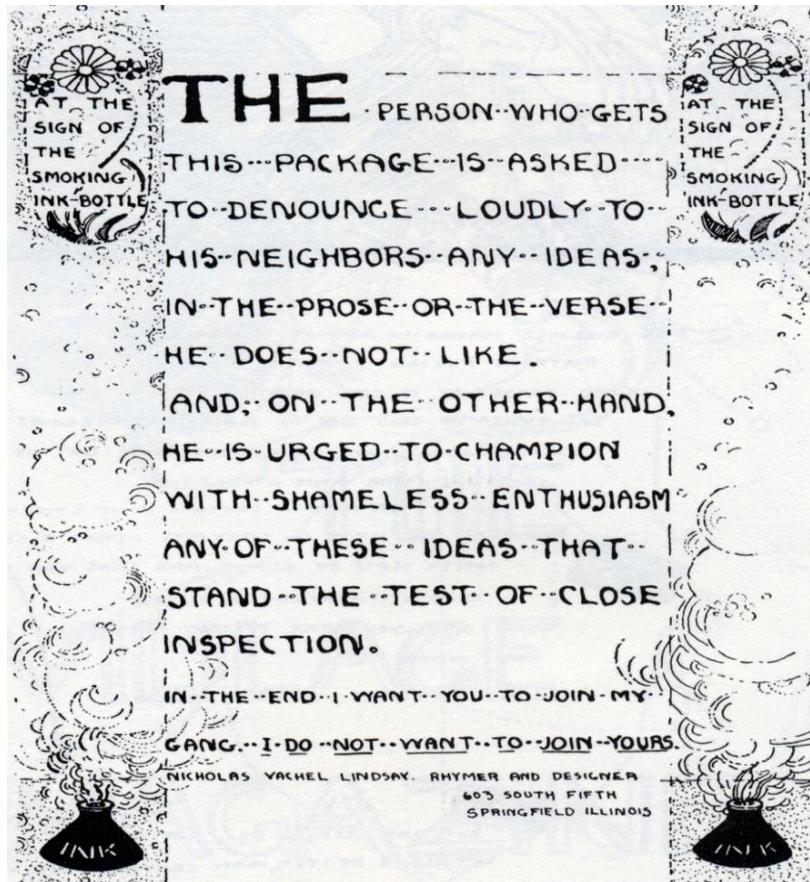


Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Six



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

by

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



6. Hiram and Expectation [1897-1898]

“I am afraid I am a chronic starter.”

1

At 9:30 one night in mid-September 1897, Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay bade solemn good-bye to their two older children at Springfield’s Wabash railroad station. Olive and Vachel, with their friend Harry Harts, were setting out on an all-night train odyssey to Toledo, Ohio, where they would transfer to the Lake Shore line and continue on to Cleveland. Following a brief visit with Dr. Lindsay’s youngest brother and his wife (Arthur Adolphus, called “Uncle Wood,” and Lulu Smashie, called “Aunt Lou”), the three young people boarded an Erie train in Cleveland and reached Garrettsville, Ohio at 3:45 one afternoon, two days or so after leaving home. In G’ville (as local people still refer to Garrettsville), they climbed into a horse-drawn carriage and rode the final three miles to their destination—Hiram College, in Hiram, Ohio.

In addition to his clothes, Uncle Boy lugged a new Caligraph typewriter, a parting present from his parents. His present to them, in turn, was a lengthy typewritten letter/manuscript recounting his trip and his difficulties in “rasseling” with the typewriter (September 24, 1897). It was the first of several hundred letters in which the dutiful son detailed his various activities for his parents’ benefit. [Note 1] While his father paid the bills, he felt obligated to provide a full record, not only of his pursuits and expenses but also of his changing personal feelings. Indeed, since many of the ideas and insights that characterize his later work were formulated while he was at Hiram, these letters are among the more important documents in his life story. Fortunately, they were collected and saved by his mother, who found them, she advised her son, “so interesting” (May 28, 1898, Virginia).

In his traveling narrative, Vachel discloses that several Hiram students happened to be on the train from Cleveland to G’ville, and he received an early introduction to the acclaimed Hiram spirit. “They [the Hiram students] made themselves known to us right away, they were very social” (September 24). The good feelings were further enhanced when the travelers finally reached Hiram Hill, where they were greeted by none other than college president Ely Vaughn Zollars himself. “Prexy Zollars,” in fact, delivered Vachel and Harry to their room in “Miller House,” a local family home and boarding house owned and managed by its eponymous landlady, one “Mrs. Miller.” The personal treatment, no doubt, reflected the fact that Zollars had been pastor of Springfield’s First Christian Church from 1885 to 1888, and he was a close friend to Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay. “The reason that I was sent to Hiram,” Vachel confided to the Hiram student body in 1930, “was solely that (President) Zollars was an old and dear friend of my father’s” (*Spider Web* 1932, 35). As a Springfield pastor, Zollars had faced the sad task of conducting the funeral services for the three Lindsay girls who died in March-April 1888

(McElroy 147). The following June he accepted the presidency of Hiram, then a small, struggling college affiliated with the Disciples faith. He would remain until 1902, when he resigned to become president of Texas Christian University.

Hiram College began its 47th year in September 1897, having opened in the fall, 1850, with the unlikely name of Western Reserve Eclectic Institute. The best-known alumnus, President James A. Garfield, matriculated in 1851 and later served as Institute principal (1857-63). By 1897, the college had added its own preparatory school (the equivalent of the final years of high school) and was engaged in a modest building program. There were some 300 students (about 50 of them in Vachel's 1901 class) and four buildings, two of them female dormitories: Bowler Hall (built in 1880) and Miller Hall (1889), where Olive Lindsay had her room. All women were required to live on campus; the men, meanwhile, lived in private homes (such as "Miller House"), including rented rooms in the homes of the majority of the poorly paid professors. [Note 2]

"There are about five stores in Hiram," Vachel reported to his parents: "we get mail, twice a day. There is an express office, and two hundred houses, but perhaps less" (October 2). For college authorities, Hiram's relative isolation was a decided asset, and the 1897 catalog emphasizes location in several of its itemized "Special Advantages" (26 in all):

1. The location is noted for its healthfulness and beauty.
15. The retired location of the College makes it an admirable place for study. Catch-penny shows and other distracting influences incident to large cities and towns are unknown.
19. There is no saloon within miles of the place.
20. The young ladies are under the special care of a Lady Principal.
23. Hiram has two mails daily, and also telephone and telegraph communications.
24. The village is lighted by electricity, and students who desire it can have the advantage of the incandescent electric light. (59-60)

The "advantage of the incandescent electric light," in fact, cost Vachel 19 cents a week extra during his first year (letter to "Papa and Mama," March 28, 1898).

Modern college students may enjoy comparing their own freedom with Hiram's self-proclaimed liberality: "It is our policy to make as few rules as possible," the 1897 catalog announces: "We designate a few simple requirements pertaining to matters of expediency." Among these "simple requirements" were: (1) "young ladies" could receive "gentlemen callers" in their dormitory parlor only on Monday afternoons, one to five, or on Saturdays from four to five; (2) no young lady could leave the village in company with a young gentleman except with the approval of the faculty—and faculty approval could only be based on the written permission of the girl's parents; (3) students could not possess firearms; (4) using intoxicants or assisting anyone else to use them meant expulsion; (5) smoking was discouraged everywhere and was forbidden on campus; (6) card playing and "other like games" were prohibited "because they are sure to result in serious waste of time"; (7) students had to "report for duty" within 24 hours of reaching the village. Mandated study hours were from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., from 12:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., and from 6:00 p.m. (fall and winter terms) or 7:00 p.m. (spring) to bedtime. "Students are not allowed to engage in sports, or to congregate in each other's rooms

during study hours,” the catalog warns: “Any infraction of this rule will subject the offender to discipline” (50-51). Cuts were limited to three per class, all students had to take two hours of gym each week, four or five chapel orations (depending upon the chosen curriculum) were required during each of the student’s final three years, and students had to attend chapel each day, as well as church on Sunday. In summation, according to the catalog: “The Discipline of the College assumes that the student is truthful and honorable until his conduct proves the contrary” (48).

Dr. Lindsay’s friend, “Prexy” Zollars, almost certainly stressed another Hiram feature. One section of the 1897 catalog is entitled, “Time Saved to Medical Students,” and reads, in part: “We have provided Medical Courses by the introduction of at least one year of elementary medical study into the last two or three years of the Classical, Scientific and Literary Courses. Students who complete either of our Medical Courses can get credit for one year’s work in the best Medical Colleges of the country” (47-48). The catalog also makes a promise that, in three short years, Dr. Lindsay would have occasion to question: “the keenest interest in the medical profession is begotten in the student” (62).

Dr. Lindsay’s son, on the other hand, must have noticed something else in the list of Hiram’s 26 “Special Advantages”: “10. Most excellent advantages for the study of Art are provided” (59). Kate Lindsay, as we noted in Chapter 3, admonished her son to cultivate his “abilities in the line of writing and speaking” as much as he could. In addition, she pledged: “If we can ever afford it, we’ll give you an opportunity to learn the art of illustrating,” although she added: “—but—it does not seem to me these things should be your aim as a profession” (October 11, 1897, Virginia). As to her son’s profession, she agreed with her husband: he would return to Springfield with a medical degree. In time, he would be his father’s successor.

2

Vachel’s Hiram classes began on September 21, 1897, and ran 13 weeks, ending on December 17. Initially, anyway, college officials must have considered his high-school preparation excellent, as he was allowed to enroll in two advanced science classes: Physics and Sanitary Science (the latter was “Hygiene^,” he explained to his parents). He also registered for Bible Geography (a “preparatory” course), Elementary Law, and Rhetoric, the one course required of all incoming students. “The teachers seem all to be of a high order,” the new student commented following his first week: “Of course they may be mistaken and very wrong in many places. But I have not yet met a case of total stupidity and inefficiency^, such as the high school is abundantly possessed^ of.” Professor George Henry Colton, the Physics teacher, especially impressed Vachel, at least at this early date: “He makes the hard points plain before he lets go of them, and I find nothing the matter with him so far. He is quite a contrast to the dense and wooden Carver [his high-school physics teacher].” Meanwhile, Sanitary Science professor, Dr. Harlan M. Page, the primary teacher in the medical curriculum, is described as “a thorough going scientific enthusiast,” while Hebrew professor and Bible Geography teacher, George A. Peckham, is said to be “eccentric and nervous in his manner, but not in the least formidable” (September 26).

The Rhetoric teacher remains unnamed and unevaluated. The Elementary Law instructor, on the other hand, Edmund Burritt Wakefield, is acclaimed as Hiram's most popular professor. In subsequent years, Wakefield's youngest son, Paul, would become Vachel's close friend and finally his brother-in-law. The professor himself is depicted as "a little less peculiar than Peckham, but he teaches well, and knows what he is talking about. He has a splendid use of words, and does much lecturing along with the recitations, but he has always said identically the opinion that I already formed on the subject in hand, but in better words than I could do" (September 26). One week later, Vachel affirmed: "I like the professors very much, as I know them, they are in general a high order of men, such as are rare in Springfield" (October 2).

