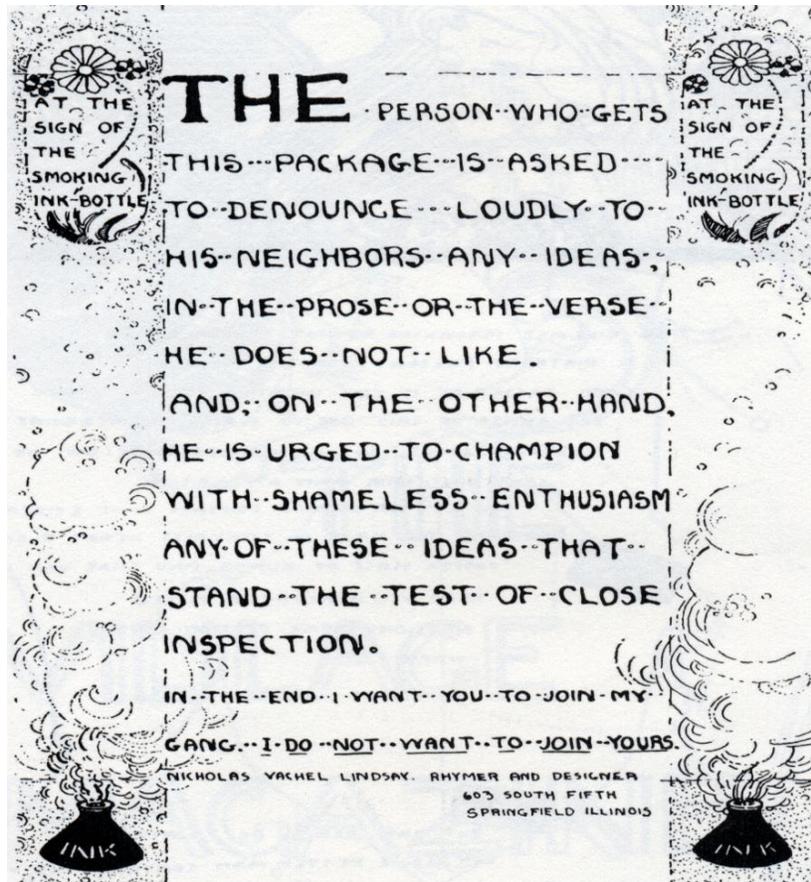


Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Five

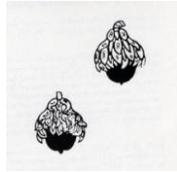


[Vachel's insert introducing his self-published *Village Magazine* (1910)]

by

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[This ongoing biography may be read online at www.VachelLindsayHome.org
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5. High School [c. 1893-1897]

“I also have my share of the human curse”

1

A week or so after his son’s graduation from ward school (June 1893), Dr. Lindsay and his two older children boarded a train for Chicago, where they spent several days at the great World’s Columbian Exposition. Kate Lindsay had been the family’s advance scout, so to speak, in that she had already visited the Exposition (June 5 to June 14). Kate’s letters disclose that she was especially attracted to an exhibit devoted to the achievements and rights of women; and, in fact, she returned a second time, with her mother, during September-October (Ward). “Tuesday morning June 27, 1893,” Vachel scribbled into a new notebook-diary: “I started on a trip to Chicago and the World’s Fair. Started for the depo^ at 6:30 o’clock.” For fifty cents admission, the Lindsays joined 12 million other Americans in celebrating the 400th anniversary of the “discovery” of their continent. They learned that the spirit of exploration was alive and well in their own era, although the exciting discoveries were in technology, not in geography.

Few disagreed that the Columbian Exposition was the most impressive event of its kind ever to be attempted in the United States. Daniel Hudson Burnham was “Chief of Construction.” His partner, John Wellborn Root, brother-in-law to poet Harriet Monroe, was “Consulting Architect” (Monroe 109). (Unfortunately, Root died in 1891, at age 41, before the Exposition opened.) Located in Chicago’s Jackson Park and nearby areas, the Exposition’s gardenized layout was spread over more than 700 acres. It was five times larger than the Paris Exposition of 1889, and sociologist Charles Zueblin’s enthusiastic appraisal is typical of contemporary accounts: “For the first time in American history a complete city, equipped with all the public utilities caring for a temporary population of thousands, was built as a unit on a single architectural scale. Unique in being an epitome of what we had done and a prophecy of what we could do if content with nothing but the best . . . it was a miniature of an ideal city; a symbol of regeneration” (as quoted by Smith 203).

At least ten large buildings dominated the site, each representative of classical architecture, each with a uniform cornice height of 60 feet. The new city was commonly referred to as “The White City” (and when the buildings could not be sold after the event, they were naturally called “white elephants”). [Note 1] Major buildings were dedicated in whole or in part to manufactures, machinery, electricity, mines and mining, agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, and transportation. The entrance to the latter was through Louis Sullivan’s great golden arch, “probably the architectural detail most admired by the general public” (Kobbé 163). The most admired building, however, was dedicated to the liberal arts: Chicagoans boasted that, as the world’s largest structure, it could seat 300,000 people. To accentuate further the Fair’s emphasis on aesthetics, a

compliments of the Allis engine, with its dynamo and alternating-current generator designed by George Westinghouse. At night, “The White City” glistened under 5000 arc-lights. Although the same basic Westinghouse system would soon light most American cities, Chicago was where millions of Americans witnessed extensive outdoor electrical lighting for the first time in their lives. They also witnessed a new wonder of the entertainment industry. Daniel Burnham asked for a spectacle to rival the Paris Exposition’s Eiffel Tower, and George W.G. Ferris of Galesburg, Illinois (Carl Sandburg’s hometown) produced a massive iron wheel that revolved 264 feet above the ground, with 36 cars, each capable of carrying 40 persons. There is no evidence that young Vachel rode on the Ferris Wheel, but he did write in his notebook: “I came to Chicago and was sick at stummick^ all day.”

Using Vachel’s notebook, Edgar Lee Masters summarizes the family’s general itinerary (46-47), although what exactly was observed will never be known. Vachel did visit the Fisheries building, and he saw George Washington’s desk in the Kentucky building. He had a chance to witness, among thousands of other exhibits, Miles Standish’s pipe, the University of Chicago’s new Yerkes telescope, needlework by Queen Victoria, and an astonishing long-distance telephone line that enabled Fair visitors to talk to people in faraway New York City. The Bethlehem steam-hammer represented the technology of peace, while the huge Krupp guns exemplified its counterpart (Smith 211-213). With the Exposition’s emphasis on aesthetics, however, it is appropriate that a budding poet started his visit with the arts. “The first day at the fair,” Vachel observed in his notebook, “we first went to [the] Puck Building in which lithographing and printing was going on. They first made the black lines and then added each color seperately^. It was very interesting. The walls were covered with lithographs that look like water-colors some of which were very fine.”

He moved on to what he called the “hortocultural^ building” and, as Masters discloses, “made the rounds of all the buildings.” But when Masters remarks on the omission of any notebook entries concerning the Arts Palace and the exhibiting artists, Olive wrote in the margin of her copy of the biography: “Saw more of these than any other” (47). Years later, Vachel highlighted another of his experiences for Harriet Monroe, informing her that “The Congo” reflected “the Dahomey-dancers at the World’s Fair” (Chénétier 88): “The whole piece is elaborately syncopated, and imitates Dahomey War-Drums” (90). Five years before, we may recall, a little boy had begged Santa for a drum, a really big drum.

Although the exhibits were many and varied, Exposition commentators normally focused their essays and reviews on the overall beauty of the buildings and grounds. Gustave Kobbé, for example, writing in September 1893, claims that “landscape-gardening and architecture” were the most important accomplishments of the entire Exposition: “If there were not a picture, nor a yard of textiles, nor a ton of machinery, inside the buildings, these themselves, and their disposition about the grounds, would preach most eloquently the gospel of beauty” (160). Interestingly, in later years, Vachel himself “would preach most eloquently the gospel of beauty,” and Kobbé in fact, anticipates several of adult Lindsay’s recollections concerning his boyhood experience. Kobbé’s conclusion, for example, reads: “I have seen many descriptions of the World’s Fair, but none has quite expressed what seems to me its most valuable characteristic.

That is neither its size nor its magnificence, but its gracious beauty and engaging loveliness, which linger in the memory like the remembrance of a pleasant dream. We Americans are apt to boast of the bigness of various things American; but here we have something as beautiful as it is big—nay, more beautiful. So let us for once overlook its size and let the world know that we have something that is simply beautiful” (166).

With hindsight, it is nearly impossible to overestimate the effect of the Columbian Exposition on Vachel’s creative work. One critic, Francis Hackett, attempted to summarize this influence in 1916, although Hackett himself was not impressed: “. . . it is an expensive orgy when one thinks of the ‘shining universal church,’ the ‘angel-song,’ the world of moral Dutch Cleanser and spiritual Sapolio [common bar soap], in which the poet richly rejoices. His idea of ‘a land transfigured’ is a dreadful one. It is a sort of perpetual World’s Fair and Christmas card and Sunday School picnic rolled into one. Sacred capitals, clean temples, millions of boats paddled by angels with silver oars on a festive lagoon, ‘and silken pennants that the sun shines through’—his heart bounds with zeal at this vision. ‘Sages and sibyls now, and athletes clean, Rulers of empires, and of forests green!’—these throng his paradise. And he thinks happily of ‘halls with statues in white stone to saints unborn to-day.’ ‘Creed upon creed, cult upon cult,’ ‘shrine after shrine’—he craves incense, ritual, censers; he has an enormous appetite for communal buildings gleaming in a communal sun. This is a side of his inspiration which leaves the present writer cold” (6).

Some years later (1922), Stephen Graham reports that Vachel Lindsay believes Springfield should be painted white, “like the Chicago World’s Fair.” Graham also quotes his friend’s reasoned explanation: “White harmonises all sizes and shapes of houses and all types of architectural design. And it has an effect on the mind. It suggests the ideal. If the city were all painted white, then people would try to live up to its appearance. Then also it would stand out among all cities of America. The very fact of its painting itself white would go into every newspaper in the United States, it would be known in all English-speaking lands and would direct world-attention to the shrine of Abraham Lincoln. . . .” Englishman Graham, who was blessed with a healthy dose of the practical, adds: “He’d find valuable allies in the paint merchants and painters of Springfield anyway” (204-205).

In addition to the images of civic beauty, the Exposition had a second, albeit long-range effect on Vachel’s work. Just days after Dr. Lindsay and his children returned to Springfield, Frederick Jackson Turner addressed the World’s Fair history congress (July 12, 1893). Then a young professor at the University of Wisconsin, Turner read a paper entitled, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Turner argued that enough scholarly appraisals had been accomplished concerning the Atlantic coast. It was time to focus attention on the West: “The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West. . . . What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bonds of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe remotely.”

Shortly after Turner’s stimulating lecture, the fledgling American Historical Society (founded in 1884 and dominated by East-coast scholars) was nicknamed the “Turner-verein” [Turner-society], in an ironic attempt to express Turner’s influence. The

grass-roots cult of the West, with its emphasis on “the significance of the frontier,” was under way; and it would soon have the voice of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay as one of its loudest proponents. “The West-Going Heart,” Eleanor Ruggles entitles her biography, quoting from Vachel’s 1921 date book and also alluding to his poem, “The Ghosts of the Buffaloes” (l. 86). Indeed, by 1896, with William Jennings Bryan in the lead, Vachel and his fellow Turnerites were going West with a vengeance, as the poet himself noted, some 20 or more years after the fact:

They leaped the Mississippi, blue border of the West,
From the Gulf to Canada, two thousand miles long:—
Against the towns of Tubal Cain,
Ah,—sharp was their song.
Against the ways of Tubal Cain, too cunning for the young,
The longhorn calf, the buffalo and wampus gave tongue.

(“Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan,” *Poetry* 344) [Note 2]

Bryan lost the election in 1896, but Vachel’s regional values never changed, even in the very heart of the roaring 20s (see “The Jazz Age,” *Poetry* 770-771). He was a self-proclaimed Southerner who harbored dreams of Western cities, replete with white communal buildings gleaming beneath a bright communal sun.

