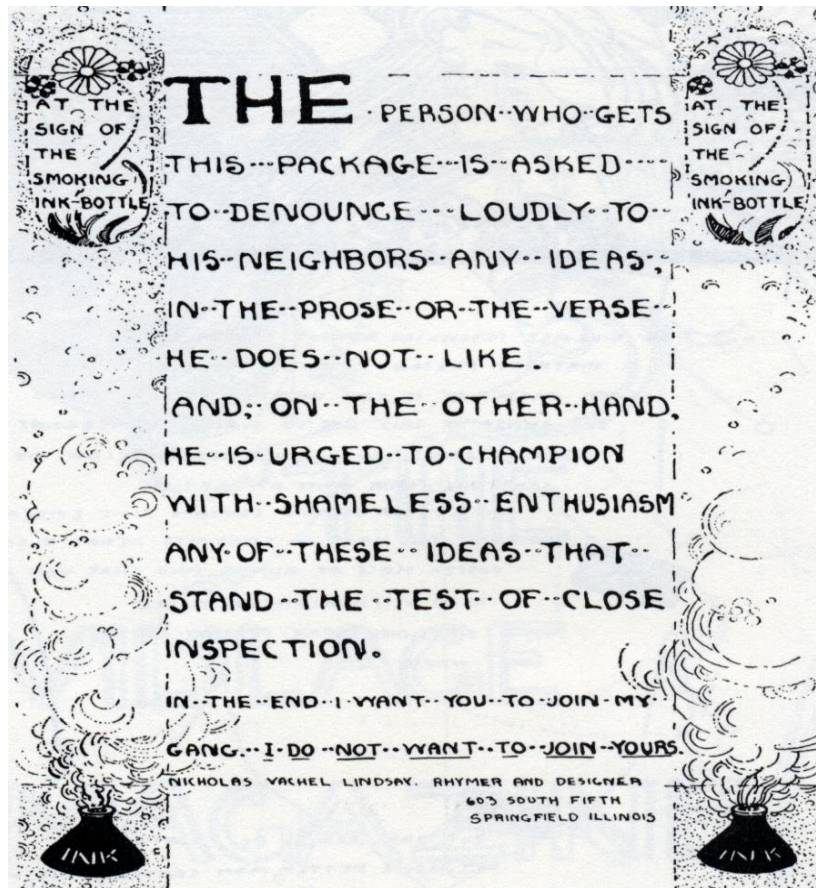


Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Seven

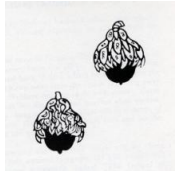


[Vachel's insert introducing his self-published *Village Magazine* (1910)]

by

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[This ongoing biography may be read online at www.VachelLindsayHome.org
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7. Hiram and Perturbation [1898-1899]

“I want you to send me a prescription for cold feet.”

1

When Vachel returned home from summer vacation, 1898, he found waiting for him a cordial but stern letter from President Zollars. The communication perhaps reminded him of his mother’s dictum, “Have all the good time you can, provided you don’t injure anyone else or yourself in any way, or disobey the teacher or break the rules of the School” (Catharine Lindsay). Prexy Zollars’ version was: “You write me that you are making good resolutions for next year. I am glad of it. I feel sure that you can improve very much over last year. While your work was passable it was not up to the high standard that you are capable of reaching. Furthermore, you allowed yourself to get into several little difficulties that you ought to have avoided. It placed me in a very embarrassing situation and I shall expect you to be thoughtful and considerate in these matters next year and not do anything that will cause your friends the slightest anxiety” (August 8, 1898, Virginia). Vachel was about to begin study of anatomy, the key course in the premedical curriculum, and the most demanding. The instructor, Harlan M. Page, was a doctor as well as a professor of biology and medical science. He was known to fail or “condition” half or more of his anatomy students; that is, he would allow them to continue the class, but they would have to raise the level of their work or they would not earn a passing grade. President Zollars was resolute on doing what he could to insure that his friends’ son would succeed.

The son, however, had set his own goals for the new term, and these bore little resemblance to his parents’ or to Zollars’ expectations. Vachel was proud that he had been elected to the governing board (the “Council of Five”) of the Delphic Literary Society, and he vowed to Paul Wakefield that he was “going to be something astonishing” in his chapel and his literary society orations. The avuncular side of his nature had come to the fore: he had an intense desire to prepare orations that would impress and educate his fellow students. He further assured his friend: “I expect to have every production prepared two weeks ahead.” Here, though, his optimism was tempered, as it normally was, with the interjection of some ironic self-knowledge: “Won’t that be astonishing? I will be astonished if I do” (September 11, Ward). Astonishing or not, Vachel’s objectives were clear: he intended to be a social, a literary, and an artistic success. President Zollars’ “high standard” would be a secondary goal, at best.