Harts and Lindsay first planned to room at "Miller House" for only one week, using the time to find different quarters. By September 26, however, obviously unsuccessful in their search, they decided to stay the term. "We have a dresser, a washstand, a good-sized wardrobe, and two desks," Vachel reported: "The room is large and faces east." The cost was \$13 per term per student, plus 19 cents a week extra for the luxury of a light bulb. Meals were eaten at Miller Hall, with Olive and her friends, three meals a day, seven days a week, at \$2.30 per week: "The fare is plain, but substantial, and I guess I can keep alive on it. They give you all you want of potatoes, beans, corn, bread, tomatoes, and such like. They generally don't have meat for supper, and have milk for breakfast and supper" (September 26). One week later, the important subject of food was raised again: "it is generally well prepared, but only the plainest substantials, for the most part, with an occasional piece of cake, or something" (October 2).

For the most part, the living arrangements seemed satisfactory, although Vachel did note one exception: "The only thing I don't like is that I have to bathe in a wash-bowl, as the bath rooms will not be started for six weeks, in the YMCA building" (October 2). On the other hand, he indicated a few days later, "Mrs. Miller makes a good houskeeper, and we are fine friends, and have pleasant visits down in the parlor" (October 7). Upstairs, he covered the walls of his room (as he would in later years) with drawings and, in his words, "a poster I made at odd minutes. The poster bears the motto, appropriately illustrated 'Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy and wealthy and wise'" (November 7). In addition, the walls boasted Harts's large American flag and a variety of college pennants.

In some ways the room at "Miller House" reflected Hiram itself: it was insular and personal. "The culture of the world," Vachel observed, "which is most essential in its way, is completely displaced by the 'Hiram Spirit'" (October 2). He did not receive a daily newspaper, although he did have access to current magazines in the college library. Otherwise, the affairs of the world bypassed Hiram Hill. In fact, many years later, fellow student Arthur Holmes attempted to define the legendary "Hiram Spirit" and concluded that it was marked by insularity, "a total situation," "an organic whole": "Hiram spirit was not enshrined nor manifested in its campus, buildings, library, laboratories, athletic fields, not in any of these, nor in its student body of about 300 earnest young people, nor in its faculty of most excellent teachers. All of these were impenetrated and saturated with a 'spirit' that was nowhere and everywhere, in every individual and in the body as a whole, nothing and everything." The spirit's essential characteristics were "moral" and "religious"; thus Vachel, Holmes argues, was ideally suited to the Hiram "atmosphere":

Into such a spiritual world the spirit of Vachel Lindsay entered and in it his inner life, already endued with a life-lasting religious experience, found a congenial atmosphere in which it breathed, lived and expanded. . . . That spirit inspired all his life, and speaks in his most lofty poems. It maintained itself throughout a period of national skepticism when he stood almost alone among his fellow poets, both in his high standards of morality and in his religious faith. . . . In the “Hiram spirit” of the mauve decade, we may look, I think, for that most winning and yet most elusive feature of Lindsay’s poems. (140-143)

Vachel himself almost certainly would have agreed. “I have since 1912 spoken in every university in America,” he related to the Hiram students in 1930, “some of them seven times, and in nearly all the colleges, yet Hiram looms larger than them all in my eyes, merely because it is my own, and because one’s eighteenth year can never come again.” He also assured the new generation of students: “I took my life in Hiram, publicly and privately, very earnestly indeed” (*Spider Web* 1932).

Spiritual atmospheres in this world, however, seldom preclude all matters mundane. Two weeks after his son arrived at Hiram, Dr. Lindsay received a message that, in one form or another, he was to receive for many years to come: “Yesterday I noticed that my funds were getting low, and thought it was time that the fact should be made known” (October 2). The money was duly sent, along with a question, and the response was another message that, in one form or another, the doctor would read for many years to come: “I think in my last letter that I accounted for every cent I have spent. I did not have more than that when I started. I was there when you counted off the money, and I am certain that you gave me the impression that I had under fifty dollars in my roll and when I counted it, with my money in my purse, I had \$46.45, every cent of which I have accounted for” (October 7).

Further declarations of accountability follow, with additional defensiveness; and, to be fair, Vachel’s notebooks do indeed record expenses in detail, including tuition (\$16), books (\$5.65), gym shoes (70 cents), laundry (25 cents), class annual (75 cents), church collection (5 cents), grapes (5 cents), cakes (5 cents), and miscellaneous expenses—locker, stamps, waste basket, and candy—(4 cents). The tensions between father and son involving money began early in the son’s life and continued until he was well over 30. For the younger Lindsay, the inventories were more than a matter of principle: they were also a matter of pride. He kept detailed accounts because he proudly resolved, someday, to pay back every penny. In spite of the firm resolve, however, that someday never did arrive.

The drain on Vachel’s money was related, in part, to the demands of Hiram’s social life, limited though it was. Fraternities and sororities, as such, were not allowed on campus, although the college did recognize five “Literary Societies”: the Garfield (for preparatory school boys), the Hesperian and the Delphic (for college boys), and the Olive Branch and Alethean (for college and preparatory girls). Harts and Lindsay decided to join the Delphics (the “Ds”), although Lindsay did attend one meeting of the rival Hesperians. The societies specialized in oratory and debate, and every Monday night each group sponsored its own oratorical contest. Recruiting meetings, therefore, featured impromptu speeches from all participants, normally focusing on a preordained subject. The night of Vachel’s visit (October 4), the Hesperians chose to debate the greatness of

the 20th century, and one prospective member decided to take an unusual approach: “when I was called upon, I astonished them quite a few. I told them I had spent a most enjoyable evening and thanked them much for the pleasure it had given me, etc. yet they had forgotten one quite important element of the twentieth century, namely the eternal devil, who would have still great conquests before him, that evil and wrong and murder and treason, and falsehood and wickedness, would still be abroad in the land, that we would be called upon to fight them, and we should see that we fight well. We must give the devil his due, as the proverb says. . . . I was more fiery than otherwise, but was not impolite,” Vachel maintained, “so the Hesperians are trying hard to change my mind for me, as I will not join the Delphics till next Monday [October 11].” The Hesperian interest, though, did not interfere with his good sense of humor or alter his reasonable perspective: “I guess the fate of Hiram does not depend upon my joining either society” (October 7). A few days later, he did indeed choose the Delphics and, soon afterward, prepared and delivered his first society oration: a declamation on the virtues of William Jennings Bryan. Olive, predictably, joined the Olive Branch Society.

Vachel’s unabashed enthusiasm found expression in another aspect of Hiram’s extracurricular life. He allied himself with a group of students who were trying to form an athletic association. Competitive sports, he wrote, is “the one thing lacking at Hiram” (October 7). One week later, he lamented that even the campus leaders showed little interest in athletics: “Too many of these gentlemen preparing to lay themselves on the altar have not enough common ordinary nerve to run a leg-race or get their faces a little skinned playing foot-ball. . . . It disgusts me to hear any one^ who has never had the nerve to play foot-ball running it down.” [Note 3] All freshmen took gym three times a week (half-hour classes), but Lindsay and Harts also spent Sunday afternoons on long walks in the surrounding countryside: “then every night,” Vachel advised his health-conscious mother and father, “just before I go to bed I run around the campus twice. That keeps me from getting too soft” (October 14). Three weeks later, he complained that he had sprained an ankle playing basketball: “It is always my left ankle^. I intend to fix it so it will never give away again, as soon as it is absolutely well. I strengthened it a whole lot last Spring with special exercises.” Perhaps the pain was forgotten, however, since he was chosen as a member of the freshman basketball team (November 7).

Vachel’s unhappiness with Hiram sports life extended to the various dress requirements. With Harts, he went to the gym one afternoon in order to watch a girls’ basketball game. They were asked to leave: “The lady instructor said she had no objections, but some of the girls would rather not have us. It was a match game open to the public, but we were the first horrid males that had had the nerve to come. It was an astonishing glimpse, to be sure. The girls trotted around like a lot of little chickens.” The men, he grouched, have to wear “tight garters and stockings . . . because ladies may occasionally drop in, and then they would be shocked at our bare legs. They certainly have no Scotch blood in them.” He went on to acknowledge, though, that “once in a while I wear my old time costume anyway, and if chance females that happen to drop in are shocked, the shock must do them good, for it certainly will occur^” (November 7).

About the same time Vachel first registered his disgust concerning Hiram’s lack of competitive athletics, he discovered, to his distress, that his high-school preparation did not satisfy all the college’s entrance requirements. He had had nine semesters of

history, and Hiram required only two. However, he had studied advanced algebra and solid geometry, whereas he needed trigonometry as a prerequisite for college physics. In consequence, after the first three or four weeks, Professor Colton, his Physics teacher, demanded that he drop the course, because, Vachel explained, “I had no knowledge of trigonometry[^], and that such a knowledge was essential to this study. I did not like to drop it, it looked entirely too babyish, but the professor insisted.” President Zollars agreed with Colton, and Vachel replaced Physics with another of Professor Wakefield’s classes: Christian Evidences. For some reason, perhaps scheduling, he changed instructors in Bible Geography as well, from the eccentric Professor Peckham to Professor J.A. Miller, who was also his Sunday school teacher. The remaining courses, Vachel assured his parents, “are all easy,” although he promised to continue working hard (October 14).

Two weeks into his revised schedule, Vachel offered his evaluation of Professor Miller: “a thoroughly live man. I like him very much. He wants and requires you to work as hard as he does.” He also added, none too smoothly: “I am not taking anything that I feel is doing me no good” (October 28). His optimism, at least on this occasion, was warranted. By November 23, he could glory in the fact Professor Wakefield had confided to Prexy Zollars “that no one in the evidence class had a better grasp of the subject than I did.” His grades for this first term were excellent, including a 94 in Christian Evidences; a 93 in Bible Geography; a 93 in Elementary Law, a so-so 87 in Sanitary Science, and a 96 in Rhetoric. It was to be his most successful college term, with only the gray clouds of physics and trigonometry darkening his overall achievements.

Vachel’s letters, moreover, offer no indication that he was unhappy in his parents’ choice of curriculum. At one point in the term, apparently with Olive in agreement, he went so far as to praise his parents for arranging to send the two of them to college together: “It would be a mighty lonesome time for both of us, if we were separated. I have not been homesick yet, but I think it is because we are together” (October 2). His mother’s response amounted to a direct appeal to the “uncle” side of her son’s nature, the side that truly blossomed during his Hiram years: “Try to be with Olive as much as you can—see that you take her wherever you ought—go walking with her too—I know from her letters that she is more lonely than you are, and you ought to be of as much help to her as you can.” This kind of request was always welcome; this kind of request made Uncle Boy feel like a man. [Note 4]

3

On a non-academic note, Vachel’s propensity for generating “gosh awful” stories was alive and well at Hiram. On November 7, he confessed to his parents: “Last Monday Harry and I spent the afternoon in the Bowler-Hall parlor with Olive and two lady friends of hers. They brought down a keg of ginger-snaps, a little pasteboard keg, that held about half a bucket-full. Harry and I between us ate that keg half through that afternoon. The ginger snaps[^] had a little red pepper in them to make them hot, and my throat is sore yet. The feast did not discommode me in the least, otherwise than a rather restless night. It got out of me, that feast did, though, and now it is going the rounds that I had the nightmare[^].” Predictably, the episode was the basis for a number of peer jokes, as well as for the following “drama,” which appeared in the very next issue of the Hiram College

Advance (No. 3, November 15, 1897), a bimonthly, belletristic paper/magazine published jointly by the college literary societies:

—The genius of Hiram has given birth to a new comedy of one act, entitled,
 “The Result of the Gingersnaps.”