2

September 1893, Vachel entered Springfield High School and also entered, he informed Richard Watson Gilder in 1908, “what I might call the Hot House period of my life.” This era, he explained, covered seven years, commencing with a high-school passion for Edgar Allan Poe and climaxing with an art-school passion for Algernon Charles Swinburne: “I do not remember any passions in my private life to compare with them, and in a public way nothing so vast has entered my blood, except the hunger for praise. That is, nothing in the domain of unreason.” In the so-called “domain of unreason,” however, the clear winner in Vachel’s mind was his high-school favorite: Edgar Allan Poe. He related his enthusiasm on many occasions, but perhaps no more clearly than in his letter to Gilder: “My first love among the Poets was Edgar Poe—when I first entered High School. I could have been called a Poe-crank for my whole High School period. Thinking it all over now, without the book of poems in my hand, in a most matter-of-fact mood—I can say that *Ulalume* is one of the great works of art to me, and no other work of his has the same staying power—I know of nothing in the catalogue of beautiful things for which I have more respect” (November 6, 1908, Chénetier 29-30). In retrospect, this “Poe-crank” wanted not only to paint Springfield white: he also wanted to make the city of his discontent “like the point of light and magic in a picture by Rembrandt or Durer[^] or a story by Poe” (Chénetier 215). [Note 3]

The attraction to Poe’s particular mystique constitutes an important key for understanding Vachel’s own early poems and prose. He identified with his hero’s struggles and admired the fact that ostracism and suffering had not thwarted the power to create something new, something entirely one’s own: “Another stung creature—who knew not Peace. But Edgar had the Yeast-Phosporus-Radium[^] in him—to produce the eminently original thing, the new Creation—and I envy him above all other mortals when

I think about writing. It is just as natural for me to want to write as new unexpected and vital a surprise as Poe wrote—as it is for some young men to want as good an Automobile as their neighbors. It is a carnal passion with me to want to carve a jewel like Ulalume or Ligeia. I will never escape him.” That the summer experience beneath the 5000 arc-lights of the Columbian Exposition had left its impression is apparent in Vachel’s conclusion: “It seems to me aesthetically—that electrical power of his is more needed in America than any other. When I write my book on Utopia—every Artist shall be a half brother to Poe. . .” (February 18, 1912, Chénétier 52).

Vachel finally depicted his high-school passion as “The Wizard in the Street,” the man in the gutter “holy folk have hurried by in scorn.” The author himself, meanwhile, is portrayed as one of the “half-grown boys” who is captured by the “artificial glitter” of Poe’s eyes, captured, that is, to the point of identifying with the salutary-but-neglected “Wizard”:

Useful are you. There stands the useless one,
Who builds the Haunted Palace in the sun.
Good tailors, can you dress a doll for me
With silks that whisper of the sounding sea?
One moment, citizens, the weary tramp
Unveileth Psyche with the agate lamp. (*Poetry* 93-94)

If he were to write stories, Vachel announced to Gilder in 1908, “I would like to write Ligeia, Elenora, The Masque of the Red Death, The Fall of the House of Usher, The Manuscript Found in a Bottle. Of them all—I have reread Ligeia, and the Red Death till I spend years trying to forget them, that I may read them afresh. I have a pretty good forgetter, but these two I have reread to an extent that was really outrageous” (Chénétier 30). Indeed, in his junior year in high school, Vachel was writing stories in imitation of Poe. He also was collecting his first rejection slips, but now we are getting ahead of the story.

In September 1893, until summer, 1897, Springfield’s one high school stood at “4th street where it crosses the Illinois Central,” Vachel reported to a new generation of students in 1921: “For four years we recited to the clang of steam-locomotives” (“Text of Recital”). The school was some 12 blocks north of the family residence, and during his freshman year, Vachel made the walk without sister Olive, who had begun high school the year before. Olive herself explains: “having the idea that we should go to a coeducational college together for the sake of companionship, our mother kept me out of high school for one year, ostensibly to learn to cook and keep house—but really to allow Vachel to catch up with me. So, beginning with our sophomore year, we were in the same class through the remaining years of Springfield High School and the first three years of Hiram College” (Lindsay-Wakefield 85). Vachel’s freshman year seems to have passed uneventfully: at least there is little reference to his efforts in existing documentation. His grades were equally uneventful, as he maintained an overall average of 81.7, the equivalent of a low “B.” Specifically, he was forced to drop Latin, due to low grades (a 50 during his last marking period); but he received 91.4 in English, 82.6 in History, 81.5 in Algebra, and 86 in Deportment. Since he was absent only a single half-day, his health obviously remained sound. The noteworthy aspect of the year, in fact, was neither health nor academics. What the Lindsay family remembered from their son’s freshman year of

high school amounted to yet another “gosh awful” story for what had become a veritable repertoire. Stephen Graham summarizes Vachel’s own version of the incident:

Many years ago one of the Springfield newspapers offered a prize to the reader who would send in the best answer to the question: What would you do with a million dollars? Young Vachel sent in an answer. His was: “I would change them to dimes and have them thrown into the State House yard and any one who wanted them could come and take as much as he liked.” The answer was printed in the paper with a lot of others and gave considerable offence[^]. The telephone was kept busy that morning by those who thought fit to tell his father and mother that they ought to look after him better and not let him make a fool of himself. (127) [Note 4]

Vachel, of course, did not win his prize, but Graham’s account manifests his friend’s characteristic inclination in later years to exaggerate public reactions to his youthful eccentricities. Actually, his family and friends found the suggestion memorable, delightful if not agreeable, and, above all, typical: there is no evidence that anyone took “considerable” offense. On the other hand, the story suggests that the moderately-well-to-do Lindsays were among the earliest subscribers to Springfield’s fledgling telephone exchange. For the record, the number on the dial was 167, a telephone number that, in itself, evidences a limited number of customers.

About this same time, that is during Vachel’s 13th year, Dr. Lindsay’s income afforded a large addition to the family home: an impressive new kitchen, a new washroom by the back door, and three new bedrooms and a washroom upstairs. The Lindsay son moved into a small bedroom at the top right of a new, golden-oak, central staircase, a bedroom in which he would write much of his prose and poetry. His small, homemade table stood before a window that overlooks the Illinois governor’s mansion and the surrounding grounds. His 8th-grade, wood-shop project, an oak bookcase, stood (and in 2011 still stands) beside the table: “The room where I write to you,” Vachel informed Harriet Moody (December 2, 1914), “I have inhabited since my thirteenth year. It holds an awkward bookcase I myself made in that year, and in it are some books that date from before then. . . . My room is always rather grubby and mussy, for I take care of it myself mainly. The view out the window is pleasant. I can look out over the Governor’s yard. . . . You have no idea how much of me this room shuts in—you who have only seen me on the stage as it were—acting (sincerely enough), speaking lines I myself have written here—yet even the writing self seems extraneous sometimes, as tonight in the midst of the past” (Dunbar 114-115). To Sara Teasdale, Vachel asserted over and over again that his room was his refuge, his one place where he could be utterly and truthfully himself.

3

When Vachel returned to school in the fall, 1894, his principal teacher was Wellesley College graduate, Susan Wilcox, then but 25 years old. Miss Wilcox, as she was known in Springfield for nearly 50 years, summarizes her initial impressions of her new student in a eulogy written in 1932, just after his death. She describes him as a “tow-headed pupil” with “honest gray eyes” and an “extraordinary forehead. How those beetling prominences over the eyebrows contradict the lack of color in his whole person!” She professed to wonder that his mother dressed him in gray, since he already

lacked color. The tow-headed pupil, though, proved to be an excellent student in English. He was far ahead of his classmates in the maturity of his reading material, and Wilcox singles out Carlyle's *French Revolution* as an example: "he would make little visits to my desk to share his enthusiasm with me." While discussing Vachel's reading on another occasion (1938), however, Wilcox also provided a few words of caution: "he never seemed particularly unusual to me and biographers have greatly exaggerated what I term normal characteristics of the youth" (Curry 7).

In this era preceding specialization, Wilcox taught botany as well as English, and, in regard to the latter, she recalls: "[Vachel's] plates were so beautifully done that they drew high grades regardless of the explanations that accompanied them. Just after he was out of college he referred to his pleasure in botany and added mischievously, 'You might have made a scientist out of me.' 'Not in a thousand years,' I rejoined. 'You know that you owe your success in that course to the fact that the teacher liked pictures and was not a scientist'" (123). She apparently forgot or neglected to mention that Vachel's "explanations" were also distinctive. On the "Dandelion," he observed: "where the plant flourishes best is in a well-kept lawn. The lawn mower, which checks the shepherd's purse, serves only to stimulate the dandelion into redoubled blooming." On another assignment, he mused: "Considering the purpose for which it was made, a bean is as perfect a thing as is to be found in creation. The great works of man are often complex. The bean is simplicity in itself" (Virginia).

Vachel's distinctive spirit and sense of humor blossomed in his sophomore English classes as well. In the spring semester of his sophomore year, Wilcox assigned the poetry of James Russell Lowell, and several of Vachel's academic efforts are on record. He began on a high note—with a story entitled "The Vision of Sir Launfal" (April 1, 1895), a story based on the search-for-the-Holy-Grail theme in Lowell's poem of almost the same name (the title is "The Vision of Sir Launfal"). Four days after the story, Vachel submitted an essay on the "Holy Grail," and this time he was not so accepting of Lowell. Wilcox herself recounts her student's main point: "He took particular exception to the passage beginning 'The Holy Supper is kept indeed,' insisting that this was not what the church meant by the sacrament; then he expounded it as taught by the Christian Church" (123). In any case, Lowell's poem clearly left a lasting impression on the tow-headed pupil, since variations on quest and vision themes play an important role both in his early prose and in his early poetry. Other Lowell poems, though, had less positive effect. A second Vachel essay that is critical of Lowell—"The Story of the Poem" (April 17, 1895)—bears Wilcox's acid comment: "It is barely possible that there may be some other criterion by which Lowell's works may be judged beside a school boy's immature taste" (Virginia).

This particular schoolboy's rebellious spirit and sense of humor, however, were not to be deterred. For his final examination, he was required to write on the subject of "Lowell as a Patriot." About "two months" after the fact, he explained his perspective in a letter to his Aunt Fannie: "More from perversity than anything else I ridiculed patriotism with pages of inconsistencies, and finally said that Lowell may have possessed^ patriotism along with other animal inclinations, but I declined to discuss so lofty a character upon so low a theme. My English teacher declined to mark it and made me rewrite it. I wrote another, and I crammed it so full of patriotic hog-wash that if my

teacher says ‘patriotism’ to me for a year I’ll miss my guess” (fragment, c. June 15, 1895, Blair).

Vachel’s original essay begins with an expression of disgust at having to do the assignment in the first place: “Conceive my indignation when I discovered that I was to discuss this great broad-minded man as a patriot! Patriotism is a thing of tinsel and pasteboard.” True patriotism, he goes on to argue, is love for one’s fellow man, and he suggests that it is natural but unfortunate when this honest emotion is distorted by excessive partisanship for the area of one’s birth. Men should not be praised for what they cannot help but feel: “It is as natural as life itself for an organism to prefer its own element to any other. . . . Polar bears are not lauded to the skies because they do not prefer to live in the tropics. An oyster is as great a patriot in his way as ever man was, for ‘Breathes there an oyster with soul so dead’ that he does not prefer salt water to tree-life?” (Virginia). Miss Wilcox was not amused and refused to grade the paper, forcing Vachel to rewrite, just as he reported to Aunt Fannie.

The following August, away from teachers and schools, Vachel wrote again to Fannie, this time advising her that “yesterday” he had finished “a 15 paged article . . . to prove that there was no such element as love of country entered into patriotism. I will send you a copy sometime.” The Wilcox paper, he claimed, had set him “thinking, and the essay is the result. It contains nothing but my honest opinions” (fragment, Blair). Entitled “Patriotism,” Vachel’s essay is in the Virginia collection, and Masters quotes several representative passages (44-45).

Notwithstanding a few early confrontations with Susan Wilcox, Vachel’s competitive spirit was seldom if ever intense, although his mother recalls in her 1916 memoir: “a few times in his life, when roused to indignation by a wrong, I have known him to fight like a tiger. His sterling principles and his democratic ideas have been quite as marked from childhood as his imagination and characteristics as a writer.” He also fought “like a tiger” as a member of his high school debate team, preparing in his sophomore year a detailed set of notes in order to argue the negative of: “Resolved: That Congress Recognize the Belligerency^ of Cuba Immediately” (Virginia). More importantly, Vachel earned the opportunity to read an original story (his first surviving short story) at the school Christmas exercises (1894): “The Skeleton in the Cracker-Box” (Virginia). One early drawing, dated “1895,” is a crude pencil sketch of a skull and was likely intended as an illustration for “The Skeleton.” The sketch is signed “Nicholas Vachel Lindsay”; the title reads: “Behold This Ruin!” (Virginia—see Bain 1).

