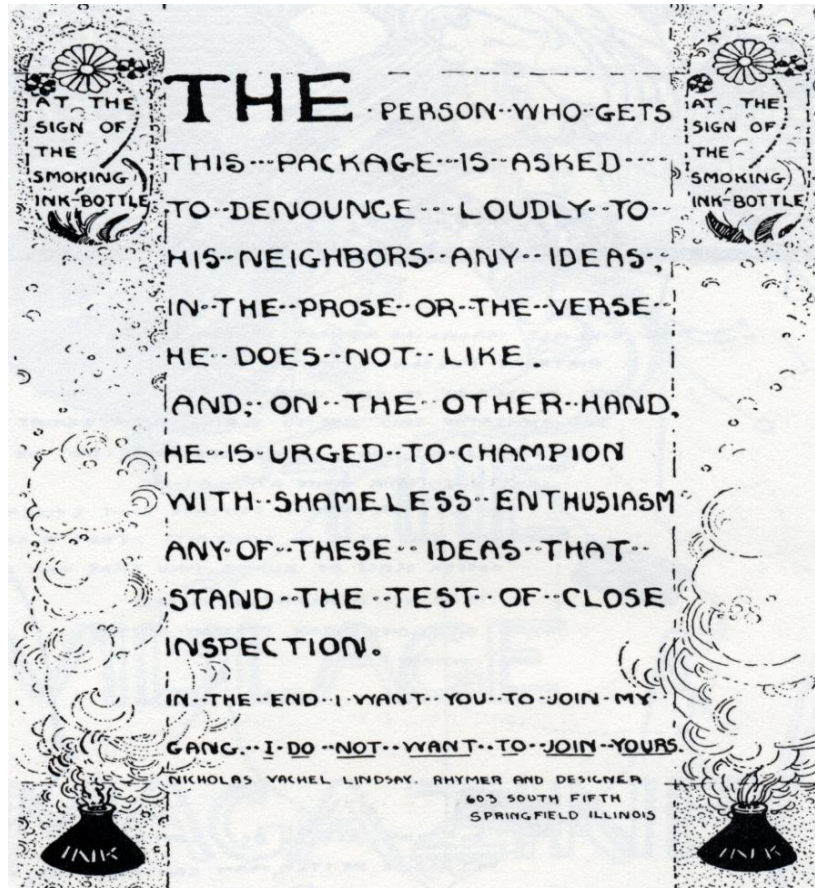


# Uncle Boy

## A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

### Chapter Twenty-Five



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

by

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[This ongoing biography may be read online at [www.VachellLindsayHome.org](http://www.VachellLindsayHome.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. Please report any errors to VachellLindsay, our account name at Gmail.]

## 25. On the Road Again (1912)

“I have another line of aspiration always tugging at me . . .”

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Vachel Lindsay’s third and final tramp is one of the more ironic efforts of his life. With great passion, he had pleaded with art students: “If you have any cherished beauty-enterprise, undertake it where you are. You will find no better place in all America” (*Prose* 151). The plea, as we saw in the last chapter, had won the approbation of Hamlin Garland: “First of all, the preachment of this self-confessed art evangelist in Springfield was in harmony with what I had been proclaiming for several years, namely that it was the duty of the American artist and writer to use American material, but young Lindsay had gone beyond me in a passionate plea to the artist and author to remain in the place of their birth and lend the best of their brain and the skill of their hands to the task of making the home town beautiful” (*Companions* 462). Moreover, on 19 February 1912, Vachel declared to C. T. Paul, professor of languages during Vachel’s final year at Hiram: “I am haunted always by a vision of a splendid America - especially Splendid cities and Villages – palaces - for the people - temples reeking with incense and musk ruled by a real priesthood of the people - and Parks heavy with lotus flowers and cross roads shining with palaces of the people golden as the corn. I have faith that America will come to her ripeness - in a hundred or a thousand years in such form as this. . . . I would like to look at my home town so hard I could reasonably build up a picture of this future world from it—as a geologist builds up an extinct animal from the leg bones and the spine” (Virginia: see Chénétier 56-57).

In this same letter, however, the author admits to several conflicts and contradictions: “I have many miscellaneous notes – and many of them lead in quite contrary directions to this. But I see this general picture before me – and may say that I hope directly or indirectly to put it into some sort of literary form.” And the one obvious conflict is expressed by Vachel himself: “I have another line of aspiration always tugging at me – the desire to go on the road – the thing that haunted Tolstoi to the end – a desire so acetic^ it seems to contradict entirely this dream of a gilded civilization. They may contradict. I only say that both these dreams are in me. I do not know what the practical reconciliation will be. I sometime think I will take a two years begging tour through the west and use up the mendicant in me – thereafter settle down here to writing – and use up the Utopian.” (With the advantage of hindsight, we know that it will not take “two years” to use up the mendicant: more like six months, with a significant Colorado camping interruption).

Professor Paul’s letter also reveals yet another reason Uncle Boy was thinking about leaving town. In the last chapter, we noted that Hamlin Garland likely walked in on a Lindsay family confrontation (see p. 19), and Garland assumed that the confrontation had to do with Vachel’s dedication to poetry rather than to some kind of day labor. In his letter to Professor Paul, however, Vachel admitted that “about a year and a half ago I definitely set aside Religion^ as a main consideration since the most valued results seemed to bring only the hatred of my friends and the wrath of my family.” He included “old War Bulletin no 3” with the letter (see Chapter 22, p. 16), and “crossed out what does not appeal to me today. I cross out the Disciples

merely because they also stand for hate – and I breathe freer without them. A plague on both your houses.” With Dr. Lindsay serving as an elder in Springfield’s First Christian Church (Disciples) and with Kate Lindsay active in several Disciple missionary societies, day-to-day living in the Lindsay home could not have been very peaceful. “Now, since if Religion<sup>^</sup> should lead to anything,” Vachel avers, “it should lead to Peace, - I decided to cling to the Peace and quit either expressing my mind on the subject or thinking about it seriously. . . . For all this I substituted the John Keats point of view pretty largely and for a long time remained just there – and produced *The Village Magazine*. . . .”

“There is something of the Religious<sup>^</sup>-novelist in me you might say,” Professor Paul’s correspondent continued, “or Dramatist or Actor – if you want to put it that way. I can read of a faith and crawl into the skin of the believer and (I fancy – I may be mistaken) get all out of it he got out of it. If one can act all the parts in a book of plays – what part shall he finally act? What is the real man? I am too sensitive to every faith. If allowed to go my own way in peace – without hate – I might in the end find my soul – but I see no particular benefit in going down an alley of swords. Whenever I see Hate in the way – I go no further. Then it’s back to John Keats and the Grecian Urn again” [“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”].

In concluding this long, important letter to Professor Paul, Vachel relates “The Heroes of Time” poem with *War Bulletin Number Three*: “The only difference was no man is supposed to speak what he really feels in poetry. And then in *The Heroes of Time* I have somewhat diluted my own ideas with those of other folk. In the *War Bulletin* I put them down straight – though too much abbreviated to be plain to the hasty reader I suppose.” Once again, though, the writer stresses the evolutionary nature of his thinking: “It [*War Bulletin Three*] gives a pretty good all round picture of what I thought most important at that time – for me to say to my friends. This letter today is more what I am thinking about at present. The difference is mainly one of accent” (Virginia: see Chénétier 55-57).

And this concludes *Uncle Boy*. Vachel ran away from his problems by heading West. His biographer has followed in his footsteps.....