Scene:—Second floor of the Miller House.

Dramatis Personae: Vachel Lindsay. Harry Harts.

Explanation:—(Harts and Lindsay visit Bowler Hall from 2 to 5 and are fed upon gingersnaps.)

About 2:30 a.m., Lindsay falls out of bed, gets his umbrella and begins a war dance in the middle of the room. Harts awakes, screams wildly. Yells!! Screams!!! More Screams!!!! Police! Murder! Help!!! Murder!!!!

Boys in the house rush into the hall. Mrs. Miller from down stairs^: “Oh boys! don’t hold the light this way but do tell me what is the matter?”

Harts responds:—“Lindsay has the nightmare.”

Petition.

To the Lady Principals:—If you value the welfare of Hiram students and love at heart the peace and quietude of the hamlet, we most humbly pray that you will not allow the girls to feed the boys on gingersnaps.

(Signed)

Boys of Miller House (39)

The college annual, *The Spider Web*, lists the event among the year’s highlights: “November 1.—Lindsay eats a small barrel of ginger-snaps^ and later has the nightmare” (vii). [Note 5]

A few days after the purported nightmare, Vachel accompanied a group of boys who decided to crash “a sheet-and-pillow-case party” organized by the Miller Hall girls. Their coconspirator was Myra Pow, who later married Vachel’s Hiram friend, John Kenyon. (John and Myra would be part of Vachel’s social circle during his Chicago years, 1901-03.) In a letter that his father thoroughly enjoyed, Vachel described his pillowcase adventures in detail: “I had a good time at the sheet and pillow-case^ party. NO one but girls were invited. They tied the pillow-cases over their heads like a kind of a bonnet, and draped themselves with the sheets. Then they wore white masks over their faces, and you could not tell anyone from anyone else. It was called a ‘ghost’ party, so no one was allowed to say [a] word. That was just the chance Harry and I wanted. We got a lady-friend to dres^ us up in just the right way, and we fell in line, and nobody found us out for a while.” Unfortunately or fortunately, as events turned out, two or three poorly dressed boys also tried to crash the party, and the women formed a committee to look for men. Every male but one was discovered and marched out, and, finally, the women seemed satisfied. They were “just about to start the programme,” Vachel declared, “when a good friend of mine, who did not know I was coming, thought sure there was a boy to be found yet”:

So she went around shaking-hands[^]. When she came to me, I did not see her, my mask was poor, and the lights were dim. So that called attention to me. The lady-principal, and the examining comitee[^] came forward, and examined my hands. Upon close inspection, of course they gave me away. The lady-principal, who had learned to love me as her own son, exclaimed “That’s a man’s hand, a MAN’S hand.” She is an elocutionist, and she became quite dramatic. “Unmask the Villian[^],” “Unmask him” etc. When she tore the mask off, (they all of the comitee[^] went at me like a lot of excited cats) when she tore the mask off, she was still more dramatic, to say the least. My tresspass[^] grieved her to the heart. She had thought I was a little angel boy, I suppose. “Oh, Vachel, who would have thought this of you,” she said.

It was such a mock tragedy, that I laughed till my sides hurt.

She seemed to think she had eternally disgraced me, by unmasking me. I didn’t feel disgraced in the least. I expected to be unmasked, sometime in the evening, but had hoped to wait till everybody did. “Now you get out of here Sir” was her next remark. I bade them all a good-evening[^], and left.

The “good” time ended when Vachel fell into a ditch filled with leaves on the way home, after which he was chased by a gang of sophomore boys: “I tell you I sprinted. They would have torn the sheets to carpet-rags, if they caught me, like as not. I distanced them, as I had on plenty of sail. . . . [Note 6] Still later, the Miller Hall Lady Principal (Kate S. Parmly, who taught elocution at Hiram from 1897 to 1900) had second thoughts. She regretted that Vachel was the only boy unmasked, and she saved him “some popcorn and several enormous doughnuts.” The latter, at least, appealed to her victim’s sweet tooth: “I assured her that to be unmasked was what I came to the ghost-party for, but I appreciated the doughnuts, at any rate. So everything is lovely” (November 12, 1897). [Note 7]

The Hiram girls were one of Uncle Boy’s primary joys, and after narrating his pillowcase adventures, he went on to boast: “I am a great friend of every girl in Hiram, have made myself dear to them all, after my famous manner, and you ought to have heard the chorous[^] of welcome, when they, the comitee[^] of manhunters, pulled my pillow-case off my shock of hair. They (the girls) were not at all displeased—‘Why its[^] Vachel’ they said in the same tone the surprised children in the Sunday-School cantata say ‘Why, its[^] Santa-Claus.’” Santa Claus/Vachel was well known because he had likely “perched” with many of the girls present. Perching was a venerable Hiram tradition perfectly suited to Vachel’s self-announced “famous manner.” Hiram gentlemen invited Hiram ladies to share a “perch,” that is, a seat in a public place. Here the two could discuss inner and outer weather, or any other topic close to their hearts. “You see,” Vachel explained to his parents, “the perches are boards across the corner of a rail fence, so as to make a bench for two. That is the origin of the term” (May 32![^], 1898). A typical Hiram joke refers to “perch” as “a colloquialism, commonly defined as four feet wide and six hours long” (“Glossary,” *Spider Web* 1899). The practice was considered innocent, and custom permitted both boys and girls to perch even with the steady dates of their best friends. [Note 8]

For Vachel’s Sir-Walter-Raleigh style, the institution was ideal. On November 23, for example, he bragged to his parents: “I have taken nine different girls places since I have been here, and not very many of them more than twice. Now I have thought of two

more. Eleven I should have said. The girls in Miller Hall have a peanut-party Thanksgiving-night. Each girl is entitled to ask one boy. I was asked, and I am not supposed to know who was it that wanted me, but one of the girls told me. It was the matron, the lady-principal, who once called me a Villian^! I was her choice among all the boys of Hiram! Well, such is life." Earlier, when Olive had given him a box of stationery for his birthday, he expressed his gratitude in terms of his behavior: "I now have something to write to my lady friends upon" (November 12).

The "lady friends," along with the textbooks, curtailed Vachel's poetry writing during his first term, although he did finish two new works. One was entitled "Dreaming," and roommate Harry Harts was clearly not impressed. When Vachel mailed a copy of the poem home, he reported: "Harry says to tell you that the poem I send is neither a soap advertisement, nor a Fiji island love song, but he doesn't^ know what it is exactly. I told him to never mind. It is not such hard work to write them, after I get them started, but the theme is the hard thing to find. The rhymes, metre^ and wording come pretty easy." Perhaps because of his roommate's response, he also made an attempt to explain his meaning, in the process demonstrating the continuing influence of Edgar Allan Poe: "It is meant simply as an effort to express the incongruous, unearthly mysteriousness that some very vivid dreams sometimes have. Even when they are full of unreasonable and illogical events, this does not impress us while we are dreaming, we simply feel the wonder of the thing" (November 23).

The following day Vachel began "Revolution," a 68-line poem that candidly reflects his distaste for science. The work concerns the loss of a "Fairy Queen," who "was robbed of her throne by a rabble throng / Who knew her little and loved her less / Who knew dimensions and weights, / With m and nth powers in their addlepatas / Whose hearts were of gristle, whose tweezers were strong," etc. The Lindsay narrator, like Keats in *Lamia*, laments that "all charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy." He looks forward to a golden age when he and his fairy queen will be reunited:

Back to the hour of Dreams again!
 Back to the land where the Soul was its own
 Back to the Queen I will battle again!
 I will set her for aye on a cloud-white throne,
 Endless and endless shall be her reign—
 Neither cursed by Thought, nor Man, nor Pain
 I will be with my Fairy, my Queen! my Queen!
 I will live for my Fairy, my Queen of Queens!

The poem was written for and sent to Springfield friend and confidante Mary Humphrey; it is signed and dated: "Nov. 24, '97, Nov. 30, '97" (Humphrey). In its worshipful attitude toward women, as well as in its combined retrospective ("Back to") and prospective ("will be") vision, "Revolution" anticipates many future poems, some of them, like "The Chinese Nightingale," normally thought to be Vachel's best work.

Apparently, after sending a copy of "Dreaming" to his parents, Vachel wrote little or no poetry at all for several months, perhaps because of his mother's less-than-enthusiastic response. "Vachel's poem, 'Dreaming' shows imagination," she commented in a letter addressed to both of her college students: "He has a vein of talent, but it will

need patient culture: a few years of training in composition, cultivating expression, enlarging vocabulary he may produce something of value.” She tried to be reassuring, but her sensitive son must have found the rest of her letter even less inspiring: “I am anxious to have you, Vachel, adhere to your plan of educating yourself for your father’s profession—but—equally anxious to have you cultivate your ability in the way of writing and speaking” (November 28, Virginia). As we shall see, both parents firmly believed that a person should focus on one thing at a time—and only one thing.

Finally, in his first term, Vachel began another form of writing. Following the lead of other Hiram students, he announced that he had purchased a notebook: “I intend to record only such as I find worth putting down, or my own ideas upon the subject under discussion when I think they are worth it” (November 23). He would continue recording what he found “worth putting down” almost every day for the next 27 years.

4

Back at Hiram after a trip home for Christmas vacation, Vachel was forced to take a room by himself. Mrs. Miller raised the rent a quarter a week, and Harts moved out, taking another room one-half block away. Vachel stayed behind, describing his new room as “very good . . . a front room, little, with a bay window that takes up the street side of it. It is on the second floor, over the front porch. It has a fair sized closet, and a folding-bed. There is plenty of room in it for me” (January 7, 1898). In time, though, his esteem for Mrs. Miller as a landlady became increasingly strained, so that by March he confided to his parents that he “never knew a woman that could succeed in making herself so unlimitedly non grata to everyone. The fellows in our house are as good as you can find in the school, yet how they do bless her memory” (March 11).

In January, however, Vachel’s perturbation was momentarily directed at his mother, not Mrs. Miller. He had inadvertently left his notebook home, and Kate had shared its contents with a neighbor friend. Her son reacted with righteous indignation: “It is not right for you to read my poems to anybody, when I say I do not want it done. They are mine. I feel what I say most intensely, or I would not speak as I do. I hardly understand, myself, why I feel so about it, and perhaps you may not see reason in it, anyhow when I want them passed around, I want to do it myself, and I don’t want anybody to do it for me. I want you to read everything I write, and if there is anything in the book you have not read, or Papa, read them to him, but don’t call in any more of the neighbors.” Typically, when he was aroused, he found it nearly impossible to drop the subject: “It was something of the indignation that you would feel if a friend of yours would congratulate you on how well you wrote a page of your diary. You have an instinctive feeling that your diary is nobodys’ business but your own. And so I feel that my poems are nobodys’ business but my own, and when I choose to let others read them, all well, and when I choose to keep them for two or three, or for myself alone, I must be respected” (January 7).