Vachel’s disputes with Susan Wilcox may be reflected in the fact that his English grade dropped to 86 this sophomore year, still a solid “B,” but not an “A.” After their blustery first year together, however, student and teacher managed to work out a lifelong, mutual respect for one another, the spirit of which Vachel likely intended to capture in “The Lame Boy and the Fairy” (*Poetry* 372-373). “Leaving out the members of my own family,” Vachel asserts in the introductory essay to the revised edition of his *Collected Poems*, “[Susan Wilcox] is, without doubt, both as a person and a teacher the noblest and most faithful friend of my life. . . . Half the poems in this book show her stern hand” (*Poetry* 958-959). [Note 5]

Vachel's other sophomore grades are also known: Botany 86, Zoology 88, Geometry 81, Drawing (a class he took for only five months) 93, Department 87, and Latin 66 (Virginia). He never did master the ancient language, but he did establish a lasting friendship with his teacher, Rachel "Ray" Hiller. Apparently, in the fall of 1908, as we shall see, the friendship developed into a short-lived romance. Little is known about Hiller, except as a Jew she seems to have been subjected to racial prejudice. She finally left Springfield, never to return (Fowler 177-178), although she exchanged occasional letters with her former Latin student well into the 1920s. [Note 6]

4

From an academic perspective, most of the papers from Vachel's sophomore year amount to little more than ordinary schoolboy essays—with one notable exception. Entitled "The Character of Brutus" and dated November 1894, the essay in itself, like the others, is a writing exercise, with Wilcox's evaluation written on the first page: "Excellent." The revelatory aspect lies in the note that Vachel added after the paper had been evaluated: "A very unexpected compliment. The more so as I had made no effort. It was one of the days when I had a 'spell'" (Virginia). Today, scholars such as Ann Massa take Vachel's alleged epilepsy for granted (see p. 11 of Massa's *Vachel Lindsay*), but actually it was not until the summer of 1924 that doctors at the Mayo Clinic suggested the possibility of epilepsy (the actual Mayo diagnosis is either lost or has been destroyed). Vachel's wife Elizabeth maintained that the Mayo diagnosis was "Jacksonian epilepsy as a name for the nervous syndrome—latent in youth and fatal in the middle years." She added that she had asked biographer Masters "not to publicize the rhythmic convulsive nature of Vachel's disorder—the public has no need of knowing. . ." (letter to Paul Wakefield, November 13, 1935, Ward).

In the 1950s, however, when Eleanor Ruggles was working on *The West-Going Heart*, Elizabeth Lindsay changed her mind. She told Ruggles of waking one night on her Glacier Park honeymoon "to see her husband a few feet away struggling on the ground in terrible convulsions" (346). According to Ruggles, Vachel admitted to his wife that "from his youth he had occasionally awakened at night to find himself on the floor, having bitten his tongue part way through, though of these seizures he never spoke to friends." Ruggles further suggests: "His sisters knew nothing of them, and whether his mother and doctor-father were totally unaware of them is impossible to say" (323-324). Actually, Vachel's "doctor-father" may himself have suffered from the disorder. Vachel's niece, Catharine Ward, remembers a conversation with Dr. Lindsay's office girl, Jennie Jones-Herrin, a conversation in which Jennie told how the doctor used to "pass out" on his office floor. On these occasions, Jennie said, "I pulled the blinds and let him lie on the floor" (personal interview with Ward, November 11, 1985).

Vachel seems not to have shared any of his health problems with his friends, even though he normally exhibited unusual candor. He seems even to have been unwilling to write his thoughts on the subject in his date books and notebooks, where he recorded his most intimate observations. Family members, however, were aware of the disorder, as the following unpublished letter from Joy Lindsay-Blair to Olive reveals:

I worry a great deal over Nicholas V. and wish the solution could be found. I thought we had hit it while you were here but on further thought, I doubt it for the Glacier Park episode would not explain the ‘nightmares’ he has had for years. As long ago as when he lived at home & I did too he used to call me in the night in that choked voice and then I would call him until I woke him up and he would be O.K. as soon as I called him enough so he awoke. Then I remember that that fall shortly after his return from England [1920] Mama was much frightened for she found him on the floor of his room one morning. She called Dr. [Henry] Ramon who roomed there then and he took care of him. Perhaps that time it was like the things Elizabeth saw [at Glacier Park]. (May 20, 1929, Ward)

“Nicholas V.” himself suggested that his family’s quarrels were caused, in part, by physical disabilities. As we have seen, his mother was subject to nervous exhaustion, his diabetic father to temperamental extremes. “The tragedies of our family history all go back to things purely physical,” Vachel commented to his sister Olive: “—Papa’s terrible furies and Mamas’ jerks. . . . I also have my share of the human curse, as has Joy” (April 18, 1924, Ward). Olive had her share as well, as her brother advised Sara Teasdale: “Olive and Mama have neuresthenic[^] ups and downs and zig zags—but under them all so much fundamental vitality that their changes in the weather I have grown hardened to” (August 6, 1914, Yale 144).

Elizabeth Lindsay’s decision to reveal her husband’s disorder to Eleanor Ruggles may have been based on the same reasoning that Paul Wakefield expressed many years earlier. Paul’s answer to Elizabeth’s letter (November 13, 1935, cited above) reads, in part: “for the life of me, I cannot see why a true story of the cause of [Vachel’s] mental change might [not] have been infinitely better than the story that has been written [Masters’ biography]. It certainly leaves the impression that Vachel came from an abnormal stock and that he was always an abnormal person. This is not the fact.” Paul’s distress reflected his own diagnosis of his friend and brother-in-law’s condition. He believed that Vachel underwent a profound personality change in early 1923, while he was teaching at Gulf Park College in Gulfport, Mississippi—more than two years before his marriage to Elizabeth. Paul attributed the cause to scar tissue, the result of a sinus operation to alleviate a meningeal infection. Until Gulf Park, in Paul’s mind, Vachel remained a “healthy, normal boy,” a delight to claim as a friend and a person commanding respect and consideration.

Paul, in fact, never did accept the possibility that his friend may have suffered from epilepsy years before going to Gulf Park: “I knew Vachel for many years as well as any person could know a human being. He has certain very human peculiarities, but he was entirely normal mentally and physically. There was no sign of any mental or physical abnormality up to his illness in Gulf Park. When I found him there he was an entirely different person. His attitude towards life, his sense of responsibility, his attitude towards his friends,—everything I found changed. Many of the things that he abhorred before had become a part of his life. The meningeal infection was cause enough and a natural explanation. . . . I have come to a very deep realization of the fact that you [Elizabeth Lindsay] never knew Vachel when he was well. Your letter has brought this home to me more than it has ever been burned into me before. It is a terrible tragedy and I hope that the time may come when you may know something of the healthy, normal boy that I

knew before Gulf Park. It will make you infinitely happier and the children more proud and serene.” Paul seems not to have known about his friend’s boyhood “spells.” Still, his diagnosis based on what he did know—he was, after all, a doctor—is consistent with medical facts concerning scar tissue as a possible cause of epilepsy.

From our perspective, the above documentation strongly suggests that Vachel did suffer from some form of epilepsy and that the symptoms began early in life. We cannot, after all, ignore the family’s comments, as well as Vachel’s own reference to his “spells.” On the other hand, Paul Wakefield’s overall impression of his friend’s temperament also corresponds with known records. Vachel did manifest “certain very human peculiarities,” but Paul was well within reason when he described his friend, especially prior to his Gulf Park years (1923-24), as one who was “entirely normal mentally and physically.” It is important, moreover, to remember that Paul spent many nights with his friend, both in Hiram and in Chicago, and apparently never witnessed any seizures. Similarly, Elizabeth Wills comments that, in the early 1920s, Vachel visited her home in Brownsville, Tennessee “several times and spent several days each time. He showed no sign of any kind of illness at any time. In fact, I knew nothing about his having spells until I read about it in Eleanor Ruggles’ book” (personal letter, October 26, 1987).

Nevertheless, the possibility of epilepsy, no matter how infrequent the attacks, helps to explain the extraordinary visions that Vachel experienced in 1904, as well as in the two years or so immediately following. (Many, like Dostoyevsky, have described the visionary aspects of the prodromal phase or “aura” of the epileptic seizure.) At the same time, Paul’s belief that 1923 was a crisis year for Vachel is also substantially supported by relevant letters and papers, although that is a subject for later chapters, especially since Paul himself had self-serving personal reasons for his *ex post facto* diagnosis. In the meantime, we may consider the opinion of a contemporary medical expert in order to maintain a proper perspective on Vachel’s alleged disorder: “Between attacks, the epileptic may be entirely normal. ‘Normal’ here is used in the broad sense, in that epileptics, like other people, may be super-intelligent or below average, or of good or bad character and disposition. Epileptics are just people with all their good and bad qualities, combined with the special problems their own epilepsy may cause” (“The Many Faces of Epilepsy,” *The Health Letter*, ed. Lawrence E. Lamb, M.D., 1985).

5

It was during his high school years that Vachel increasingly turned to his Aunt Fannie as a confidante, relating incidents and thoughts to her that he would not, or could not, relate to his parents. Frances Frazee Hamilton was Kate Lindsay’s youngest surviving sister, and she and her husband, Lucius, were among the many Frazee relatives who continued to make their home in the Rush County, Indiana area. Vachel, of course, had exchanged letters with Aunt Fannie from his boyhood days, but the correspondence manifests an added degree of respect and affection after Vachel entered high school. On November 22, 1893, Fannie wrote: “How are you getting along with the back yard, ‘got ’er clean yit?’” She wondered how well he was doing with his tools and asked whether or not he had acquired enough expertise to build the hen house she needed. He must come to her home next summer and raise chickens: “town’s no place for you in summer so as soon as school is out come and stay with me ’till school begins. You’ll like it here in the

country I know” (Virginia). The next March she repeated her invitation, adding: “I’ve a ‘gal’ for you, a little sweetheart, as it were, a Kentucky girl, Cousin Sam’s daughter, Miss Laura Whisner by name, thirteen years old and not one bit bashful. Now, if that is not a bewitching inducement, I know not what to offer. I’m sure the girl will be delighted, and I know of no reason why you shouldn’t be. If that isn’t enough to bring you I will add that your old stand by[^], Ellen the beloved, lives very near, but a mile from here. It would be very healthful for you to take a morning stroll, I suggest before breakfast, down past her cottage. A smile from her beautiful countenance I’m sure will do you good during the entire day” (March 26, 1894, Virginia). In December 1894, Fannie addressed her nephew as “Dear Sir,” explaining that he was beyond the age for “My darling Vachel” or “dear little man. . . . I suppose you are sporting around with the young ladies, engaged, perhaps. Will you not confide in your auntie and tell her all about your engagements and ‘dis-enjoyments’ of this new world you have entered? . . . Well, no news I believe. I might state, however, that your kite has not come down yet. At least if it has, it has not been accomodating[^] enough to prostrate itself at our door, or near enough for us to see it without looking for it” (Virginia).

When Vachel had a disagreement with Susan Wilcox, as we have seen, Aunt Fannie was certain to know. She also served as advisor on a number of other occasions, particularly when her nephew professed inexperience with girls. In June 1895, for example, he obviously made a specific request for assistance. His words are lost, but Fannie’s response has been saved: “Some time since I received your very entertaining letter. That is the kind of letter I appreciate, one in which you asked my advice. Allow me to compliment you on your wisdom. It is certainly in advance of your years. Why! many a man of forty would not have been well balanced enough to have known where to go for advice on such a subject.” Then she offered her recommendation: “Go in young man, spark them all apparantly[^] in earnest, but don’t let one of them catch you sparking the other, always be sure you are holding a good hand, then you are sure of your point, and too, ‘be sure of your point before you show your hand,’ then it will all come your way. Experience is what you want, so go at it in earnest and get all the experience obtainable, there’s nothing like it, it takes the place of many things” (June 27, 1895, Virginia).