In addition to his efforts for the Delphics, Vachel supervised the reading room for the campus YMCA; he also sat on the YMCA membership committee. He again submitted illustrations for the *Spider Web* (he received \$15 for his drawings this year), and he wrote regularly for the *Advance*. He played on the football team and he tried out

for the basketball team. He joined the college chorus and sang in a production of Mendelssohn's *Miriam* ("I helped howl on the bass chorus^ for an hour," November 11). He enjoyed long perches with a variety of girls. Even his anticipated profession took some of his time: he was a member of the "Committee on Programs" for the student Medical Association. Academic study, especially in premedical subjects, remained ancillary to nearly everything else in his life. "My second year at Hiram, as before," he admitted in 1930, "I enjoyed myself immensely, illustrated the annual and worked very hard for a place in the oratorical contest, training day and night. . . . Also I put in all the chapel orations I could and wrote a great deal of poetry. . . (*Spider Web* 1932, 49). He did not mention whether or not he had worked in his classes. He did, in fact, study; but his primary energy was exerted elsewhere.

Vachel again roomed at Miller House and he continued to eat at Miller Hall. He also kept the promise made the previous June, the promise that he would get into athletics "good and hard next year" (June 9). This fall, though, the enthusiasm was directed at football rather than track: "I have not missed a foot-ball practice yet. I do not play a good game, and show no prospects of ever learning how, but I get plenty of regular exercise every afternoon, and make a scrub,—that is I represent a position in an imaginary team, represented by eleven poor men, for the regular team to learn to play foot-ball with" (October 7). Along with the regular exercise, he acquired, he told the Hiram students in 1930, "a lifetime football scar on my chin, and was always beaten in every athletic event" (*Spider Web* 1932, 122).

The varsity football team itself was beaten, and beaten badly, the day after Vachel wrote to tell his parents about his football exploits. He had not played in the game, but he observed that "there would have not been much worse playing, if I had" (October 14). He was not discouraged, but apparently his teammates were: a week after the game, the intercollegiate football program was terminated, due to lack of student interest. Vachel's anxious parents, however, had little time to relax. Basketball practice had begun (at 5:15 each morning), and their son was attempting to make the varsity team. He predicted that he would not be chosen and claimed, as he had when he tried out for football, that he only wanted the exercise (October 20). This time history supported the efficacy of his prophetic caul: he was cut from the basketball team.

In addition to athletics this fall, Vachel plunged into Hiram's oratorical contests with renewed enthusiasm, as he had promised Paul Wakefield he would. The results, however, were something less than "astonishing." His first oration of the year, "A Corn-Stalk under the Microscope" (dated "November 3, 1898"), was reviewed beforehand as a favor by Paul's father, Professor Wakefield, who apparently liked it but offered, according to Vachel, "some good criticism." The professor sounded a note that the would-be orator would hear, in one way or another, for the rest of his life: "The thing has too much scattered force, and no—team work—so to speak. It needs to be thoroughly outlined and organized and rearranged" (October 14). Vachel's prose mirrored his life. It was not systematic, but it did manifest an abundance of "scattered force."

Just hours after delivering his cornstalk oration, Vachel summarized the speech and the event in a letter to Papa and Mama: "I made the corn-stalk^ under the microscope typical of the age, and dilated at length upon the decline of superstition and the coming forth of the great wonder called protoplasm, to fill its place. I got out a pretty respectable

rhetorical. Nothing brilliant, however” (November 3). Whether or not his parents realized it, the ironic theme of the oration reflected their son’s emerging skepticism toward the scientific curriculum he was obliged to study. In fact, the speech closes with biting sarcasm: “And the Scientist and the Mechanic, who have made the microscopes, have reared from glass and metal greater temples than those of Athens or Jerusalem” (Virginia). The microscopic view of the cornstalk was intended to demonstrate that modern science had reduced reality to inconsequential minuteness. The dutiful son intimated that studying science as a requirement for medical training locked him into a world view that was fundamentally at odds with the religious values he also was expected to believe and practice.

Vachel’s eager anticipation of Hiram’s oratorical contests actually led him to draft his second oration, “The Power of the Platitude,” during the preceding summer, while he was vacationing in Colorado. Indeed, he disclosed to Adaline Mudge that the seminal idea had occurred to him as early as the previous spring, when he had perched with her in chapel. Mudge also received a preliminary synopsis: “It starts up bombastically:—‘A platitude is a sounding phrase that may be a falsehood unrealized, or what is the same, a truth, unfelt. For he who has no feeling to justify his gospel, is a liar, though he sound forth what many men have felt and known.’ It keeps up that strain all through.” Typically, the author went on to acknowledge his problems with organization and coherence, professing that he would give anything “to be able to conquer my turgid style of writing as I conquered the mesa of Fisher’s Peak, and learn to write in smooth, marketable English” (July 30-31, 1898).