Kate responded immediately, trying to assuage her son’s feelings but also adroitly using the occasion to remind him of his primary responsibilities: “I found your scrap-book and read some bits to your father. He works so hard that he ought to have some thing to feed his hopes of your manhood upon. Write him the most encouraging letters

you can. Try every day to do your best for the sake of your father; you are the flower of his life and if you bring not forth fruit worthy of his unselfish efforts, then his brave life falls short of its proper result” (January 13, Virginia). The scrapbook, actually a notebook in which Vachel pasted poems and wrote commentary, is not mentioned in subsequent letters. The brief dispute ended almost as soon as it began, although the exchange manifests the characteristic strengths of mind of both mother and son. They were candid in expressing their emotions, but they also knew how to forgive and forget.

Meanwhile, back at Hiram, the son’s primary responsibilities, namely, his second-term classes, began January 4 and continued to March 25, 1898. His schedule included International Law, Elementary Astronomy (preparatory), the required Rhetoric, and the dreaded Trigonometry: “I will have to work three times as hard this term to do as well as I did last,” he wrote a few days after classes began (January 7). His “trig” teacher, Professor Colman Bancroft, explained little or nothing, according to Vachel; and by January 22, he wanted to drop the course. Prexy Zollars, however, “would not hear of it,” so that in some desperation Dr. Lindsay’s would-be successor attempted (for him) the impossible. He tried to compress his life into a system: “I have my time all divided up systematically. I spend from seven till half past eight on trig., in the evening, and get my International Law and Astronomy in the remaining time, till eleven o’clock. The electric light goes out at that time. Then I sleep till I wake up, which is generally half past seven or eight o’clock. I recite astronomy at 8:15, and from 9:15 till 11:15 I study trig again, making three hours and a half altogether on trig. Then I go to noonday, to dinner, and to Law at 12:30 . . . and recite the fearful and wonderful trig at 1:30. Then we have Chapel, at 2:30, and then I either go to the gym, or to the library, to Wakefields, or somewhere, or stay at home and read or study.” He added the hopeful note that Professor Bancroft “offered to give me extra time to help me out if I needed it, and I expect to when I think it is absolutely necessary” (January 22).

A few days later, nonetheless, he again brought up the possibility of failure: “While I am hobbling along in my trig, I find it quite puzzling stuff. That is I do not see the drift of the argument, and where it is all leading to. It seems but a series of arbitrary formulas and specifications” (January 27). And so the story continues, until March 16, when Vachel finally and regretfully admitted defeat: “I am sorry to say that I have almost given up hope in trigonometry[^]. That is, hope of getting credit.” Still, he sounded the note of optimism that characterized his reaction to defeat in his early years: “I think in a year or so if I keep up my courage, I will be able to dig in a steady way like Olive.” While young, anyway, he generally found something to look forward to, as we shall see, something positive, in every seeming setback. Meanwhile, Vachel’s parents may have wondered how much the failure in trigonometry could be attributed to his success in perching. His list of “lady friends” grew dramatically this winter: “There are at least twenty five[^] girls that I think the most of,” Vachel admitted to his parents, though he added that “none of them are quite such kindred souls as the few at home, Mamie[^] Tiffany, for instance.” One sophomore girl (“quite loveable”), he boasted, had called him “a diamond in the rough” (January 13). Apparently, the vaunting led to an inquiry from home, because the dutiful son made an effort to defend his integrity (as well as to crow a little more while explaining his success): “I do not think I have told any girl anything that I thought was beyond the truth along that line. I simply make it a point to be frank, and as I am susceptible, and prone to admiration, that is all that is necessary” (January 22). A

few days later he returned to what was now a familiar theme: the girls “are so thick around here, that you are sure to find some one^ you love wherever you go.” He claimed, though, that he would not perch with the same girl more than once. Hiram tradition was such that, if a boy dated the same girl twice, he was expected to go only with her for the rest of the term. “That,” Vachel maintained, “makes me tired” (January 27).

The desire to perch with a variety of girls, however, soon ran contrary to the desires of his sister Olive and their close friends. He was asked to confine his perching activities to a newly formed circle, a group of students who decided to call themselves, according to Vachel, “the sextette^” (absolutely no pun intended). In addition to himself, the group included Harry Harts, Paul Wakefield, Olive, and the two Wheeler sisters: Jane and Ruth (from Akron, Ohio). On the Wheeler girls, Vachel remarked: “Jane is 17, I think, and the Homliest^ girl I ever saw, to be so good-looking and refined in her appearance. She is built on the plan of an ordinary jewess^, and none of her features are an improvement on that type, except, perhaps, her eyes. At the same time, though she would stop a clock, she manages to please your eyes, and never hurts them. . . . Ruth is a mild edition of Jane, two or three years older, more delicate, leaner, and perhaps more sensitive” (February 17). In a few years he would consider himself engaged to Ruth, but at Hiram she was simply one among many.

To the chagrin of the other members of the “sextette,” though, Olive’s brother, for a time, followed Aunt Fannie’s advice and refused to limit himself to one girl, choosing instead to perch with his art teacher Allie Dean (a Hiram instructor from 1896 to 1907) and with fellow students Bertha Peckham (daughter of the professor), Besse Frazier, Alice Robinson, Elsie Jackson, and Mable Philips, as well as several others that he did not bother to name in his letters. One girl, whom he referred to as “Miss Mader^” (her name was Anna Maeder), sent him a valentine inscribed:

You are a jolly little lad
 But your flirting makes me sad.
 Do you think that time will be
 When you’ll only flirt with me?

“I let the Valentine speak for itself,” the “jolly little lad” commented to his parents (February 17).

When Vachel did break his vow not to date the same person more than once, he did not choose a member of the “sextette.” On February 12, a few days before the above letter, he advised his parents that he had taken a long walk with Adaline Mugrage: “She is one of the fine girls of Hiram She has quite a winning way about her, and is a budding philosopher, and very refreshing to a mind jaded with doing nothing, principally. . . . Adaline is a fine girl. She somehow or other makes you talk about yourself, which I very much enjoy. That is her principal attraction. . . . I tell you these feminine friendships do a fellow lots of good. They are an education in themselves.” Five days later, what Anna Maeder referred to as “flirting” paid dividends. Adaline, Vachel bragged, had invited him to her birthday party: “I did not take that walk with Adaline for nothing” (February 17). The following week he added: “[Adaline] is becoming quite a grave and wise little philosopher, she sees everything truly and keenly, and is reducing this perplexing existence of ours to a system, in a way that I did about eight years ago though I had fewer chances of success” (February 24). In reality, to relate the obvious, Vachel

had little chance of success with systems at any time in his life, although “eight years ago” (1890-91), in the fifth grade, he had managed to achieve a number-one ranking, and we know how and why he did it.

Perching with Adaline and others was not the only extracurricular activity to encroach upon Vachel’s study time. To his delight, he was asked to draw illustrations for the annual *Spider Web*, a responsibility that was normally assigned to members of the junior class. Several of his drawings, in fact, are printed in the 1899 edition, although his crudeness as an illustrator is readily apparent. (Vachel himself frequently referred to his lack of ability in his college illustrations.) A few drawings also manifest his peculiar spelling habits, such as a large block-letter headline that reads: “RELIGIOUS ORGINIZATIONS.” Three years after the fact, when Vachel showed his *Spider Web* drawings to Miss Vanderpoel, his instructor at the Chicago Art Institute, she told him, in his words, that he “could not finish in less than three years even with two summer’s work” (date book, March 7, 1901).

In addition to his illustrating, Vachel’s continuing interest in sports and physical fitness led him to the handball courts, where he gave new meaning to the concept of spectator sports: “It was almost impossible for me to learn to play hand-ball, because I could not bring myself to get in the game. I would let the balls pass me without reaching for them, I would not run for them at all.” In football, it was much the same story (but a story told in rather garbled fashion): “And kicking foot-ball in the school-house yard I might make two or three wild rushes for the ball, but I would not ‘get in the game’ but, however I would resolve, I would find myself standing still and watching the other fellows work and kick.” Typically, he offered an introspective analysis of his behavior: “I think this tendency to observe for the general effect alone, and to shrink from being a part of things myself, works harm for me when it comes to acting and living, and does not afford me the requisite impulses to make me healthy mentally” (January 22).

Somehow during this term, in addition to his extracurricular activities and his course work, Vachel found time to read *A Tale of Two Cities*, one of his three non-textbooks. (The others were a volume of Shelley’s poetry and a dictionary). Like “Shakespeare,” Vachel lectured to his mother (and to his future biographers), Dickens deals with “the ever existing mysteries of Nature and Man, which mysteries are never wholly fathomed. It is no infinite power to be able to reflect an infinite depth, shallow waters may reflect the stars most perfectly. And there is an endless mystery and grandure^ which man cannot fathom even reflected and to be seen and studied in the depths of muddy waters.” As Taine said of Shakespeare, Vachel continued, “he tears out a distorted fragment quivering with life, and with power suggests the whole of which it is a part.” He finished his impromptu lecture by expressing his regrets that he had no time to write poetry himself, although “I have a thing in mind that I intend to dash off some spare moment, when I have the time and the inspiration that will enable me to grind it out” (February 19, Ward).

As this second term drew to a close, Vachel himself likely feared that his parents would attribute his failure in trigonometry to his non-academic activities: illustrating, handball, football, and Dickens, but especially perching. On March 4, he mailed home an exceptionally brief letter in which he explained: “I don’t even have time to take the girls home the long way any more.” In fairness, though, it would be wrong to conclude that the

entire term was a failure. The final grades included a 98 in International Law, a 98 in Rhetoric, and an 80 (after great struggle) in Elementary Astronomy, as well as the no-credit grade in Trigonometry. The Rhetoric grade was based on an acclaimed oration entitled "Chicago," a subject, Vachel admitted to his parents, that put him at a major disadvantage: "I will have to write something diffuse, dealing for the most part in glittering generalities, as Chicago is not a subject for which there is any material readily available around here" (February 17).

What he finally produced was an oration that personalizes his subject, in an approach that foreshadows his successful New York art lectures in 1906-07 and 1907-08. The history of Chicago is portrayed as the history of a hero, such as John Peter Altgeld or Vachel Lindsay, a man who transformed himself from a sickly baby to a champion walker. "The history of Chicago," Vachel concludes, "like the history of the West of which it is the exponent, is a History[^] abounding in long struggles through small beginnings to realize great possibilities" (March 2, Virginia). In fact, the note of optimism, perhaps more than anything else, contrasts young Lindsay and mature Lindsay. In 1930, when speaking to the new generation of Hiram students, mature Lindsay related nothing of his successes. Instead, he singled out his one failure: "I attended . . . classes but was too dumb to find out what a logarithm was. . . . I couldn't define a logarithm then or now; no, not to escape hell's fire" (*Spider Web* 1932, 43).