Less than a month later Vachel wrote again, perhaps to demonstrate how earnestly he was heeding Auntie’s recommendations:

I have been having quite lively times with the pretty 17 year old young lady I told you of in my last letter. When I went to the S[unday] S[chool] picnic I gathered an enormous bunch of maiden-hair. I had enough to give three sprays to each picnicker, and had some left. The “sweetness” stayed at home and as I gave her mother some ferns, she suggested she would give them to Russie (there! I have told you her name) for me If[^] I wanted her to. I told her to keep them, and gave all I had left for Russie, and forgot all about it. I supposed they would wilt on the train [streetcar], and gave them to get rid of them.

Now Russie volunteered to give me her hand one day, because there seemed to be no end to my shaking it. I graciously accepted the little gift, and have the recognized right to squeeze it all I please. As I was squeezing it the Sunday after and felt a paper press my hand, I closed on it and stuck it in my pocket and no one was the wiser.

After I had gone home and locked the door and hid the key under the bookcase and pulled down the window blinds and crawled under the bed I read the following—

My Dear Friend—

I regret very much not having a chance to thank you for the ferns you sent me. They were beautiful. I admire flowers that show how daintily they are made. I am pressing them with great care, for your sake as well as their beautiful aspect.

Russie.

I was taken by surprise, to say the least. Of course I wrote a not[^] in reply. It was this—

My dear Russie—It has made me happy, very happy, to find that I have so pleased one I so much admire, and that with so humble an offering.

Nicholas Vachel Lindsay.

Vachel then continued with his story, telling of an afternoon that he and Olive traveled to Russie's home: "I crammed her as full of taffy as any one could hold and she swallowed it all, and I began to think she was a pretty big fool, when she just then advised me to write a book. I have had my doubts ever since." That same afternoon, the three friends went out riding, "to the new state fair grounds . . . I sat in the middle, and got looks that made thrills run down my spine. We took her home to supper, and she made the meal very happy for me. Then we played croquet, (she and I were pardners[^], of course and we beat). Then I put a daisy in her hair, and we had a most enjoyable time. When I was turning the horse out she asked Olive if I was over twenty, or at least how much older than (Olive). This in dead earnest. Olive parylized[^] her by telling her my true age (15), and I about parylized Olive for it afterward, when she told me. But I was almost delirous[^] the next day, was gone so far that I attempted to write poetry. I wrote a six stanzaed affair, which I thought heavenly at the time, and mailed it to R. I sort of worked off my excitement by basking in the smiles of a sweet young neighbor. The day after, being fully cooled down once more, I read the first copy of the effusion. Actually I was mighty near sick. I will inflict the last lines. They are to be taken with several barrels of salt:—

But the sweetness and glory of Russie's smile,
From the heaven of her face
Is a warmth of sunshine in my heart
That night cannot efface;
I can live with joy in the darkest hours,
And the tears that they may give
Will make a rainbow in my soul
At Whose[^] end is the treasure—love.

"Not that Russie does not have a sweet smile, and is a most charming little creature, but as to her intellect—I have told you before I have my doubts." He added that he had not seen Russie since and that everyone was telling him she had "gone away": "I think it is but a kind effort to break it gently. As Poe says—, I am—

—Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before, ["The Raven"]

—Then my heart it grew ashen and sober
 As the leaves that were crisped and sere—
 As the leaves that were withering and sere.” [“Ulalume”]

The letter does not end with Russie’s story. Vachel briefly focused his attention on yet another “young lady,” one “with the long green,” an heiress. He asserted his trust that she was faithful to him: “There is no male of her acquaintance that is any where near her age in the church except me. I have no rivals in the field, and ought to be very happy.” Since “the long green” is a typical Vachel reference to money, the heiress was likely Bessie Brinkerhoff. In any case, Vachel expressed regrets that the heiress did not live across the street, like “the music teachers’ young lady,” that is, the neighbor girl he had already referred to in this letter. That young lady’s name was Mary (“Mayme”) Tiffany, and Vachel reported: “She is just my age, or a little younger, with perfect features, beautiful brown eyes, goes in tip top society, dances, plays cards and all that, and yet is as modest and maidenly as possible. I have not been acquainted with her very long. That is, not very well. I used to think she was nothing but unsubstantial gaiety, and did not even give her credit for modesty, but have had reason to change my opinion.”

Apparently, Olive had been taking music lessons with Mayme’s mother “about a month ago,” when “Mrs. Tiffany told her that Mayme told her that she thought me the most intellectual boy she knew anywhere. That settled me. I began studying Mamie’s character right away, and find that like her mother, she is deeper and more serious than she appears. She is very sensible, possesses good judgement, is studious, besides other things I have mentioned” (July 19, 1895, Blair). In less than two years (1897), Vachel would write one of his first poems for Mary Tiffany: “How a Little Girl Sang” (*Poetry* 20). A year later, in August 1898, he advised his friend Adaline (not Adeline, as in Ruggles) Mugrage that “There are always about three girls that have the chief places in my estiamate of the sex. . . . At present Maymie is one, and you and Jane [Wheeler] are the other two. . . . You do not know what a peculiar inspiration my girl-friends have always been to me, from the time I was eight years old. I do not know any of them very well, but lots of them better than they do themselves. Somehow, the girls that were in the ascendancy two years ago have dropped into the second rank today though I know them no better. Maymie has kept up pretty well for six years however. She is an exception. But the changes of time bring on new friends, without utterly crowding out the old ones” (letter, August 17, 1898, Virginia). Mayme Tiffany seems to have been Vachel’s “best girl,” the Eve in his high school garden, at least during his final two years. In the parade of “inspiration girls,” she likely followed Bessie Brinkerhoff.

As Vachel drew to a close in his characteristically long, intimate letter to Aunt Fannie (July 19, 1895), he focused his descriptive skills on an assessment of Mrs. Tiffany. Hopefully, 29-year-old Fannie smiled when she read that Mrs. Tiffany, on a piano stool at a distance, looked like a “decidedly giddy young thing of eighteen,” but “when you come up close and see the wrinkels, you would know her a somewhat careworn woman, on the worst side of forty. But in her picture she is still eighteen.” Mayme, in the meantime, was his real interest, although he admitted: “The drawback to Mamy’s case is that her father is a horse doctor.” Here the manuscript ends abruptly, the final page or pages apparently having been lost.

For her part, Aunt Fannie preserved more than her nephew’s letters: she had her own “gosh awful” stories to tell. In 1927, she scolded him for not having biographer

Trombly consult with her: “Don’t you know that I know a lot which might have interested him? Have you slighted yourself or me? I might have told him of Charlie Kennedy and the old ladies’ kissing episode—and, oh, a lot of things that he could have culled over and might have been glad to know.” Then, since it was too late for Trombly, she included two of her favorite stories in her own book, *Ancestral Lines of the Doniphan, Frazee and Hamilton Families* (1928).

The first is a picture of her nephew as “a lad of perhaps ten years.” One day, on his annual summer visit, his mother took him into Rushville to attend Sunday morning church: “After services, a number of women, quite old ladies to Vachel, who had been long time friends of his mother’s, were delighted to see Mrs. Lindsay and incidentally each one kissed little Vachel, much to his disgust and discomfort. Mr. Charles Kennedy, another old friend, had volunteered to take the lot of them (I suppose I should say ‘bunch’ by way of a ‘kick’) in his carriage to Mrs. Campbell’s home. All were seated in the carriage except Vachel who was the last to enter. Just as he put his foot on the step preparatory to entering, he hesitated, looked up quickly, and asked Mr. Kennedy, ‘Do you want to kiss me?’ Mr. Kennedy, rather puzzled, replied that he had no thought of doing so, but could were it necessary, whereupon Vachel retorted, ‘Well, if you do, I’ll just walk’” (453-454).

Fannie’s second story concerns Vachel’s childhood dress and the time he looked forward to “casting off the knickers worn by the small boy and donning the long trousers of youth. . . . At last, the time for long trousers came. There was purchased for him one suit of clothes with one pair of long pants which he was permitted to wear to school and on Sundays, but alas! when Saturday came, he must needs don the despised knickers again preparatory to working on the lawn and doing the Saturday’s chores. He wrote me of this, of his mortification in being forced to wear kid clothes on Saturdays, when he was so near being a young man. He expressed his chagrin in his letter to me in his own quaint way, ‘Thus, my Saturdays are filled with short-panted humiliations.’ His spiciness of expression commenced so early in life that it seems it began with his first chatter” (454). His “spiciness of expression” may have been the very reason that “this dearly loved aunt,” in Vachel’s words, “sent me one book of [James Whitcomb] Riley’s poems every year, on Christmas, from the time I was eight years old till I grew up” (“The Real American Language” 258).

In summary, “Lindsay, as a lad and youth,” Fannie recalls, “was refreshing company, bright, vivacious, and bubbling over with a sunny wit. He was always a welcome and appreciated visitor in our home” (453). In turn, Vachel recorded his impression of Aunt Fannie in his 1923 date book: “It should be possible to return to the oldest and dearest friend with renewed strength and the cry for more wisdom—and whatever the flower—these older are the fruit—beginning with Dines, Bogardus, Aunt Fannie” (November 29). He listed but these three, thus placing Fannie in the company of Tom Dines and Fred Bogardus, two of his dearest high school friends.

Vachel’s penchant for fun and mischief increased as his high school career continued, until, predictably, his “Department” grade in the junior year dropped to 79, the

lowest grade to date—but not the lowest he would receive. (He managed to “fail” Department in November 1895.) As it turned out, his spicy wit was especially suited to one junior-class tradition, namely, a parody of the regular school newspaper. Entitled THE JUNIOR ILLUSTRATED SLAM-BANG, an introductory note, almost certainly by Vachel, explains the title: “Our predecessors have always hunted a name for their papers that they could make a long and elaborate excuse for. We did not want that trouble, so we chose an inexcusable^ title” (Virginia). Actually, for anyone not intimate with the Springfield High School scene in the fall, 1895, the articles themselves are inexcusable—or downright silly.

This junior year was also the benchmark year for the “gangs” that Vachel fondly recalls in his poem, “Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan”:

Oh, Tom Dines, and Art Fitzgerald,
 And the gangs that they could get!
 I can hear them calling yet. . . .
 We were bully, wild and woolly,
 Never yet curried below the knees. . . .
 Oh, we bucks from every Springfield ward!
 Colts of democracy. . . . (*Poetry* 346)

In subsequent years, the poet was not the only gang member to wax nostalgic, as is evident in the following letter sent to Vachel by an old friend, Will Radcliffe: “I have often thought if some one would write the history (spiritual not literal) of a gang of boys similar to the one we used to travel in when we roved from carpenter’s mill to town or paraded in ‘minstrel show’ formation down North Grand Avenue, it would be something more than a journal of a gang of boys, it would be a history of the race in its truest sense. It would be the evolution of the soul of the race. It would have to be some such gang as ours was who literally had to work out their own salvation; not the carefully edited edition the modern boy scouts put out.” Radcliffe felt that Vachel was just the man for the job: “I can see in your poetry the old tribal rythm^ that pulsated thru all our activities when we were young savages. It was the tribal rythm that made men first act in unison and that was the beginning of civilization. I can hear it yet in the old cornstock^ parade or the ‘Bryan, Bryan, Bryan,’ shout of the gang at the election returns or in the thump of heels on the partitions of the ‘out of door plumbing’ at the old high school! Oh there are dozens of incidents that come to mind all of which played an important part in civilizing old 97” (December 5, 1926, Virginia).

Radcliffe’s letter struck a sympathetic cord, and Vachel responded immediately: “It seems to me that the Class of 1897 was most picturesque in its Junior Year, before some of the wilder members were thrown out, and a certain standard of book learning was required for graduation. As long as mere enterprise was required, there were a lot of us.” In addition to Vachel and Radcliffe, the “lot” included Tom Dines, Art Fitzgerald, Fred Bogardus, Bert Stewart, James Brannan, Roy Coates, Wilbur Montgomery, and Albert Owen, all of whom were lodged in Vachel’s memory, along with their various antics: “I remember the Corn Stalk Parade, now you tell about it, and new items of the first Bryan Campaign. Also, I tried to tell Mrs. Lindsay all about the famous Football Game when 12 of us challenged about 400 and were gloriously licked, and I remember Bert Stewart was nominated captain of our team by acclamation, after we were lined up

on the field. I wish you would fill in the details.” Finally, Vachel closed with a vague reference to several trick stories that had been forwarded to a local newspaper, the *Springfield Monitor*, resulting in published “accounts of class parties which had not taken place.” Radcliffe, undoubtedly, was able to fill in the details: he had the necessary inside information (December 16, 1926).

