copies of “We Who Are Playing” and “The Cup of Paint” reveal that the same border highlighted each drawing, but the latter is reversed. To disguise the error, Vachel cut out the prints of the cups themselves and pasted them onto colored construction paper, although a small part of the border is still visible. The few copies that I am aware of have been signed and numbered. (Vachel may have complained about the publishing error and received little or no satisfaction. In the second of his three notebooks kept during his 1906 tramp, there is a brief reference to “the nervous skill of Goerck, the high-tempered printer.”)

On June 17, 1906, in one of many meditations on the nature of his art, Vachel wrote: “I must put more order into the designs, more Greek order, and I must reject even the borders, that do not carry some weight of significance. It is well enough for other men’s designs to be meaningless, but mine must be the servants of thought, of the thinking imagination. If the verses have borders, they should signify the verse-meaning” (from the “January 19, 1903” notebook).

[Note 7] In his *Theodore Roosevelt: The Citizen* (1904), Jacob A. Riis relates that, in 1881, when Roosevelt was nominated for the New York State Legislature, “Joe” Murray, the Republican “boss,” took the young candidate around to the saloons one night “to meet ‘the people.’” However, Riis continues, one night was enough for Roosevelt: “He did not like that way of making votes” (51-52). At about this time, Vachel also read Upton Sinclair’s *The Journal of Arthur Sterling* (1903), a novel that depicts a young poet’s

unsuccessful struggles to find a publisher. The discouraged Sterling finally commits suicide. See Melcher, pp. 51-53.

[Note 8] Fowler (231) notes that Altgeld's words are quoted "with some minor variations" and taken from a Springfield speech Altgeld delivered to the Democratic State Convention on July 12, 1878. The speech is entitled, "How the State Is Being Plundered by Republican Administration," and is published in John P. Altgeld, *Live Questions*, Part 2 (Chicago, 1899), p. 826. Available online at: www.archive.org

[Note 9] Vachel met [John] Gutzon [de la Mothe] Borglum (1871-1941) through their mutual friend Jack Jones. On January 5, 1905, Vachel wrote "Papa and Mama": "Jack has made friends with Borgulum^, the sculptor who made the Cowboy pieces for the World's Fair. Borgulum^ is intensely American in his spirit, and won some notable medals. Jack is a proud fellow about the friends he picks up. He always lands people who are doing things." When he missed Borglum at his studio, Vachel advised "Papa": "I visited Bogulum's^ studio not long ago. He was not in, but it was an event in history to behold his sculptures. I was never so stirred by anything plastic" (April 7). Finally, on May 17, 1905, Vachel reported, again to "Papa": "Borgulum^ called on us for about an hour the other night, and gave us fatherly counsel and advice. So we are not without an outlook and a hope." Borglum is best remembered for his gigantic Mount Rushmore and Stone Mountain memorials, and for his bust of Lincoln in the Washington Capitol rotunda.

[Note 10] Mrs. Wheeler wrote Vachel at least one more time. Vachel reported to "Papa": "I had a very very kind letter from Mrs. Wheeler, from Akron, Monday [May 15]" (May 17, 1905).

[Note 11] On May 1, 1905, Vachel echoed his criticism of "We Who Are Playing" in a letter to Susan Wilcox: "I have forwarded several copies of 'We Who Are Playing' to Mama, and if you feel that you would like to give one to any of your friends, ask her for it. They are for any one who really likes them. I am going to have another edition struck off pretty soon. . . . The picture may not be an ideal illustration, but it is the best grotesque I ever did, and illustrates the first verse in a fashion. I am going to get out more of this sort of thing, from time to time" (Chénétier 6).

[Note 12] See *The Poetry of Vachel Lindsay*, pp. 310-313, 440, 869-870. Vachel's "gathered information on Art" notebook contains an afterthought on the projected poem concerning the buffaloes-versus-Chicago apocalypse:

Poem—on the Charge of the buffaloes—describing it only by a series of swinging metaphors—like—

The Song was the Sorrow of Sorrows—

Or the Pitiful Hope of Despair—The Cry of a Warrior falling—

A prayer and a Curse and a prayer—

Or a soul going down through the darkness and calling.

Or the laughter of Night in his lair.

On August 11, 1914, Vachel advised his family (unpublished letter—Blair): "I have been writing a poem about Indians Buffaloes—the Prairie Fire, and the Pioneers. I call it the Red Gods. . . . It is Congo-Size^ I hope—based on an idea I have had since about 1905 in

New York. That line in the Lincoln poem is the basis: ‘Born where the Ghosts of the Buffaloes still gleam’” (l. 189, “Litany of the Heroes,” *Poetry* 440). Two weeks later, Vachel sent a draft of the poem to Harriet Monroe: “I am very anxious to make the Red Gods a success. It is an idea I have had for years and years” (Ch  netier 105). Subsequently, Vachel changed the title to “The Ghosts of the Buffaloes.”

[Note 13] On April 8, 1905, Vachel reported to “Mama”: “I am economizing more than I ever did before. My room and board is eight dollars and a half a week. My laundry fifty cents. That leaves a dollar for incidentals, and I think I have kept pretty close to that dollar. I havn’t^ gone to the theatre more than two dollar’s worth since I have been here, and that is my only extravagance ever.” In a late essay, “The New John L. Sullivan” (February 1926), Vachel claims to have seen James J. “Gentleman Jim” Corbet starring in George Bernard Shaw’s *Cashel Byron’s Profession* sometime in 1905 (Virginia). The *Admirable Bashville* (1903), a stage adaptation of Shaw’s early novel, *Cashel Byron’s Profession*, played at New York’s Majestic Theatre in 1905. Cashel Byron’s profession was the same as Gentleman Jim’s: boxing.