5

Toward the end of term, Vachel found himself in trouble, not just with his trigonometry but with the college authorities as well. He ill-advisedly joined a group of boys who tied "a fellow named Berry" (either Harry Z. or Milton C.) to a stool in the Miller Hall parlor and forced him to play the piano. They were stopped by the faculty secretary and reported to the appropriate administrators. In ensuing weeks, the affair wound up in Hiram's "Supreme Court," a body of six students and six faculty that ruled in all disciplinary cases. The boys were forced to write letters of apology, and Vachel's at least was genuine: "I am always sorry when I have displeased any of my friends," he confessed to his parents. "Since I have been told that my late action has offended the Matron and girls of Miller Hall, I am sorry to the same extent to which they have been displeased" (March 24).

After two terms, in fact, the penitent had become something of a legend in his own times, an unmistakable individualist, both in behavior and in appearance. Fellow student William F. Rothenburger remembers: "It was at the turn of the century in Hiram College that I asked the name of the bareheaded fellow student frequently seen hurrying across the campus. With his head thrown back and his long blond hair flowing in the breeze of Hiram Hill, this pioneer of the collegiate style which is no longer considered as odd attracted more than ordinary attention" (144). Marcia Henry, Vachel's Latin teacher, relates similar memories: "As for personal appearance he was decidedly blond, had a habit of throwing his head back, was not very tall, but was distinguished looking. He often held forth on the subject that artists had no business to marry. He was a militant, professing Campbellite. He was consciously dramatic," although, she insisted, he was also "a normal boy with healthy interests" (Curry 11).

Joan Stauffer, the daughter of two of Vachel's Hiram classmates, echoes and expands on Henry's sentiments: "My parents both reported Lindsay as an eccentric individual who wore carpet slippers about the town late at night, and wrote astonishing poetry for the college annual. . . . I think the average student at that time probably looked upon Lindsay as good hearted, 'kiddish,' eccentric more through his youth than anything, and not to be taken very seriously" (Curry 11-12). Good humor, indeed, seems to characterize the other student's reaction to their "good hearted, 'kiddish,' eccentric" classmate. The Hiram *Advance* (No. 2, November 1, 1897) reports as news: "Vachel Lindsey^ combed his hair last Sunday" (23). The 1899 *Spider Web* alleges that Olive's reason for going to college was "to see that Vachel has his hair combed on Sunday." As the squibs and the stunts continued, however, at least one person on the Hiram campus was not amused. Prexy Zollars, as we shall see, would have a few comments to make regarding the behavior of the eccentric son of his dear old friends.

6

Olive Lindsay spent the short break between the second and third terms in Akron, at the home of the Wheeler sisters. Her brother remained on campus, ostensibly to work on his nemesis, although another squib in the *Advance* suggests that trigonometry did not receive all of his attention: "On Sunday morning, March 27, Vachel Lindsay was studying his Trigonometry very industriously. When asked what he was doing, [he] said that he was to recite to Prof. [Emerson J.] Smith in a few minutes. Now we don't want you to think that either of these persons are accustomed to do such work on Sunday, but Vachel had been out the night before, and had been somewhat confused by a great many 'kisses' (No. 12, April 1, 1898). Prexy Zollars, Vachel informed "Papa and Mama," arranged for him to study "trig" during "the next week or so" (March 28), and he began the make-up work in earnest. Vachel's enthusiastic beginnings, however, did not always lead to successful endings. He generally left the starting blocks, to use a track metaphor, with a full head of steam; finishing the race was an altogether different matter. Predictably, his April and early May letters this year disclose that he had not, in his words, "touched trig since break" (April 13).

Meanwhile, the beginning of each new term proved to be an emotional high point in Vachel's Hiram career. As most human beings, he relished the opportunity to take up life's struggles *de novo*: "I have started out right in my lessons this term, and do not want to fall behind, the spirit truly is willing, but I am afraid I will fall back into my old ways before a week is over. One thing in my favor is that I am genuinely anxious to know all about the things I am studying that I can know. I have an intellectual appetite as well as a conscientious spurring in these directions" (March 31). In a matter of months, he would recognize the behavioral pattern for himself. "Of course I am doing well now," he advised his father at the beginning of another term: "—but that does not signify. I always start right. I am afraid I am a chronic starter" (January 10, 1899).

The chronic starter this spring term (March 28 to June 17, 1898) registered for Zoology, Bible Analysis (preparatory), English History, and Sociology. During the first two weeks, predictably, his letters exude optimism. He praised all his instructors and all his courses, although Zoology was the clear favorite: "I do not know why I should find it so much more interesting than other things, it is much the same class of work as Botany

and Hygiene[^], yet though I liked both well when I had them, they did not fire me with any special enthusiasm” (April 8). Looking back over their son’s record during the first two terms, Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay must have been pleasantly surprised that a scientific discipline could “fire” any interest at all, let alone a “special enthusiasm.”

Pleased or not, Dr. Lindsay insisted that the new term begin with an accounting update. His son responded with an itemized list of expenses for the term just passed: a total of \$65.37, including books (6.00), room (12.00), tuition (11.00), and board (20.00). He also demonstrated his lifelong insouciance in respect to mathematics: “That leaves \$15.97 I think, for incidentals, about 1.33 a week. The laundry was on an average of .30 a week, leaving \$1.03 for general expenses not before specified. That is not as strictly economical as I intended to be. Sure enough, I forgot the light. That was 19 cents a week” (March 28). When asked for details concerning the “incidentals,” Vachel answered: “Those were necessary, I think. They are mostly entertainments, etc. I did not go to half that went on, on account of the expense. I could not stay out of everything, in justice to my lady-friends” (April 13).

Vachel was responding the day after “Sugar Day,” another Hiram tradition that few students cared to “stay out of.” Hiram was (and is) surrounded by groves of maple sugar trees, and spring perching trips to the sugar camps were popular student activities. Vachel himself perched with several girls, including another new girl, “Miss [Christine] Hudson” (March 31). In addition to the ad hoc trips, the college designated an annual “Sugar Day,” a unique holiday on which classes were cancelled and students visited the camps en masse. “Sugar Day,” in 1898, was Tuesday, April 12, and Vachel and the rest of the “sextette” made the expected trip together, the boys, of course, paying for the “incidentals.” For Papa’s further information, Vachel went on to relate how the Miller Hall girls and the Miller House boys went serenading. Afterwards, there were “refreshments, chocolates, fruit, cake and such,” again paid for by the boys: “They assessed me twenty cents to pay for the refreshments for the girls. When things like this happen twice a week or more, it is easy to see where the money goes to. You can’t back out very well” (April 13). Accordingly, a week later, he bragged that he had been perching with Besse Frazier, “a girl with a passionate heart, I think and certainly a beautiful face” (April 21); and, of course, there were certain incidentals.

So the accounts of social activities continued, until, as Dr. Lindsay likely anticipated, a letter arrived requesting money. The doctor may also have anticipated his son’s wry explanation: “My incidentals have been quite incidental of late.” Candidly, the letter also outlines daughter and son’s game plan: “It is Olive’s turn to write, but I will anyway. Write for money—I mean. I wrote first term, she wrote second, and this term we alternate.” Then, in an attempt to placate his father, Vachel also reported that he had made the ultimate sacrifice. He had given up his nickel’s worth of candy each week, something he valued, he maintained, more than the average Hiram lecture and more than the average Hiram meal. “Candy is never so tempting as when one has just survived the monotony of an average boarding house meal,” he observed, adding that the meals reminded him of Tennyson’s “description of Maud’s face—‘Icily regular, splendidly null, dead perfection—no more’” (May 2).

Dr. Lindsay answered immediately, sending thirty dollars but enclosing a remonstrance: “A letter from Vachel yesterday asking for money. I fear you have not

paid as much attention to mathematics as you ought to have done—for this now overreaches[^] the estimate you made about Apr[^] 1st. Be economical—don't be niggardly[^] though" (May 5, Virginia). His son responded with equal promptness: "We were very glad to get it, especially this part of we. Papa says I have overreached my estimate[^]. Well I tried to explain that in my last letter. A fellow's[^] shoes will wear out, and he will get out of clothes, and he won't know exactly just when." This time, in a rare display of judiciousness, the fellow in question avoided references to "incidentals," although he did brag about his popularity. It seems that the 32 girls of Miller Hall arranged for a select group of boys to approach them separately with mock marriage proposals. Proudly, Vachel related that he had been accepted 25 times and refused only 7—much better than average, he boasted—with no mention of "refreshments" (May 7). Dr. Lindsay may or may not have been impressed; at least he seems to have stopped asking questions. Monetary disagreements between father and son, however, were not over: they had only just begun and they would continue long after Hiram. Dr. Lindsay was generous, but he made inquiries. His proud son's answers were defensive and, on occasion, downright belligerent. [Note 9]

Ironically, the failure to agree on expenditures may lie behind the fact that the son's letters this spring contain several reassurances of his determination to be a doctor. He could be contentious, but at heart he remained the "dutiful son." (As a maturing human being, he also was beginning to understand the basic laws of bread and butter.) He accepted his mother's suggestions that he consider medicine as a vocation, art as an avocation, although he added his own interpretation as to how he might go about accomplishing his goals: "There is no time like the present to learn to draw, while the fingers are young and limber, and one has not any but the responsibilities of preparation[^] for life upon his mind, none of those of following a profession. The more I think about it, the more I am settled in my expectation of becoming a physician." He was convinced, he declared, that his abilities to draw and to write would make "direct and financial benefits in the profession," so that he was determined to perfect his creative talents "and perhaps I will be sufficiently proficient to make my drawing and writing count without any extra training in the former and go to doctoring as soon as I get through medical college, without any feeling that I am letting something valuable be lost through lack of exercise and development" (May 11). Several days later he returned to the subject: "I have no doubts of being a doctor, so far." But he also claimed to know his limitations: "I do not think I am man enough quite, yet, to go to studying the business" (May 22).

The end of term brought a different story. In the beginning, the chronic starter was filled with renewed hope and renewed determination. He pinned a hand-lettered sign to the walls of his Miller House room: "Take a chair, but do not act the Hog with my time." In accord with the message, he poured himself into his studies and filled his letters with hopeful and promising messages—for the first six weeks. By early May, however, the "old ways" began to return and, as usual, young Vachel was candid enough to let his parents know. "I am enjoying all my studies this term, but I have a hard time sticking to them. I make honest efforts to do so, nevertheless" (May 2). A few days later, he elaborated: "Well, I am in for anything during the holidays, in the way of a change. I do not need rest. My nature is such that I always waste enough time to rest myself, even when I try hardest. I am trying to change it but there is no perceptible[^] change as yet. A person lives a week every day in Hiram" (May 11). Ironically, a second sign on his walls,

a sign featuring the words of a popular song, echoed his growing lethargy, as well as his subsequent self-pity:

This is a weary world at best,
What is the use, my heart, of living,
'Tis vain to seek for peace and rest,
This world is cold and unforgiving.