In April 1896, meanwhile, Vachel himself detailed his class’s mischief in another letter to Aunt Fannie, after she had sent a photograph of her family as a Christmas present. “You wrote a letter to Olive,” he began, “in which you cast a slur upon my manners, by saying that I had not written my thanks yet for the Photo[^]. Well, for my part, I think country kinfolks are in a big business criticizing the manners of the most cultured gentleman of his city. Aforesaid gentleman is accustomed to give his country cousins lessons in etiket, as I have written you about last summer. Howsomever that may be I am thankful for the suggestion, and will act upon it. But of a truth it was a very fine picture and I hope to soon see the originals.” He added that he was having “a swimming time with the young ladies. Recieved[^] three new locks of hair this week. Will soon have enough to stuff a chair.” Then he turned to academics:

In school I flourish[^] like an iceberg on the mountains of lebanon[^], or a fly in the vinegar cruet. Joy and Olive flourish like sunflowers on garden walls, and in general way we are Prosper, flourish and Co. In school today us juniors are going to plague the life out of our physics teacher. He is a country jake from way back, and notwithstanding he has spent years in study in the best schools of Europe and America, you cant[^] polish him any more than a brickbat. He looks like this. (April 1, 1896, Blair)

Perhaps, though, the boys’ mischief had less effect than they intended. The “country jake” (his name was Albert Carver) gave Vachel a 91 for his final grade in Physics. Vachel’s junior year, in fact, was easily his best year scholastically. He earned an 89.4, even with the low “Department” grade averaged into the total. His other grades were: Physical Geography 91, Modern History 93, Arithmetic 84, English 88, Civil Government 93, and Political Economy 96 (Virginia).



VL’s depiction of physics teacher Albert Carver

The sound scholastic grades were matched by sound health. In fact, it was during his high school years that Vachel developed the vitality and strength that enabled him, in succeeding years, to walk 25 to 30 miles a day, or to harvest alfalfa ten or more consecutive hours under a hot Kansas sun. [Note 7] He had been working out in the gym, he informed Aunt Fannie, “piling on muscel[^] at an alarming rate.” And he was able to joke about his purported delicacy: “I am now able to do as much work as I ever did in a reasonable amount of time. The winter class has quit, so I will have to rest on my laurels, and not get any stronger this season. It might be too great a strain on my constitution which is fragile and delicate as a tropical lilly[^], or some rare and beautiful—rare and beautiful—what? I can’t think how to fill out the comparison. We must leave something to the imagination anyway” (April 1, 1896, Blair). After a short time, Vachel abandoned the gym in favor of the track; and, on April 30, 1896, in the annual high school “Field Day” competition, he carried away the first-place trophy for the one-mile walk. Springfield’s *Illinois State Register* reports: “Lindsay is fast approaching the one mile

walk record of last year” (“High School Athletes,” May 1, 1896). The rival *Illinois State Journal* notes that “Vachel Lindsey” won the mile walk with a time of 9 minutes, 10 seconds (“Competed for Places,” May 1, 1896). Winners earned the right to represent Springfield in the state high school track meet in Champaign on May 16. Here, however, Vachel’s name does not appear in the list of top finishers: a Chicago boy walked home with the victory in a time of 7 minutes, 50 seconds. The entire Springfield team, in fact, did very poorly. They were forced to compete in the late afternoon, directly after their 5-hour-and-20-minute train ride from Springfield to Champaign, a distance of just over 90 miles.

Vachel also competed in debate this junior year, arguing the negative of “Resolved: It was unjust to behead Charles I” (November 1895). At the same time, he began keeping a scrapbook of newspaper clippings on another political martyr (at least from Vachel’s perspective): Illinois governor John Peter Altgeld, his next-door neighbor to the north. In subsequent years, the scrapbook materials were used for a Hiram College essay, for a later essay written at the time of Altgeld’s death (March 12, 1902), and for a poem, “The Eagle That Is Forgotten” (*Poetry* 136-137), Vachel’s frequently anthologized elegy for Altgeld. The 1902 essay, though, offers the clearest account of the Governor’s appeal:

It happens to be my good fortune to have been born in the house where I live today—a house on an embankment that looks out on the Governor’s yard and mansion. From the earliest years I have stepped across the street [Edwards] to processions, speeches and the like. I have witnessed the political pagents[^] of [Governors] Deneen [1905-09], Yates [1901-05], and Tanner [1897-1901]—of Altgeld [1893-97], Fifer [1889-93] and Ogelsby[^] [Oglesby, 1885-89].

Once upon a time I was in the Governor’s yard when an escort of the Illinois National Guard arrived for Altgeld—the then chief executive. He was a shaky invalid—and would have been excused for riding in a carriage. His black horse threw him and rolled upon him—but the Governor refused help and managed to climb back into the saddle. He went through it all with a sort of Spartan quietness. I can this moment recall the grim—mesmeric face, the lack luster-eye and the unstable frame. I well remember the ease with which he led the procession—emphatically the Governor of Illinois—the horse still snorting, his conceit still vexed that this creature with the feeble knees should somehow ride him. (Virginia)

For youthful Vachel, Altgeld was courage and honesty personified, the first of the “brainy” radicals, the first of the brave Turnerite politicians who later supported William Jennings Bryan for president: “Under the surface of his dramatic public life Altgeld’s spirit worked subtly to make the forces that champion the underdog permanent in America as Richeleu[^] worked to buttress monarchy in France. He set himself tasks that took a lions[^] courage and a martyr’s heart. He planned each step of his immolation amid a stupid people. He threw his reputation and health into the furnace every hour” (Virginia). Thus, Altgeld joined the growing list of Vachel’s heroes, and it seems appropriate that one of the extant essays from this high school junior year is the brief “Survival of the Fittest,” an essay in which Vachel argues that the weak “contaminate the race.” He uses Lincoln and Webster as positive role models, but Altgeld and Bryan also fit the essential pattern. All were individuals who triumphed over circumstances to

achieve final success; all bore a resemblance to the essayist's own life. After all, he had been carried on a pillow at an age when many children could walk. By his junior year in high school, he was a track star, a walking champion. [Note 8]

7

In July 1896, the Democratic Party nominated William Jennings Bryan for president, in effect swallowing up the rival Populist and National Silver parties. The United States had been in “a prolonged industrial depression” since 1893, when panic created chaos in the financial world: “Hundreds of banks failed, railroad construction came to a standstill, factories closed, and unemployment reached an all-time high. Basic agricultural crops suffered a further decline in prices” (Yatron 6). Bryan’s panacea for the depression was “bimetallism,” the “easy money” policy that promoted free and unlimited coinage of silver at a 16 to 1 ratio to gold. At the Chicago nominating convention, Bryan immortalized “bimetallism” with the ringing words: “You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.”

In the ensuing campaign, newspapers labeled Bryan the candidate of the agrarian West and South, his opponent, William McKinley, the candidate of the moneyed East. Youthful Bryan (he was 36 on March 19, 1896) traveled over 18,000 miles and delivered more than 600 speeches in 27 states. Each appearance was duly reported in the *Illinois State Register*, the Springfield “Democratic” newspaper that Vachel read with intense interest and enthusiasm. Finally, on the afternoon of October 23, in Vachel’s words, “Bryan came to Springfield, and Altgeld gave him greeting” (*Poetry* 345). The *Register* headline proclaims: “**OVATION TO BRYAN** / A Magnificent Demonstration in Honor of Silver’s Champion / The Largest Crowd Ever Assembled in Springfield Gathers / To Do Honor to the Democratic Candidate for President / Sixty Thousand Strangers in the Capital of Illinois.” Standing among the crowd were a gang of senior high school boys, including Tom Dines and Art Fitzgerald, chanting with their friend Vachel Lindsay, “Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan.”

In his poem, Vachel characteristically adjusts reality to comply with his imagination. “I stood,” he claims, “by my best girl”:

She was a cool young citizen, with wise and laughing eyes.
With my necktie by my ear, I was stepping on my dear,
But she kept like a pattern, without a shaken curl. (*Poetry* 346)

Where Masters cites these lines, however, Olive comments in the margin: “‘Best girl’ only for that one occasion! Her chum was really Vachel’s girl—but she was a Republican!” (52). Vachel also places Bryan’s visit at the beginning of summer, creating a sense of drama and uncertainty as the long campaign wound on:

July, August, suspense.
Wall Street lost to sense.
August, September, October,
More suspense. (347)

In reality, disappointment came less than two weeks following Bryan's Springfield visit. Despite Bryan's extensive travels, and despite the fact the *Illinois State Register* daily predicted Bryan's victory, the 25th President of the United States was Canton, Ohio resident, William McKinley, Jr., the last Civil War veteran to be elected President.

“**HANNAIZED**,” the *Register* headline screamed on November 4, 1896: Mark Hanna, the Republican party campaign manager, had bought and/or stolen the election for McKinley. (Hanna did admit in later years that he had raised at least \$3,500,000.) Indeed, Vachel's account of the election story in “Bryan, Bryan” is basically a metrical summary of the *Register*'s unabashedly biased reporting. What the poem contributes is Vachel's heart-felt belief that “Boy Bryan's defeat” meant not only a loss for Bryan and the Democrats but a loss for the “Turner-verein” and a personal loss for the poet as well:

Defeat of the aspen groves of Colorado valleys,
 The blue bells of the Rockies,
 And blue bonnets of old Texas,
 By the Pittsburg alleys,
 Defeat of alfalfa and the Mariposa lily.
 Defeat of the Pacific and the long Mississippi.
 Defeat of the young by the old and silly.
 Defeat of tornadoes by Tubal Cain supreme.
 Defeat of my boyhood, defeat of my dream. (348) [Note 9]

Boy Bryan's defeat was not the only disappointment for Vachel in the summer and fall, 1896. In July, he submitted a short story, “A Life-Long Friend,” to *The Black Cat: A Monthly Magazine of Original Short Stories* (a popular periodical with a name borrowed, appropriately enough for Vachel, from Edgar Allan Poe). “A Life-Long Friend” concerns a man who serves the Devil for the duration of his life, as the title suggests. The story earned Vachel his first rejection slip, but long before the slip arrived in the mail, the inspired author was hard at work on other stories. He was spending the summer at his grandmother's Indiana farm (shortly after his grandfather's death, June 6) and relying on the postal service to learn the fate of his submissions. On August 4, for example, he inquired of his parents: “Was there any message along with my returned article? I have the first copy of my new story completed and almost the second. I will send the third to the publisher, though I intend to take some time in perfecting the second. Sometimes I am disgusted with my story and sometimes enthusiastic, so I cannot trust to my own judgement whether it has merit or no. My new story is freaky, I think a little more so than the other, but it has at least the merit of originality.” He did not add, ‘like Poe's short stories,’ although he did suggest sending the rejected manuscript to *The Century*, since they had already published, in his words, “some freaky sketches”: “I consider the Century my last chance. . . . Be shure^ and send it. I want money badly. If my next story fails too I will have to strike out on some other line, and mine is the only original line I know of. Everything else has been worn threadbare” (August 4, 1896, Ward).

The legacy or, more realistically, the burden of past literature that distresses most beginning writers distressed Vachel. Youthful John Keats complained to his friend Richard Woodhouse: “there was now nothing original to be written in poetry; that its riches were already exhausted,—& all its beauties forestalled” (October 21, 1818).

Young Vachel shared Keats's fears, although Vachel, of course, remained optimistic. "I suppose all soil has been turned in the literary line," he remarked to his parents, though he added: "Mayhap I can find another new or unused line yet" (August 4). Poe, as we have seen, impressed him as a writer who could "produce the eminently original thing, the new Creation" (Chénetier 52). Ironically, "A Life-Long Friend" amounts to an imitative attempt to "produce" another "original line." If the story was sent to *The Century*, however, the author collected his second rejection slip—and not his "badly" desired money.

At the end of summer, Vachel returned to high school (with 362 other students) and resumed the activities he initiated in his junior year. His "Department" grade dropped to 75 ("C" or even "C-"), a grade that almost certainly reflects his predilection for pranks and other antics. His puckish humor also was expressed in new whimsical sketches written for the student newspaper. One is entitled: "HIGH SCHOOL MURDER," starring Albert Owen as the victim, Fred Bogardus as the murderer, Wilbur Montgomery and Thomas Dines as the witnesses, and "Vachel Lindsey^" as the "coroner." Another sketch is headlined: "IN SOLEMN SESSION." Vachel Lindsay, as an alderman from the city's fifth ward, accuses the mayor of Springfield of "throwing his shoes in the back alley." Meanwhile, the city council unanimously adopts a resolution "against the girls getting higher marks on account of their winsome ways." Similar articles, all pasted in Vachel's high school notebook, manifest more inside humor and even less inspiration.

The debate competition during this senior year found Vachel arguing the negative of "Resolved: That the latter times are better than the former." Significantly, his spirited defense of past greatness, as well as his anxieties in regard to contemporary originality, continued as differing, if not contradictory, aspects in his thinking for several years to come. It would be in New York, in his third and last lecture series (1907-08), that he would finally work out an original approach to the study and appreciation of the past. In the meantime, his public-speaking skills seem to have made amends for his pranks, as in April (1897) he was asked to deliver an oration in honor of the new high school, then under construction. The manuscript, entitled "Oration . . . on the laying of the corner stone of the New High School," is part of the Virginia collection. However, the Springfield newspapers report that the stone was laid on April 13, "without ceremony," so that the oration was likely part of a high school assembly or similar event. One month afterward (May 20), the speech was rewritten and submitted as a senior essay, this time bearing a title indicative of contents rather than occasion: "The Advantages of a High School Education" (Virginia). The content, unfortunately, is all too predictable: anyone who has attended a high school graduation has heard something very like Vachel's speech. [Note 10]

On high school "Field Day," May 7, the walking competition was reduced to one-half mile, and the winner was—Vachel Lindsay, in a time of 3 minutes, 56.4 seconds. Vachel also placed second in the half-mile run, second to a winning time of 2 minutes, 31 seconds; his friend Tom Dines finished third. Another friend, Art Fitzgerald, won the 50-, the 100-, and the 220-yard dashes. At the state meet (May 22) in Champaign, however, the Springfield team was again shut out. A Savanna boy won the half-mile walk, setting a new state record: 3 minutes, 32 seconds. The victories and losses, though, seem unimportant, at least when compared to the preparation. Vachel trained for competition

by persuading his friends to accompany him in long walks in and around Springfield. Olive, in fact, noted in her copy of Masters' biography that the chapter on her brother's high school years omitted several significant points: "Nothing at all about his H[igh] S[chool] friendships—and long walks with Fred Bogardus, Tom Dines and others—Track meet at Champaign when he was in the walking race" (54). For Vachel, "talks-walking" began early, and continued to play an important role in his life, as they did in the life of the man who invented the word-phrase: Robert Frost.

In later years, when Vachel prepared an outline of his life for essayist Peter Clark Macfarlane, he summarized his high school career very briefly: "Champion walker, High School—Graduated from Springfield High School—Began to write poems and illustrate them the same time. 1897" (Virginia). And for Susan Wilcox, anyway, it was the poetry, not the track, that was the memorable aspect of Vachel's senior year: "It was not till his senior year that I saw any of Lindsay's poetry. This was when he was in that stage that so many talented boys pass through, an enthusiastic devotion to Poe. From this came his first version of 'The Battle' [*Poetry* 29-30] in which 'Love fought with a withered Hag.' This he says was his 'first picture drawn in words.' For several years following his high school course he wrote verses only occasionally and most of them as commentaries on pictures" (123). Wilcox might have added that "The Battle" reflects a few of Vachel's other favorite authors, such as Tennyson ("The Burial of Love") and Whittier ("The Human Sacrifice"), although she is likely correct in naming Poe as the primary inspiration.

The Poe-like visual aspect of Vachel's first poetry was accompanied by an early interest in sound, thanks to the efforts of Professor S.H. Clark, chair of the University of Chicago's Department of Public Speaking and a faculty member for more than 35 years at the Chautauqua Summer School of Expression (New York). Clark delivered a University of Chicago extension course in Springfield's Grace Lutheran Church during the winter, 1896-97, and Vachel, his sister Olive, and his parents all attended. The entire lecture series clearly impressed youthful Vachel, and we shall have occasion to return to it in future chapters. At this point, though, three of Clark's ideas are most interesting.

First, Clark stressed that content is essential to all art: "The idea [the "message"] is of the first importance in all the arts, including poetry." He was contemptuous of "art for art's sake," as Vachel himself was in later years: "There is one thing infinitely better than art for art's sake," Vachel wrote in 1899, "and that is art for love's sake" ("A Notebook on Illustrating" 77). Second, Clark maintained, "form is worthy of sincere study because (1) it aids the artist in presenting the thought (2) it affords aesthetic pleasure and (3) it is often inseparable from the thought" (Edwards 183). Third, Clark argued: "Poetry is primarily an oral art. It is written to be read aloud or heard in imagination. Those who do not hear as well as see lose a large element of pleasure and also a large part of the author's intent" (185). And to illustrate his point, Clark recited selections from some of Vachel's favorite works: Poe's "The Bells," Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Tennyson's "Galahad," "St. Agnes Eve," "The Lotus Eaters," and "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington." Professor Clark, Vachel informed Harriet Moody in 1916, "lectured on Tone Color here in University Extension when I was in High School and many of my methods go back to that lecture I am quite sure. I will never forget what he said of the Lotus Eaters and the Choric Song of Tennyson" (September 24, 1916).

Later, when asked by friend Davis Edwards whether or not he had acquired his poetic technique from Clark, Vachel reportedly answered: “‘Yes,’ . . . with great emphasis, ‘that’s where I got it. And you can tell the world’” (Edwards 182).

In addition to “The Battle,” Vachel dated the poem, “How a Little Girl Sang” (*Poetry* 20), to his senior year in high school. The “little girl,” as we have noted, was Mary “Mayme” Tiffany, and the poem may well have been written in late May 1897. The Springfield newspapers report an impressive recital at the “Central Music Hall” on May 20. The star performer was music teacher Mrs. Mary Tiffany, accompanied by her daughter Mary, who also played the piano and “sang from finger tips, / From every tremble of her dress,” according to the poet in her audience. Several years afterward, in 1905, Vachel wrote out a one-page inventory of his work and listed “The Battle” and “How a Little Girl Sang” under the date “1897,” along with two additional poems: “March Is a Young Witch” (*Poetry* 37) and “Crickets on a Strike” (originally called “The Foolish Queen of Fairyland,” *Poetry* 54). The list is loosely titled, “The Order of Composition as it remains in my memory” (Virginia), and it includes only work that Vachel thought worthy of publication. A fifth poem, “The Easter-Prayer of a White Rose to an Easter Lily” (see *Poetry* 787), dated “Spring, 1897,” survives in manuscript but is not mentioned in the inventory.

On June 10, 1897, the young poet/track star was graduated from the old Springfield High School, a member of the last class to attend that school. The diploma, dated “June 17, 1897,” is in the Barrett Library at the University of Virginia, along with the final report card: English 90, Chemistry 89, Algebra and Solid Geometry 70, Latin 70, United States History 92, and Geology 89. With the 75 in “Department,” Vachel’s senior scholastic average fell to 82.1 (about a “B-”). His vital statistics are also known: weight 119 pounds, height 66 inches, chest contracted 30.6 inches, chest expanded 33.3 inches, and waist 26.2 inches (Virginia). His future fate, he knew, was sealed: he was going to Hiram College in the fall to study in the premedical curriculum. Susan Wilcox recalls: “Just before his graduation I asked Vachel about his plans for the future. His face grew grave as he answered, ‘If I were an orphan, I should be an artist, but I’m not and so I’m going to college and be a doctor.’ This proclivity for art was innate,” Wilcox observes: “all his early dreams were of using his pencil rather than his pen.” Still, she concludes, he went to college to study medicine “because he was a dutiful son. . .” (124).

Aunt Fannie was not so serious. When she received her nephew’s graduation picture, she sent a timely thank-you note and added a few comments: “I always thought it looked so nice to see young men sit on ladies’ dresses. It gives them, the dresses I mean, such bewitching stickativeness when a lady tries to rise, and all that sort of thing, unless, of course, the gent prefers to rise first. . . . By the way I consider your class picture a fine looking group, but why, pray tell, have you no whiskers? I expected an insinuation of a mustache at least; you should be supporting something of the kind, how would a little goatee strike you? It would make you quite handsome I am sure” (July 25, 1897, Virginia). Her nephew later sent a copy of one of his poems, perhaps “The Battle.” Fannie’s tongue-in-cheek response made her an unwitting ally of his career-minded parents: “The poem! well the poem was fine, simply immense! and thoroughly poetical. Be sure and put in every extra moment on poetry, there is nothing equal to it for filling brain and purse” (August 30, 1897, Virginia).

Home life rather than homework played the more essential role in shaping Vachel's character during his Springfield school years. He was close to both of his sisters: to Olive as a peer or "twin," as he liked to refer to her, and to Joy (who was ten years his junior) as a big brother. In late 1896, the family acquired a third "daughter" when Kate's sister and designated college reader (see chapter two), Isabelle ("Belle") Frazee Campbell, died unexpectedly (October 11). Belle's daughter Helen (born March 7, 1887) lived with the Lindsays until June 1903, when she returned to Indiana to attend high school (see Chapter 12). Several of Vachel's letters in the early 1900s refer to Joy and Helen as *de facto* sisters.

With four children, the Lindsay house was seldom quiet. In addition, Dr. Lindsay often invited patients into his home, and Kate filled her downstairs rooms with weekly and monthly meetings of her various groups and societies. "She entertained constantly," Ruggles reports, "a utilitarian entertaining" (36). Both parents, moreover, welcomed a variety of friends from the church and the community—always with the assistance of at least one live-in domestic. Writing about her father in later years, daughter Joy declared: "He and Mama were both very sociable and hospitable and it seemed as if our house was never empty of company" (Lindsay-Blair). Her brother agreed: "As long as my father and mother lived a stream of patients for him or of penitents for her poured through the house. They were good democrats my parents. It is incredible how I miss all that rag tag and bob-tail. All Americans have democratic hearts—but their very efficiency, if they are successful, separates them from the unambitious more philosophical crowd I love. God knows I would rather beg ten years incog, than give one more lecture in a dress suit" (letter to Sara Teasdale, February 26, 1925, Yale 223).

Actually, Vachel was pointing to the critical difference between his attitude as a writer and the attitudes of most writers from ancient Greece to contemporary America. Since Plato (*Republic* 6) and Aristotle (*Poetics*), and likely since the first cave woman or cave man scratched a picture or a few verses on a rock, the literati have referred to the Lindsay family's "stream" of visitors as "the motley multitude" (Plato, Jowett translation)—the rumbling, grumbling "herd." For almost as long, artists have been warned of the dangers and frustrations of trying to please this "multitude [who] commend writers as they do fencers or wrestlers" (Ben Jonson, *Timber*). Even gentle Thomas Browne professed to hate "absolutely" only the Devil, yet he could not help but "contemn and laugh" at the sordid multitude: "a monstrosity more prodigious than hydra" (*Religio Medici*). "Men in history, men in the world of to-day," Emerson laments, "are bugs, are spawn, and are called 'the mass' and 'the herd'" ("American Scholar").

Like Emerson, however, Vachel was convinced that, when given the right perspective on life, bugs could transform themselves into butterflies. Or, like his mother, Vachel believed the herd could transform itself into the Kingdom of God. In contrast to most of his peers, both past and present, Vachel proclaimed himself the poet of the people, the poet of the "rag tag and bob-tail," the poet of democracy. With utter seriousness and on several different occasions, he informed Sara Teasdale that her only rival for his affections was "the 90 million Americans" (June 21, 1914, Yale 129). Even

in 1930, when he faced periods of unhappiness that were as excruciating as any he had faced in his life, he could declaim: “I believe in the human race, in the perfectibility of mankind, in the virtue of keeping a tender and innocent heart, and I will not be downed by cormorants and croakers. I am going to love the heart of the world to the end, and whoever tries to make a cynic out of me is wasting his breath” (letter to Elizabeth Lindsay, March 4).