Perhaps in another attempt to assuage his parents' anxieties over his academic success, he announced at one point: "I have not written a bit of verse this term, or last. That shows just how busy I have been, for I have had several in mind, which I intend to attend to this summer, if it is possible. That will be good recreation." He then confessed: "I revised the other night, an apostrophe I once wrote to Pele, the Hawaiian goddess[^] of fire, who dwells in the volcano there." The poem is entitled "Death to Fire," and Vachel enclosed a copy with his letter, along with a pointed comment to the effect that he was disappointed because neither of his parents seemed to care about his verse. The opening stanza is representative of the work's quality:

The embers of thy ending life
Pale faintly in my baneful breath
Thy strong soul strikes and struggles still,
But knows its end. For I am Death. (May 11)

His parents' reaction, if any, has been swallowed up by Pele's foe. [Note 10]

Ironically, the reference to poetry may have proven to be a stimulus. Anyway, soon after writing the above letter and without letting his parents know, Vachel found time to compose a lengthy prose and poetry piece for his friend, Paul Wakefield. "The Triumph of Friendship," dated May 22, 1898, survives in the Ward collection and begins: "There was once a dreamer, who had a strange fancy." A prose introduction gives way to 48 lines of verse, part of which is quoted in Ruggles (62). The dreamer-author's "strange fancy" turns out to be another imagined battle between the forces of evil and the forces of love and beauty, not unlike the conflict depicted in his high-school poem, "The Battle":

We stand to swear by Friendship—more deeply sweet than Sin—
Mayhap the Only[^] thing of good I still may hold as Holy
When the tearing turmoil and the din
Of the bitter strife for Evil over Beauty shall begin.

For the time being, friendship triumphs, but Vachel's relation to Paul Wakefield, as we shall see, was something of a battle in its own right, especially in early years. [Note 11]

Vachel's renewed interest in poetry this spring (1898) led to a brief outburst of creative productivity. During the final weeks of term, he authored "Fits and Misfits," a gossip column for the *Advance*. He also published a serial story in the May 15 and June 1 issues: *The Four Trumps*. Subtitled "A Tale by a Medical Student," the work chronicles the grotesque misadventures of fictitious Hiram boys who form an unholy fraternity. By way of introduction, the narrator announces: "It is the purpose of this writing to give the history of its rise and fall. Its deeds were not worthy of praise, but worthy of permanent record as a fearful example." The fraternity seems to exist solely in order to defy the decrees of all college authority, chiefly through engaging in "unlawful marauding

expeditions by night . . . , as near midnight as possible.” Initiation rites require that a new member “openly do a thing worthy of expulsion, and still remain in school” (175).

In the opening episode of the story, one recruit, “Patrick Cronin,” is accidentally shot to death during an initiation rite. Sometime after discreetly disposing of the body, the gang decides to break into the college anatomy laboratory in order to steal the left ear of the resident “stiff”; and, in the midst of an eerie midnight raid, the first half of the story ends. In between episodes, to Prexy Zollars’ chagrin, someone painted “4-TRUMPS” on the college tower, in a dramatic and sensational attempt to promote the ongoing tale. In later years, if not at the time, Latin teacher Marcia Henry knew who that “somebody” was: “During the years at Hiram College,” Henry reminisced in a 1939 letter to William Curry, “the future poet was full of pranks and fun, helped paint 4-Trumps on the college tower, loved the story of Caesar’s campaigns (though not the Latin grammar), read much poetry—especially Shakespeare, Byron, and Poe, and drew many pictures” (Curry 11). Paul Wakefield also knew. According to his daughter, Catharine Ward, her father enjoyed telling of the time friend Lindsay showed up at a party with dried green paint on his undershirt—the day after the culprit or culprits decorated the college tower (personal letter, August 9, 1987).

With interest now heightened by real-life vandalism, the concluding episode of *The Four Trumps* appeared in the June 1 issue of the *Advance*. The gang finally succeeds in breaking into the lab, and one member cuts off the cadaver’s left ear. Afterward, though, the head of the “stiff” rises from the table and takes on the features of a young man: Patrick Cronin. The resulting shock, according to the narrator, “broke the power finally and forever of the once inevitable Four Trumps . . . they refuse to take any part in any further escapades” and so the story ends (189). Although it is difficult to generalize about Vachel’s strange, rambling tale, *The Four Trumps* likely reflects what the author imagined Edgar Allan Poe would write—if he were he a mischievous, moral-minded freshman at Hiram College in 1897-98. [Note12]

On a more romantic note, Vachel continued to perch with a variety of girls, although his interest in Ruth Wheeler became more and more manifest as the spring progressed. On May 22, he advised his parents: “Ruth is a rare girl, sensitive, sensible, dainty, spiritually and physically the embodiment of refinement.” He added that she was “sage and wise and old and sensible in matters of serious import, and always willing to be earnest on the grave occasions she is infallible in recognizing.” Still, Ruth and the “sextette” were far from monopolizing his social time. His role as illustrator of the *Spider Web* led to an invitation to the Junior-Senior banquet, and his date was his companion illustrator, Edith Cowdry. Ruth, meanwhile, went with a junior boy, and Harry Harts and Jane Wheeler were “waiters.” The juniors also wanted Olive to serve, but Vachel, in not-very-brotherly fashion, blocked the invitation. His circumlocution evidences some embarrassment as he tried to explain to Papa and Mama that he did not want the occasion to be a “family affair We are a little kin to our mother, and inspire jealousy in a few nondescripts always, I suppose, and it is worth while to try to keep the demonstrations of it in abeyance, if possible by doing as little as possible to call it forth.” He went on to describe the impressive banquet menu as “holy smut, as the boys say here” (May 25). Olive’s feelings are not a matter of record; her brother’s self-proclaimed jealousy,

though, is a rare manifestation of sibling rivalry. Generally, brother and sister seem to have kept such feelings, in Vachel's words, "in abeyance."

Along with Ruth Wheeler and several others, Vachel continued to perch with Adaline Mugrage, even though she and his friend, Charlie Smith, had become "steady" dates. "She belongs to Charlie Smith at present, a boy just like her," Vachel commented: "and if he has sense enough to treat her rightly, she will remain his, I judge. I overheard him talking in the library, the other day,—(he is a good friend of mine, and meant no jealousy by it—) If I don't take her to chapel, Vachel always does, so I am going to do it a little. . . . Now that is perching at its best, in Hiram" (May 32^).

Perching, poetry, and prose, then, helped to sidetrack Vachel's academic concentration this spring, but his continuing interest in athletics and his growing interest in the Delphic oratory contests were also contributing factors. Early in the term, the two interests merged in a Delphic oration entitled: "Obligations to Our Athletics" (April 11)—an oration that received special praise in the *Hiram Advance* (No. 14, May 1). Vachel's success on the platform, though, did not carry over to the handball courts: "I was wiped in my usual manner. I have beaten just three games since I have been to Hiram" (May 7). As for his ineptitude, he had a ready explanation: "A fellow cannot train if he has no prospect of anything of the kind before him" (May 11), that is, no prospect of organized competition.

When competition for the freshman basketball team did come along—they were challenged to a game by the sophomores—Vachel was no longer a member of the team. Instead, he chaired what he called the "freshman yell committee." The freshmen won 17 to 10, and the triumph turned out to be a very memorable occasion for the yell-committee chair. "Tell the historian who would record my delicate history," he proclaimed to the Hiram students in 1930, "that I was chairman of the freshman yell committee and wrote many temporarily successful yells" (*Spider Web* 1932, 35). Later, when the freshman baseball team played the "senior preps" (preparatory school), the preps won 9 to 5, notwithstanding the efforts of the yell committee. "That was as good as we expected to do," gracious-loser Vachel explained, "but we accepted their challenge, anyway. I was not much worried over the defeat and neither were the rest of the class. When the Sophs got licked by us in basket-ball^, they slunk out and disappeared sore and crestfallen, but we died game yesterday, and yelled like we had beaten, after it was over, and drowned out the prep yell with the Freshmen yells" (May 32^).

The mixed success in athletics proved to be something of a motif in Vachel's life this spring. After months of struggle, he and his friends succeeded in getting the college to sponsor a half-mile race toward the end of term. On June 4, the chronic starter left the blocks with a full head of steam, only to slip and fall in a hole by the side of the road—just 20 yards from the finish line. Typically, he was not about to slink away; instead, he declared that he was going to get into athletics "good and hard next year" (June 9). Away from the track, he fared better. By June 16, he knew that he had passed everything except "trig": "I have not been examined in that yet." He passed Zoology, although no final grade is recorded on his overall evaluation, perhaps because the course was considered a prerequisite or a "refresher." The grades that do appear, on the other hand, are excellent: a 96 in Sociology, a 94 in English History, and a 90 in Bible Analysis. [Note 13]

Finally, when it was time to be examined in trigonometry, and contrary to what Vachel claimed in later years, he managed to pass. He had resumed study about May 15, about the time, that is, the initial episode of *The Four Trumps* appeared in the *Advance*. The “fearful and wonderful trig,” to use his description, appears on his Hiram evaluation, without a final grade, as trigonometry also was considered a prerequisite. Still, he had not earned enough credits to merit second-year standing. The 1900 *Spider Web* (covering academic year 1898-99) pictures Nicholas Vachel and Olive C. Lindsay as continuing members of the class of 1901. The official college catalog, however, indicates that Nicholas Vachel remained a freshman, while Olive C. advanced to her sophomore year.

7

Throughout the spring, 1898, the Lindsay family shared plans for a summer camping trip to Stamford, Colorado. For the Lindsay son, it was the first time west since the summers of 1889 and 1891, when he traveled with his father to visit Grandmother Lindsay. In 1898, though, the trip was planned for the benefit of Dr. Lindsay himself. He was not in good health, and his wife felt he needed several weeks of rest and relaxation. He suffered from diabetes and from a painful ulcer in his right eye, an ulcer thought to have been caused when a diphtheria patient coughed directly into his face. From time to time, as we have noted, he also suffered epileptic or epileptic-like seizures. In several letters this spring, Kate warned her children to expect the worst when they returned home for summer. Their father had lost a lot of weight and they were admonished to avoid any “discouraging comments” when they saw him: “The seat of his pants hangs in a regular fullness, like the front of a shirt waist this season. I don’t care for the loss of his fat if he’ll only get well. I am more hopeful of his recovery than he is.—I believe grippe has made him morbid; but he’s more like himself these last few days. It does him good to tell him he looks well” (June 6, Virginia).

Even with his mother’s warning, Vachel was shocked by his father’s appearance. “My father is utterly broken down physically,” he wrote to Paul Wakefield: “He looks like burnt-out ashes. He is suffering torture with his eye, day and night. It has some sort of an ulcer on it, just as it did last year when he was worn out. Sometimes he groans with it, and it takes a mountain of pain to make him groan.” His own job, Vachel dryly reported, was to get the house and yard in order, so that the family could leave on vacation: “My usual systematic concentrated and unflagging industry enables me to pull through these things in more or less of a hurry.” He added that, while on vacation, he was not going to write any of the Hiram girls (June 28, Ward).