Like his “Kallyope,” Vachel tooted and touted himself to audiences at home and abroad as “the pioneer / Voice of the Democracy”:

Born of mobs, born of steam,
 Listen to my golden dream,
 Listen to my golden dream,
 Listen to my G-O-L-D-E-N D-R-E-A-M!
 Whoop whoop whoop whoop WHOOP!
 I will blow the proud folk low,
 Humanize the dour and slow,
 I will shake the proud folk down,
 (Listen to the lion roar!) (“The Kallyope Yell,” *Poetry* 248)

Democrat William Jennings Bryan lost the election in 1896, but he won a lifelong friend in Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, who saw in Bryan’s campaign a confirmation of his own belief in the value of the common people. Bryan directed his promises at the well-being of the masses, the “motley multitude,” in contrast to special interests and the elite. More importantly, he delivered his promises in poetic rhythms. He was “the one American poet,” Vachel exults, “who could sing outdoors . . . Gigantic troubadour . . . Homer Bryan, who sang from the West . . . And everybody heard him” (“Bryan, Bryan,” ll. 6, 82, 246, 167).

In later years, Vachel explained his enthusiasm for Bryan on innumerable occasions. The following interview, granted to an anonymous reporter for the *Boston Post*, is typical:

“I believe William Jennings Bryan to be about the nearest to the model of what an American poet should be,” [Vachel] continued. “I mean, of course, a democratic poet. He chants democracy to the people. When he says, ‘Be-hol-d the re-pub-lic,’ he sings the thing rhythmically. He does it in such a way that 10,000 persons hear the rhythm of it at once. When he is doing that he is nearer the real poet than the fellow who sits in the corner and writes. ‘My country, O my beloved country, I would die for thee.’ Mr. Bryan constantly sings the song of democratic peace. He is the troubador[^] of the nation. In the old days the troubador went from castle to castle and sang his song under the casements. As Bryan sings 90,000,000 people lean out over the parapet instead of a single maiden, and he sings a song that is heard.” (“100 GOOD POETS IN U.S., SAYS LINDSAY,” February 17, 1915) [Note 11]

Bryan’s attitude toward the public reminded Vachel of an attitude he witnessed many times in his own home—in Dr. Lindsay’s devotion to his patients and in Kate Lindsay’s devotion to her church and to her civic associations. With his parents’ example before him, Vachel learned love and concern for his fellow human beings at a very early age. “The center of all Vachel’s thinking and writing,” Olive affirms, “was his deep desire to

help people understand more clearly the meaning of democracy, instead of using it only as a slogan, and never seriously trying to live up to it. That is why he gave, in his poems, pictures of all kinds of people—Negroes, pioneers, politicians—and heroes of every age and race from St. Francis and Columbus to Bryan and Woodrow Wilson” (Lindsay-Wakefield 99).

From the perspectives of many poet/artists, Vachel’s particular respect for humanity is highly unusual, if not downright contemptible. It was a respect, therefore, that did not go unnoticed in later years, as evidenced by the following article published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* during the same week as the above article cited from the rival *Boston Post*. The *Transcript* reporter, William Stanley Braithwaite, was an author himself (with a non-journalist’s flair for affected prose) and the editor of the distinguished *Anthology of Magazine Verse and Year Book of American Poetry* (1913-29):

Beginning to write verse in 1897, and illustrate them^ in that Blakeian and symbolic style which the West had hitherto never known, [Vachel] started on a poetic career absolutely original in American literary history. Where most poets conceive the mission of their art in the abstract, Mr. Lindsay conceived his in the concrete. He took his mission as an artist seriously and pursued a propaganda with all the passion and conviction of a zealot. He had a vision [in?] which it was his purpose to reflect upon the lives of a humble and laboring class of American citizens. It was all the more remarkable since his art was not a common art, and for all its humanitarian impulse, its socializing substances, was of rare and exalted embodiment of form with all the fine and exquisite shadings of language that has made the fine images and elaborate metrical web of the best English verse.

For these farmers he was trying to do what no other poet thought worth doing for them. The poetry of the Sicilian idyllists, and two of the best known and greatest of the Roman poets, gave a bucolic substance and color to their verse, but it was not for the bucolic mind and temperament they wrote. The English pastoral poets of the sixteenth and the pseudo-pastoral poets of the eighteenth century wrote for a sophisticated and artificial town audience. None of these poets cared particularly for the social and spiritual qualities of the bucolic nature and condition; they saw the human mirage in a large and mystical sky of nature, and it made a pretty, delicate and exquisite picture to sketch this beautiful and alluring world. Burns wrote of, but not to, the class to which he belonged, and though he sang for a democracy in their behalf, he was blinder to their enjoyment of beauty than Keats and Shelley. But in Mr. Lindsay’s case the farmer was typical of a class, whether the human being was on the farm or in the town, to whom the socializing and democratic influence of beauty was to come before man could enjoy his full inheritance of life and civilization. It was this spirit which inspired Mr. Lindsay to do what no other poet that I know of has done. From time to time he printed his prose and verse for free distribution. . . . (“**VACHEL LINDSAY, A LINCOLN TURNED POET,**” February 13, 1915).

Dr. Lindsay’s son was indeed different, but then he descended from parents who were often described as unusual. Biographer Eleanor Ruggles quotes a knowing member of Springfield’s fashion world: “Mrs. Lindsay was very ambitious. She queened it in her own circle, which was very worthy but was not the best social circle. The Lindsays were

not so much snubbed by Springfield ‘society’ as that they simply didn’t exist for it. The mother, however, was always impressing her superiority on herself and her family” (35). Other self-important socialites, according to Ruggles, “can remember [Mrs. Lindsay] standing graciously to receive them just inside her parlor door, or seated at her dining room table on which, however, the refreshments laid out were hardly up to the lavish midwest standard even though Mrs. Lindsay, when she set her mind to it, was a wonderful cook. But at these large-scale serious affairs ‘there would be an urn of coffee and a plate of Nabiscos,’ recalls one of her daughter Olive’s friends. ‘And that would be that’” (36). [Note 12] Ruggles herself remarks on “an old kitchen stove” that stood on the Lindsay front lawn: “out of the four stove holes sprang scarlet geraniums. Those who knew the Lindsays accepted the ornament; those who didn’t know them exclaimed over it. It was unusual” (27).

The unusual Lindsays, as such, were not members of “the best social circle,” that is, if the word *best* is limited to money and to social standing. The *best* social circles are never unusual. The Lindsay son was unusual as well: he knew what to do if given a million dollars, and he was brash enough to say so. He performed even the simplest of chores in his own peculiar manner: “When Vachel was in High School,” his sister Joy remembered, “Mama told him to weed the onion bed. He soon tired of the official way of weeding a flower bed^ so employed his own original method. He pulled everything up, sat comfortably down and sorted the weeds from the vegetables and then calmly replanted the onions in the bed. Perhaps others of his ideas seemed as illogical to others but seemed very logical to he^ himself” (Lindsay-Blair). (For the record, shallots purchased in the grocery store, when planted in the garden, will show little or no sign of distress, as any usual person can find out for her- or himself.)

The unusual Lindsays also manifested unusual priorities. At least one of the family pastors, Dr. William F. Rothenburger, believed that “Vachel inherited much of his talented mother’s mind-set.” Rothenburger recounts the time he stopped by the family home: “Once it was necessary to call at her home at a very unconventional hour of the day. Naturally I explained this irregularity, but Mrs. Lindsay made no apologies for the fact that the house had not yet been put in order. However, she did speak of books and remarked: ‘You see, even if the house has not been set in order, my mind has been. In fact I have always been less concerned about cobwebs in my house than about cobwebs in my brain’” (145-146). From our distant perspective, it is clear that Vachel inherited his father’s “mind-set” as well. The doctor’s fees were modest for whites and token or nonexistent for poor blacks. He made arduous buggy trips to serve Cotton Hill patients when he knew he would earn no money at all. He evidenced few of his profession’s usual priorities. His daughter Joy marveled: “He never MADE much money (his fees were exactly 1/10 what I pay now to my doctor here in Cleveland). He made little but he SAVED much”—and she meant people, common people, not money (Lindsay-Blair). The doctor should perhaps have expected a son who would scoff at “the ways of Tubal Cain” (“Bryan, Bryan,” l. 140).

What Vachel learned from his parents’ priorities seems obvious to anyone outside the family: he remained a lifelong democrat, he valued nearly everything more than money, he preferred the arts to a career, he generally feared cobwebs in his brain more than he feared them in his house, he would rather write poetry or draw or read Poe than

shovel coal or cut grass or weed onions. And when he thought about his mother and father in a calm mood, the obvious was inescapable: “They are my parents, all right, all right,” as he confessed to Harriet Moody (Chénetier 119). Meanwhile, the anomaly of the human condition is also apparent when we consider how usual it is that people from different generations but with similar priorities, living together under the same roof, find occasion to disagree and even to quarrel with one another concerning those same priorities, as the Lindsays certainly did. The difference is that, unlike many other families, the quarrels did not deter their considerable efforts to love and help one another as well.

In fact, the domestic spats that Vachel remembered in later years were not simply internecine family disagreements. His parents, he apprised Harriet Moody, were “both fighters equally—in their younger days always on some kind of campaign against the ungodly and abetting each other like twin bulldogs. Their councils have always been councils of action—How shall we put up this tent?—What cities shall we visit in Europe? What new pastor shall we have for the church? They used to read together a deal—The Nation—The Christian Standard—the novels of Walter Scott—Dickens—etc.” (Chénetier 118). Moreover, at the time of his father’s death, his parents’ love for one another was the one thing Vachel wished to recall. “The uppermost thought with me tonight [September 29, 1918],” he advised Eleanor Dougherty, “is how abashed I should be over my agonies of this summer in the presence of the lifetime devotion of my father and mother, and their triumphant and august affection. My love has not yet been proved, it is only a cry.—You and I and all Americans have seen so many broken marriages among our friends (—there are three in my immediate connection,) that I stand in respect before my father and mother with their house standing to the last and shining brightly” (Ward—an edited version is in Lindsay-Wakefield 110).

That respect, finally, was the mainspring of all Uncle Boy believed and all that he expressed as regards the individual’s responsibilities to his or her fellow human beings (not “the herd”), and as regards man’s responsibilities to woman and woman’s responsibilities to man. They were his very seldom parents, all right, all right.

Historical Postscript

In 1927, Vachel announced that the best introduction to “the Nifty Nineties” or “the Gay Nineties” was Mark Sullivan’s book, *Our Times: The Turn of the Century* (1900-1904) (revised edition, 1927), although there were not enough illustrations of “Gibson girls.” Indeed, Charles Dana’s Gibson girl and Chicago’s Columbian Exposition, according to Vachel, were among the chief glories of the era, along with three emerging political figures: Bryan, Roosevelt, and Wilson (“Gibson GIRLS, Gibson MEN and the Chicago World’s Fair”). In contrast, the panic of 1893 led to the estimated demise of more than 15,000 American businesses. For Democrats, however, the same year brought some satisfaction, in that Cleveland was returned to the presidency. Illinois Democrats had the added satisfaction of seating John Peter Altgeld as governor. Indeed, when the election results were finally announced in late 1892, Springfield Democrats celebrated with not one but two torchlight parades, and Dr. Lindsay served as a member of the reception committee for Altgeld’s inauguration. The doctor’s badge of office was duly saved and is now part of the Ward collection.

In 1893, Charles and Frank Duryea of Springfield—Massachusetts, that is—built America’s first gasoline-powered automobile. (Henry Ford began work on his, but the car was not tested until the night of June 4, 1896—in Detroit, of course.) On April 30, 1894, “Coxey’s Army” of approximately 500 unemployed men marched on Washington to demand relief. The following June and July, labor unrest spread to Chicago, and President Cleveland ordered federal troops to quell the Pullman strike in Altgeld’s Illinois. On December 30, 1894, suffragist Amelia Jenks Bloomer died: her short skirt worn over baggy trousers had given Americans a new word for their vocabularies. Two years later, in 1896, another American minority suffered a setback in their attempts to gain the Constitution’s promised equality. The Supreme Court upheld segregation, approving “separate but equal” facilities for blacks in railroad travel (*Plessy vs. Ferguson*). The same year the first modern Olympics were held in Athens, Greece, while, on August 16, 1896, another competition got underway. Gold was discovered on Bonanza Creek (just east of Alaska’s border with Canada), and the Klondike Gold Rush began.