The story of Dr. Lindsay’s poor health would continue for no less than 20 years, until his death in 1918. Each year, it seemed, he was grievously ill, but he somehow miraculously recovered his strength during his summer vacations. In May 1914, for example, Vachel wrote reassuringly to Sara Teasdale, whose own father was not well: “It is your business to be just or tender with your folks as you can—but not to believe everything the doctor says—till you must. When I was seventeen years old my father was alleged to be dying of diabetes—and every Summer and almost every winter my mother was either sure he was dying or going blind. I learned—long ago—that things do not happen to old folks till the[y] actually happen. In many ways my father and mother are spryer than I am this minute. Don’t believe what you don’t see. That may be bad

enough—of course” (May 4, 1914, Yale 98). Actually, the spryness of his elderly parents, especially when they were on a camping vacation, was one of Vachel’s favorite subjects. Teasdale, for example, in an earlier letter, had received a full account of Papa and Mama at camp:

You ought to see ’em at it. If there are rocks to lift, he lifts ’em, and she goes ahead and cooks on the camp stove with that big free arm-movement she used when a girl in cooking for twenty harvest hands, when the harvest hands ate with the family—way back in Indiana, just after the war.

Well—they camp all over the place. They have been at it sixteen years. Camp is as elaborately regulated as home—though most informal and non-tailor made in its contraptions. The Camp[^] takes for granted two very energetic old people, one of them a wood chopper—a tent builder—a bridge maker, a water-carrier—a mountain climber, a trunk mover—thats[^] Papa—and the other one a whirlwind cook and general atmosphere:—thats[^] Mama. Between Breakfast and Supper they climb the highest mountain they can find—carrying lunch and eating it on the peak. Then they come home real chipper and refreshed. (December 21, 1913, Yale 14)

Confidante Harriet Moody was told much the same story: “And in all they [his parents] indulge in what many people would consider heroic physical exertions—for either of them would yet prefer to do what they do by heroic bodily force than get any living mortal to do it for them” (see Chénétier 118-119).

Meanwhile, Vachel’s resolve not to write to any Hiram girls, as expressed to Paul Wakefield on June 28, barely lasted one month. Indeed, the most revealing extant documents from this 1898 summer are several personal letters that Vachel sent to Adaline Mugrage. One of these, written at the end of July, relates that Dr. Lindsay was “utterly broken down,” having almost lost his left eye from overwork “last year”: “It had been weak for a long time. Now it is his right eye that is out. He expects to go blind.” In the next two years, his son guessed, the responsibility of supporting the family might fall on his shoulders, just as the same responsibility had fallen on his father’s shoulders in his younger years. With characteristic candor, however, Vachel admitted: “But I havn’t[^] enough man in me. I never earned a cent in my life. I havn’t[^] sense enough to be a farm-hand, as he was. Do not worry about all this, I don’t. But I write it down that I may feel more duty-bound to take the matter to heart, and consider it seriously. My preceptions[^] are varnished over with superstitions of my destiny. I cannot believe a disaster till it is upon me, I wish to break my faith, and highly resolve to do something. I have faith that things will happen as I choose, rather than as they should” (July 30-31). Two weeks later, he returned to the theme, concluding with passion: “Oh, Adaline, manliness is such a noble thing, it is hard for me to forgive its lack in anyone but myself” (August 17-22).

If “manliness” is reduced to physical bravery, Vachel would have to be considered a man in anyone’s estimation. Paul Wakefield, for example, like the rest of the family, was upset with Masters’ biography, but Paul especially objected to the innuendos that his friend was namby-pamby, a “curled darling.” In what he must have recognized as a vain attempt to set the record straight, Paul wrote (but finally did not send) a letter to Masters, a letter that reads, in part: “We learned very early at Hiram that Vachel was not a physical coward. He did some stunts in class scraps that had never been equaled in the history of the college for physical courage. His doctor and most of his

friends failed to realize his physical recklessness” (November 11, 1935, Ward). Vachel’s letters to Adaline Mudge confirm Paul’s observations. In fact, on one eventful day this summer of 1898, physical bravery nearly cost Vachel his life. He was mountain climbing on “Fisher’s Peak,” he related to Adaline, when he decided to tackle one of the area mesas:

I almost broke my neck climbing the perpendicular “Mesa.” (Mesa is Mexican for table-land.) It is 300 or 400 ft[^] high, and mostly one great stretch of stone, with just enough cracks to claw your way up. These were mighty scarce, and two or three times I hung by one hand unable to let myself down or find a higher footing. I had more excitement to the square inch than I will be able to find for a long time. One stretch of the mesa-ascent was loose rock cemented with clay. Here was the greatest real danger, and some places it was not only perpendicular but overhanging. I thoroughly enjoyed this, all but one place where the rocks gave way faster than I could grab up at fresh ones. I got hold of one point, and held on, and finally with desperate wrenching got up to a little better climbing.

That was the biggest day I had out here. I seldom get enough excitement to satisfy me when I am in that mood. But I am tolerably happy without it even at such times. (July 30-31)

In a letter to Paul describing the same event, Vachel confessed: “just once I got panicky, and thought of home and Mother. . .” (July 14, Ward). As we shall see, his dangerous climb, oddly enough, would prove to be good training for his second year at Hiram.

In addition to detailing his climbing exploits, Vachel’s letters to Mudge this summer include subjects and themes that would be repeated in other personal letters to other girls during the next 25 or more years of his life. The mature, “uncle” perspective of his nature is very evident, as it would continue to be in correspondence with future women. At the beginning of a romantic relationship, anyway, Uncle Boy loved to play the role of the older, thoughtful man:

We are too much alike in one way, for the good of ourselves. We both need ultra-conservative, solid friends to hold us down. We are both emotional and impulsive, and lead each other a chase. When we are just to ourselves, there is no one to keep either of us from being too radical. It is delightful for us to be sympathetic and responsive, but it is dangerous. I think we may lead each other on to a dangerous frankness, almost dangerous. If I was two years younger, it would be more dangerous, but I learned one lesson just in time. It is possible for two impulsive children to lead each other on to extremes that they have not experience enough to know are dangerous or not. “A little learning is a dangerous thing.” We cannot half-know either of us, and our little half-discoveries make us too confident. We ought to be sure of nothing. Poets assume that to be entirely confident and trusting is the rare privilege[^] of adoring sweethearts. I do not know. Falling in love has been an act of the will on both sides of the house everywhere. They fell, most of them, but jumped—deliberately. I do not intend to be absolutely sure that the poets are right till I am 28 yrs. old. But we two have unwittingly encroached upon the exclusive rights of confidence that perhaps would belong only to those we loved if we were ten years older. (The argument keeps unravelling. I do not know where it will stop).

He knew his proclivity for writing on and on, where his emotions were involved. Like the narrator of Byron's *Don Juan*, though, he could not resist digressing on his digressions: "I write too much anyway. It is a bad example. . . . I preached my letter full about writing so much and now I am writing interminably" (August 17-22).

The urge to preach went hand in hand with his avuncular nature, and he was not yet ready to drop the seemingly interminable subject: "Do you know I want you to know more of the world? It is the thing you need, most of all. It is the solution to your character. More of the Universe of thought, and Art, and accomplishment. It is not detail you want so much, as the sense of being in touch with things. And now is the time to begin. You will be a woman sometime, and you cannot use the time now too well." After more of the same on the same subject, he promised to lend William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* during the next school year. Howells, according to mentor Lindsay, "knows The World most thoroughly in some of its phases. I do not know of a mistake in the book. . . . Believe me, child," he finally concluded, "your trust, and faith and sympathy for your friend are a decided inspiration" (August 17-22). Both the reference to Mugrage's extreme youth (in implied comparison with his own experience) and the reference to her inspiration were themes repeated many times to many girls. Vachel seldom left doubt as to his self-perceived mental superiority, particularly in the early days of a relationship. He also left no doubt that his self-proclaimed abilities were the results of female inspiration. Two weeks earlier, for example, Mugrage was told: "I wish to be moved to earnestness that is more resolution than emotion. My friendship with Adaline has moved me just one step. Her trust and frankness have given me a vital regard for honesty, in word and act. A friend I told you of once, showed me the strength of frank open-heartedness, but she could not teach me the worth of an honest heart." It would be an eventful experience, he announced, to "perch" in the Colorado mountains: "the realities here transcend what the imagination can see . . . and lead it on to further flights," back to "the brave days of old," when pioneer man and pioneer woman perched on these same heights, and pioneer woman inspired pioneer man. In the midst of his reverie, however, he suddenly turned defensive, sounding a warning note that he would also repeat in future years (usually to his regret, as his correspondents often took the warning to heart): "But you had better be afraid of me, no, you had better not. If we are good trusting friends a long time, I may forget how to tell mean lies."

The next day Vachel returned to the same subject, again extenuating his interest with a characteristic mix of defensiveness and superiority: "I hope you will not misunderstand the way I have written so much. When I enjoy things I sometimes have the impulse to write them up. The effort at description heightens one's appreciation. And I prefer to imagine I am describing for a sympathetic friend. I have failed to send such descriptions often, after I have written them up. I have too great a passion for fine phrases, to say fine things that are more a matter of emotion than conviction. Emotion should be the clothing, the outward expression of conviction, and not independent of deep seated feelings" (July 30-31). And so on: the Mugrage letters are early examples of Vachel's uneasy posturing, his anomalous blend of self-superiority and self-doubt. They foreshadow a flood of letters written to other girls in other years, with one important exception. With Mugrage, Vachel remained in command of himself and the situation; the "boy" side of his nature did not emerge. [Note 14]

Eleanor Ruggles quotes an excerpt from Mugrage's response to her friend's verbosity: "You are the most thoroughly original boy I ever knew. . . . To me you are a genius. If the world never finds it out it will not make much difference to me. But whatever you may do will not surprise me" (61). In her letter, however, Mugrage also inquires: "And still whatever you may not do, will not disappoint me. Is that not faith?" Vachel's sardonic answer is scribbled in the margin: "No, Sentiment." And later, in the same letter, after an especially gushing passage, Vachel again registered his critical appraisal in the margin: "Sentimentality" (Virginia). In later years, as we shall see, Uncle Boy lost much of his objectivity and much of his self-control—to his own discomfort, if not distress. Chronologically, Vachel adopted the role of uncle long before he adopted the role of boy. His boyishness is most apparent in his mature years. When he was a college boy, he was too busy proving he was a man.

Notes for Chapter Six

[Note 1] The typewriter was a source of fun for Vachel's peers. The Hiram College *Advance*, No. 5 (December 15, 1897), includes the following squib: "They say that Lindsay's parents sent him his typewriter so they could read his letters."

[Note 2] On April 8, 1898, Vachel wrote his parents: "Wakefields live like birds. None of the Faculty get more than a months[^] pay in two terms. Don't tell this. Don't say it to anyone. I had no business to tell it." In later years, Paul Wakefield described how his father and mother "gave everything to their friends, and everyone was friend, especially those who had any need, physical, spiritual or mental. How they lived on the salary father got I do not know. But I do know this—they are the richest people I have ever known" (Hamilton 467).

[Note 3] Among Vachel's books at the University of Virginia is Walter Camp's *Foot Ball Rules* (New York: American Sports Publishing, 1897). His roommate Harry Harts left Hiram after the first year and, in the fall, 1898, became the starting right tackle on Princeton's freshman football team. (Lindsay letter, October 27, 1898)

[Note 4] A week after this letter, Vachel learned that his mother had left for a routine visit to her girlhood home in Indiana. He expressed his concern to his father: "I think she needs two or three months of absolute rest, as I never saw her in such a state as we left her in, before. It seemed to me that she was not like herself at all, at intervals. The strain she has been through was evidently telling on her seriously" (October 14).

[Note 5] This is the *Spider Web* dated 1899. The year, however, is confusing, as the junior class was primarily responsible for publication, and the book was dated according to the year that that class would graduate. The 1899 annual actually covers the activities of academic year 1897-98; it was published in late spring, 1898.

[Note 6] We have already noted (chapter 4) that a droll Dr. Lindsay later advised his son: "be careful don't presume too much on your standing with the young ladies. You may slip up on it and get a tumble that would be more disasterous[^] than falling into a ditch filled with leaves" (November 15, 1899, Virginia).

[Note 7] Vachel's puckish humor is reflected in most of his college letters. About two weeks after the ghost party, he sent his parents the following account of his foraging in

the countryside with roommate Harry Harts: “We have a closet-full of hickory-nuts, which we crack and eat every once in a while. We had about 3 pecks, two or three weeks ago. There are a good many left. We got these all one Saturday. We went back the next Saturday (for the trees were still loaded) to the same place, and were just beginning to gather, when a farmer drove up, and told us that those were his nuts etc. We asked him if he cared if we gathered a few, and he said we had better get out, and that some young thieves had been there the Saturday before, and about stripped one tree. We told him that people that would steal nuts were a disgrace to any community, and deserved to have the law upon them. He agreed with us, and we parted affectionately. I don’t know what we would have done with any more nuts, anyway. ‘Sour grapes,’ you might say” (November 23).

[Note 8] This letter added a new dimension to Vachel’s typical carelessness with dates. His amused mother responded: “Have you a new calendar in Hiram? Our May here is not quite so long as that!” (June 6, 1898, Virginia).

[Note 9] On March 21, 1898, Dr. Lindsay wrote: “Let me know when you will need more & how much.” On April 15, he added: “I will inclose^ \$15.00 each for you & you can report when you need more & at that time you can probably tell just how much to send to complete the course.” In the final pages of his 1901 date book, Vachel summarized his college expenses for the first two years: \$288 for 1897-98, \$348 for 1898-99. He tried to figure the expenses from his third year as well but seemed unable to arrive at a satisfactory sum. At the time, he was employed at Marshall Field’s department store (Chicago), and he was determined to reimburse his father for the cost of his Hiram education. He quit Field’s, however, before he could make even the first payment.

[Note 10] Contrary to what Vachel wrote his parents, he was authoring some poetry. On April 10, 1898, he sent two new poems, “Life Serpents” (Lindsay Home) and “Death Serpents” (Humphrey), to his Springfield friends, Maud and Mary Humphrey. Together, the two poems suggest Vachel’s theme in the poem “The Battle”: the defeat of “Life and Lovliness^” by evil forces, “serpents.” In “Death Serpents,” Vachel’s self-pity may be evident. The narrator throws his heart to six attacking serpents: “with a groan and a gasp, / And it died with them in their deadly clasp.”

[Note 11] (Arthur) Paul Wakefield was born in North Bloomfield, Ohio, October 5, 1878. Through his mother, Martha (“Mathie”) Sheldon, he was “a direct descendant of Governor William Bradford . . . of the Plymouth Colony” (Hamilton 463). His father, Professor Edmund Burritt Wakefield, was a member of the original Yellowstone survey, after which he lost all his assets in a Tucson mining venture. He had successfully preached in Tucson on a dare; and, in 1878, when bankrupt, he accepted a pastorate at North Bloomfield, five miles from his boyhood home. After a pastorate in Warren, Ohio (1882-89), Professor Wakefield accepted a position at Hiram, a school his farmer-preacher father had helped to found. Earlier, when he himself was a student at Hiram, Edmund, “bashful, diffident to the last day of his life, fell madly in love with ‘Mathie’ (Martha) Sheldon, the most beautiful girl in school,” in the words of their proud son Paul (Hamilton 467).

Paul himself summarized his own early years rather cryptically: “Sick from nine to sixteen years I grew up a semi-invalid, no athletics, only playing with girls. Then I went into the gymnasium and fought it out, breaking up adhesion of the old appendix”

(Hamilton 467). In Paul's graduation year, the Hiram *Spider Web* (1901) asserts that he "so far has well sustained the old adage concerning preacher's sons. He is our small boy, general tease and ragger. In his school work he is reasonably proficient, but in his love affairs he is unfortunate, because the girls consider him such a kid. Notwithstanding all this he has good blood in his veins, and all hope for developments in the future" (32). Paul and Olive were married on June 14, 1904.

Professor Wakefield, whom Vachel greatly admired, "had a genius for teaching," his son Paul claimed: "In father's classes any boy of average brain power would get his stuff over the end of the term by listening in during class. So he had a reputation of being easy. One could not attend his classes and not learn. . . . He is the greatest (truly great) man I have ever known and I have a very unholy pride in being his son" (Hamilton 466).

For a second poem from Vachel to Wakefield, "The Nonsense Tree," dated "1898," see *Poetry* 788, 920.

[Note 12] Eudora South's version, based on what she had heard from her cousin and his family, reads: "Perhaps the most that Vachel got out of his pre-med course was the inspiration for a serial mystery that ran in the college monthly, dealing with the nocturnal exploits of the skeleton in the laboratory. The climax of the story came with the startling appearance of a cryptic painting, *The Three Trumps*, one morning, upon the college tower, purporting to be the work of a zombie hero. Undoubtedly there were many among faculty and students who guessed the identity of the artist but Paul [Wakefield] was the only one who knew it was Vachel. The prankster went unchallenged and the mystery unsolved" (*Cousin Vachel* 48). Along with the error in title, South incorrectly dates the story "1899."

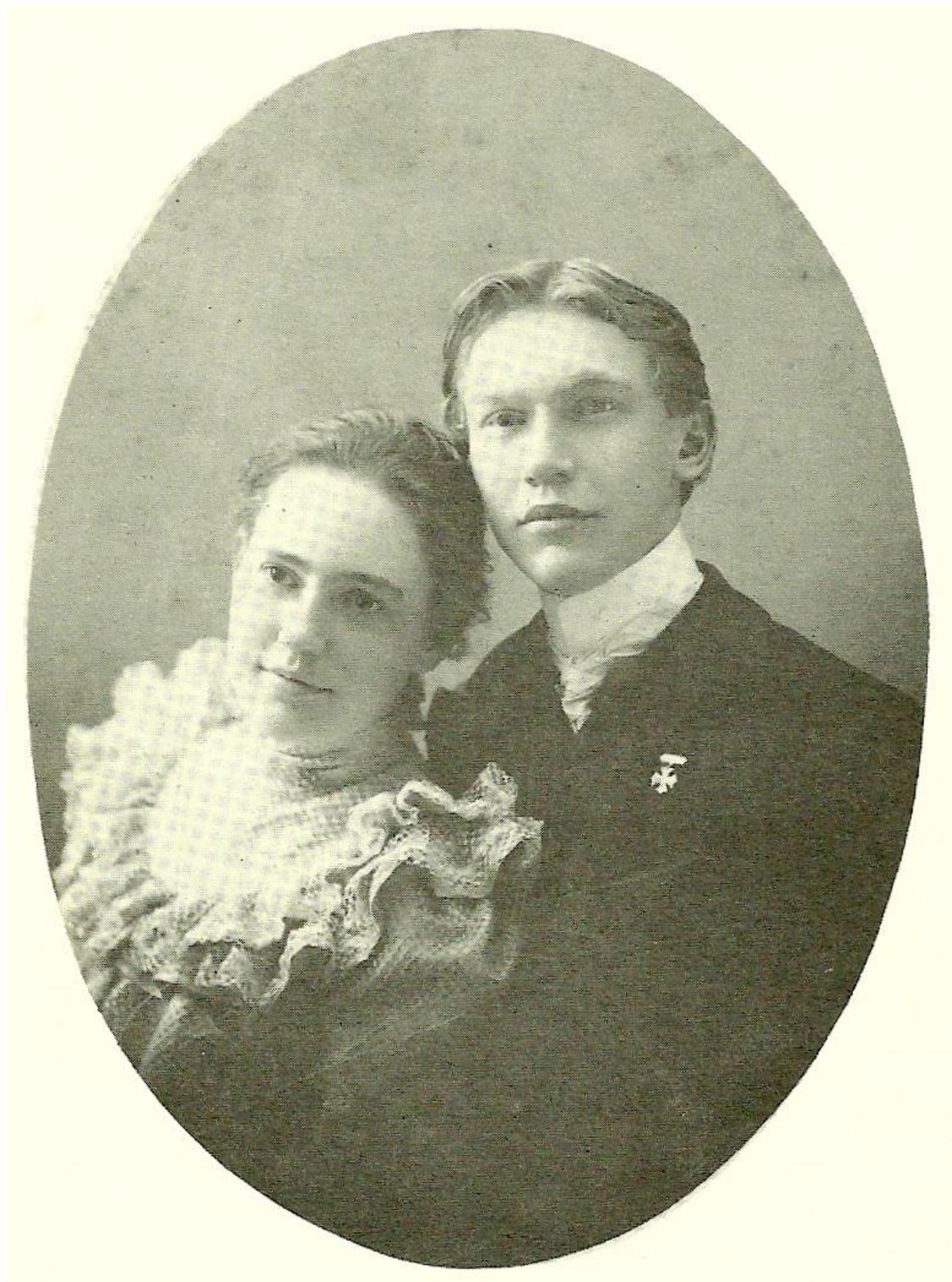
"The Four Trumps" may be read on line at: www.VachellLindsayHome.org. Choose "Biography" and then "Essays & Stories." At the end of the story, there is a link to the Hiram website. Scroll down the page to President Ely V. Zollars' picture, below which is a picture of the Teachout-Cooley Library and Observatory. The tower is on the left.

[Note 13] A copy of the formal appraisal of Vachel's academic standing is at the University of Virginia. Signed by "J.O. Newcomb, Secretary," the *de facto* transcript gives credit for zoology under the section, "College work taken elsewhere for which credit is given on our books." Since Vachel had attended no other college, the Hiram course likely was considered a "refresher" class, and Vachel was given credit for his high-school work. In all, Vachel received college credit for six of his high-school courses.

[Note 14] Vachel's inclination to author poems for his inspiration girls may also be evident this summer. "Astarte" (*Poetry* 789) was written in August 1898, and the title likely reflects Vachel's typical method of disguising a name, in this case, the name Adaline. The Sangamon Valley Collection (see "Works Cited") contains a black-and-white photograph of a water-color painting entitled "The Perch" by Mary Adaline Mugrage, but I have not been able to learn where the painting may be stored.



Photographs for Chapter Six





**Olive C. Lindsay and Uncle Boy at
Hiram College (1898).
Photo from South, *Cousin Vachel*.**