In late summer, 1894, the Illinois State Fair opened with ceremonies on its new permanent grounds in north Springfield. It was to be the site of young Vachel’s high-school track victories, and it would inspire mature Vachel’s poem, “The Kallyope Yell.” Dominating the scene was the Dome Building, which had been moved to Springfield in the aftermath of Chicago’s Columbian Exposition. In “The Soul of the City Receives the Gift of the Holy Spirit,” Vachel includes a drawing of the edifice and refers to it as the “Horticultural Building” (*Poetry* 212). (The building was destroyed in a great fire in 1917.) The next summer, on June 2, 1895, Springfield’s *Illinois State Register* headline proudly proclaims: “**LIT BY ELECTRICITY.**” The opening paragraph of the article reads: “When Mrs. Woodruff, wife of the mayor of Springfield, touched an electric button at the county court house last night at 8:45 o’clock, 363 arc electric lights commenced burning, and the entire city of Springfield was lighted by electricity for the first time in its history. Sixty arc lights in the court house square hung under the trees made the square look like a fairy grove.” Ten thousand people, the *Register* reporter claims, witnessed the event.

In 1894, Dutch physiologist Willem Einthoven demonstrated the electrical activity of the heart. The same year Kitasato Shibasaburo and Alexandre Yersin almost simultaneously identified the bubonic plague bacillus. In 1898, Dutch botanist Martinus Willem Beijerinck, sometimes referred to as the father of virology, published his conviction that agents smaller than bacteria caused various diseases. He named these agents “viruses.” On January 5, 1896, the Austrian newspaper *Wiener Presse* published the first public account of a discovery by German physicist Wilhelm Röntgen—a form of radiation that would finally be called X rays. In a matter of months, Springfield newspapers began to advertise treatment with X rays as a cure for diphtheria (and nearly any other disease the advertiser could imagine). Also in 1896, Henri Becquerel discovered the radioactive properties of uranium. The following year, 1897, Ivan Petrovich Pavlov published his study on the physiology of digestion; Almroth Wright introduced a typhoid vaccine; Paul Ehrlich developed the blood count; and Friedrich Löffler prepared a vaccine against foot-and-mouth disease.

Thomas Edison had commenced working on the technology for motion pictures in the fall of 1887; and finally, on July 31, 1891, he patented his Kinetoscope. Less than three years later, on April 14, 1894, Edison brought motion pictures out of the laboratory and into the public domain, as the first Kinetoscope parlor opened at 1155 Broadway in New York City. A coin-in-the-slot peep show, the Kinetoscope provided 15 seconds of people and objects in realistic motion. (The Edison Kinetoscope “Record of a Sneeze,” January 7, 1894, “starring” Edison’s helper, Fred Ott, was the first motion-picture film copyrighted in the United States.) Two years later, on April 23, 1896, Edison’s Vitascope system of projecting movies on a screen was publicly demonstrated at Koster and Bial’s music hall in New York City. The event is viewed by some as the dawn of the motion-picture industry. Also in 1896, a brief “movie” entitled *The Kiss*, with performers May Irwin and John Rice, incited the first clamors for film censorship. In 1897, R.G. Hollaman of New York’s Eden Musee produced a Passion play on three reels of film, in what likely was the first story told in motion pictures. (Edison’s eight-minute classic, *The Great Train Robbery*, was not issued until 1903.) [Note 13]

On January 4, 1896, Utah was admitted to the union, so that nine months later, when William McKinley defeated William Jennings Bryan, McKinley became the 25th President of 45 united states.

Notes for Chapter Five

[Note 1] In the summer, 1894, a spectacular fire destroyed “the grandest of the World’s Fair palaces” (Smith 226). A stone replica of the Art Palace, built with a million dollar gift from Marshall Field, is now Chicago’s Field Museum.

[Note 2] “Turner-verein” is a pun on the German word for an athletic club or gymnasium: Turnverein. People of Vachel’s generation used the German word to describe dance clubs and other organized recreational activities. For more on Vachel’s love of the American West and Turner’s influence, see Graham, pp. 73, 78, 141; Massa, pp. 157-160, 176-177. For more on the “World’s Fair Concept” and Vachel Lindsay, see Massa, pp. 119-121, and Vachel’s letter to Harriet Monroe (February 9, 1927—Chénétier, pp. 381-384).

[Note 3] One of Frances Hamilton’s scrapbooks includes an unidentified newspaper clipping (c. 1915) entitled, “The Ten Books I Have Enjoyed the Most.” The anonymous reporter cites Vachel on his favorite books and authors: Poe, Swinburne, *Hamlet*, *Spoon River*, *Huckleberry Finn*, Carlyle, Lanier, William Herndon (the Lincoln biographer), Kipling, and the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. In 1913, writing to fellow poet George Sterling, Vachel affirmed that Poe was his “first great literary passion and a deathless one” (Chénétier 69). For Vachel’s assertion that Poe’s “Ulalume” was his favorite poem, see Graham, p. 155. See also Massa, pp. 186-187.

[Note 4] Joy Lindsay-Blair claimed that Dr. Lindsay’s “talk of economy was always very irritating” to her brother, “and made Vachel go to all sorts of extremes such as that of saying ‘If I had a million dollars I would scatter it all over the state-house yard and never turn around to see who picked it up.’ Vachel believed our thoughts should always be above money—but if it had not been for Papa’s savings where would his sisters and brothers have received their education and start in life? I can not call a man stingy who was an elder in the church and gave liberally to it, who gave each of his children five or

more years of college, took Mama on four trips to Europe and one to China, besides many summers spent in Colorado” (Blair).

[Note 5] In 1926, Vachel wrote: “Across the street from the old house [his boyhood home] is a tiny Congregational church. There attended the greatest English teacher I have ever known—Susan E. Wilcox. Though a Campbellite of the Campbellites, nothing interfered with my sneaking in alone as a small boy to go to free stereopticon lectures at that church. Colored slides were shown of the bombardment of Fort Sumter, while the Battle Hymn of the Republic was sung. The speakers were sure New England had established Plato’s Republic or the like” (“What It Means to Be a Poet in America” 12). The church was destroyed by fire during Vachel’s lifetime.

[Note 6] Vachel advised Professor Calvin Dill Wilson: “I suppose I should list Esther Katherine^ [!] Frazee’s heavier accomplishments in the academic line. The house was full of Latin books and she made an awful mistake when she tried to teach me Latin all by herself, when I was about eight. Those were tragic hours for so great a teacher. The only Latin I ever get is when I look at a good marble bust of a wicked Roman senator. I get his number, all right. The Latin book is different” (February 7, 1927). Vachel tried Latin again at Hiram, as we shall see, with very little success. On Rachel Hiller, Vachel informed Nellie Vieira: “She has made her way as a brilliant individual, a solitary soldier of fortune, against odds and come out triumphant. To *my* mind she has the most valuable social and intellectual standing of any woman in Springfield. Her brains are overestimated, and people take her flaming aspiring spirit for what it is worth, and it is worth a great deal. She is a climbing rose that has climbed so high that even the conceited potatoes and cabbages admit it, and the potatoes and cabbages are the last to admit anything.” He added that he himself knew her “well enough to know that she naturally was a very very conventional Ladies Home Journal sort of a person, with a prim pedantic moralizing mind . . . , and if she had been born in Jewish circles large enough for a woman of brains to have any sort of place there, she would have been as conventional and peaceful and happy and respectable as any pillar of society you can name. . . (Fowler 177-178).

[Note 7] Cf. William Stanley Braithwaite: “About the man it may be well to know these facts of his career. Mr. Lindsay was born in the house in which he still lives at Springfield, Ill., in November, 1879. He attended the Springfield High School, where he had the distinction of being the champion walker, an accomplishment which was of considerable value during his foot tramps through the West and South” (“Vachel Lindsay, a Lincoln Turned Poet,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, “Part Three,” February 13, 1915).

[Note 8] When Masters suggests that Kate Lindsay’s “general temperament was not so reassuring upon this subject [Altgeld]” (50), Olive wrote “horrid slam” in the margin of her copy of the biography. At the bottom of the page, she added: “Both Papa and Mama greatly admired governor Altgeld.”

[Note 9] Vachel’s love for Democrat Bryan did not go unchallenged by his mother’s Republican family. On November 16, 1896, his second cousin, H. Pritchard Ross, wrote to him from Rushville, Indiana: “How did you like the news of Nov^ 3rd? It was ‘wery good,’ as Samuel Weller would say. I suppose you take your consolation out in saying:

‘Well, defeat in 1896 means victory in 1900, Hurrah for Bryan?’ I don’t see how in the world anyone can construe such an idea out of such a foolish statement. I even doubt whether Bryan will be nominated in 1900, or still farther, whether the Democratic party will advocate ‘free silver.’ Every person who stops to consider the silver question should ask himself this question, ‘Where do I come in?’ I have thus far been unable to find anyone who could answer this question, ‘of what good will free silver be and how will it remedy hard times?’ (and you haven’t either or never will).” The letter is signed: “I am your Grand-mother’s sister’s child’s cousin” (Virginia). Samuel Weller, of course, is Mr. Pickwick’s cheerful and devoted servant in Charles Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers* (1836-37).

[Note 10] The cornerstone for the new Springfield High School was not laid until April 13, 1897. In fact, the names of Vachel’s senior class were enclosed. For some reason, however, the manuscript for Vachel’s dedication speech bears the date “1895,” an error that explains Masters’ claim: “In 1895 a cornerstone was laid for a new high school in Springfield” (44). The date was likely added to the manuscript in the 1920s, when Vachel was reviewing his life’s papers and when his lack of memory, at least in regard to details and dates, produced many such errors.

[Note 11] In 1927, Vachel returned to the Bryan-as-poet theme in the essay, “Gibson GIRLS, Gibson MEN and the Chicago World’s Fair”:

Take for instance Bryan. Bryan was not so strong for the Big Stick. Roosevelt said, ‘Step softly, and carry a Big Stick.’ Another time Roosevelt said, ‘My spear knows no brother.’ But Bryan had another way with him. He was a Jacksonian and a Jeffersonian. He was, after all, in his own gentle way, combative.

He said, in substance, ‘Sing them down.’ And he could do it every time. The silver-tongued orator of the Platte could, till he grew old, sing down in the Democratic convention, any machine ever constructed by any boss. If it was a wet machine, it surrendered. If it was a Wall Street machine, it surrendered. If it was a newspaper machine, it surrendered. It left Bryan shouting and singing—our most triumphant poet: in many ways, our only poet, yet.

Bryan has had little mercy from our intellectuals. They do not think it is refined to admire him. They do not think it is even psychological to admire him. When Mrs. Bryan issued his biography, they all preserved their Greenwich Village regularity by skinning the entire Bryan family. But not one of them could make a speech or sing a song that could be heard across the street. (5)

[Note 12] These comments obviously piqued Eudora South, who praises Kate Lindsay’s culinary abilities in her memoir, *Cousin Vachel*:

she generally made a special confection for these occasions, a pink-and-white cake, its pink layer flavored with rose-water, decorative as it was delectable—unfortunately a recipe now unknown.

In a biography of the poet [Ruggles] a sprightly but queerly twisted picture is given by one who attended the Via Christi and other meetings at the Lindsay home, but who obviously because of her own spiritual limitations could not or would not understand, regarding it all as a mere inept social effort. The storyteller has nothing to

say of the purpose of the meeting but moves on to her climax at the teatable whereon reposed neither pink-and-white cake nor homemade cookies—just nabiscos!

We now can never know what circumstances brought about such a contretemps but of this we may be assured—if a culinary fiasco had overtaken the pink-and-white cake and hungry fingers had emptied the cooky-jar, my Aunt Kate would have resorted to what lay on her pantry shelves with no undue apology for the sparseness of her refreshments. (32)

[Note 13] It is generally assumed that Vachel's *Art of the Moving Picture* (1915) is one of the first, if not *the* first, serious study of film as an art form.

Photographs for Chapter Five

(from South, *Cousin Vachel*)



NICHOLAS VACHEL LINDSAY 1896





Graduation photo of Uncle Boy's Springfield High School class (1897). Vachel is seated at the bottom right. This damaged photo (someone has tried to tear off Vachel's picture) hangs in Uncle Boy's bedroom at the Vachel Lindsay Home State Historic Site, 603 South 5th Street, Springfield, Illinois.



Olive C. Lindsay at age 17: Vachel's older sister (born October 10, 1877). Named for her father's first wife, who died tragically from tuberculosis, the "C" was originally for "Crouch." In later years, the "C" was understood to be an abbreviation for "Catharine," Olive's mother. On the back of this picture, in Olive's hand, we read: "Olive Catharine Lindsay, Age 17 yrs." Olive was kept at home for one year after high school, so that she and Vachel could enter Hiram College together in the fall, 1897.

The picture is the property of the Vachel Lindsay Association.