In the fall, 1898, “The Power of the Platitude” was entirely rewritten, and copies of the finished work may be seen both at Hiram and at Virginia, the latter dated “November 17, 1898.” Paul Wakefield contributed the Hiram copy, along with a personal letter to then Hiram president, Kenneth I. Brown: “I am mailing you a copy of Lindsey’s^ famous oration which no one ever quite figured out. It is copied just as in the original. Lindsey^ wrote this sitting cross-legged on the floor, pounding it out on an old Caligraph, a typewriter that was fearfully and wonderfully made. He went over it with most of the scholarly Delphics. They were sure it was good because they were not sure of what he was talking about. I believe the judges varied widely in their grades. As I remember, one gave him first and one gave him last in Thought and Composition” (October 29, 1935, Hiram).

Vachel himself apprised his parents of the final result, although he was ambiguous as to his exact final position: “I was thirteenth. The only man below me was the crazy man, Schoevanek^ [Charles Schovanek]. I was graded 61, 32, and 78. My ranks with each judge were 9, 13, and 12, this gave me the final rank of 12.” He was not distressed: he valued what he had learned from the experience and he pledged his determination to do better next time: “I am going to teach myself to think upon my feet” (December 12). The very next day, perhaps in an attempt to persuade himself, he returned to the subject in a follow-up letter: “I would not have felt better or worse, if I had gotten on, or had won it. I was as satisfied as I ever could be when I had finished the thing, and read it over for the last time. Then I began to think about the next one.” The subject of “the next one” had been determined: he would speak on “the silent man in history” (December 13).

Although it proved to be a mystery to Vachel's fellow students, "The Power of the Platitude" is not difficult to understand (despite the characteristically rambling organization). The overall thesis is that the "blighting power of falsehood is felt throughout all things that are," especially "in all the doctrines and gospels of men." (After all, the idea came to Vachel during chapel.) The specific focus is how the platitude, "as a trite saying that poses as a vital idea," constitutes a major source of falsehood: "The only potency of the platitude is its deceit. Yet that one power has been enough to bring many a mighty race to dust and endless darkness. Let men then have a care. All are prone to trust a glib saying as a magic talisman, to ward off the burdens that every man must bear, to save them from the long search for truth, to save them from the pain and passion of the life-struggle. The more they trust, the more are they deceived."

By way of development, the orator then argued that platitudes contain vestiges of truth, so that heroic men are called for, warriors who will revitalize "the God-made impulse" that is frozen into "a man-made epigram." The heroic fighter that Vachel envisioned was the prototype of what he himself wanted to be, and his growing desire for self-direction is evident in his impassioned close: "From sea to sea the world is full of lies. The coming century desperately demands redemption. The time ripens for the divine iconoclasts. An endless harvest is ready for the hammers and swords of a mighty army of ideas. A great age cries out to be conquered by the good right arms, and the sweeping strokes of those great warriors, the greatest warriors of the world" (Hiram). Vachel himself likely did not understand all the implications of his speech, since whether he realized it or not he was embroiled in a struggle far greater than a mere college oratorical contest. He was learning to fight for the freedom to pursue his own purposes instead of the purposes of others. His opposition included not only his parents and their friends, like Zollars, but also his religion, where he found glib platitudes alive and thriving. With unintentional irony, he dedicated his oration to his primary opponent, the fiercest fighter that he knew: to Vachel Thomas Lindsay, his beloved Papa.

There is no way to know whether or not Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay grasped the message of the oration, but from their son's response to one of their letters, we can speculate that they were in general agreement with Professor Wakefield as to form: "I realize what you say about my composition, and its lack of flowing smoothness, but I think I know and feel my case even better than you. I can make a fine sentence much oftener than it is needed, but I can seldom attain to an artistic and symmetrical paragraph." He added confidentially to his mother: "I am going to start my next oration with special reference to Papa's criticism and to yours." Although it was almost the end of term and although he knew that his grades were suffering, his priorities remained unchanged: "I have still another subject to develop—'The Conquerors of Fate'— which I will use for chapel or the contest. I am going to do my biggest in society, for the rest of the year, and make a speaker of myself, if it is anywhere possible. I think I saw the mistakes of my oration better than I can express them. My next one will be as different as possible" (December 21). In his several attempts to conquer his own fate, he would see even more mistakes before this second college year had ended.

On a less competitive note, Vachel continued to perch with a variety of Hiram coeds, although he remarked to his parents that “not so many nice girls came in this year new, as did last” (October 7). Early in the term, he directed his attention only to his established friends: Adaline Murgage, Alice Robinson, and Jane and Ruth Wheeler, especially the latter. “Ruthie-May looks better than I have ever seen her,” he commented on September 28; and he made it obvious that Ruth had largely replaced Mary Tiffany as his personal standard among girls. Later, when his interest turned to another classmate, Vesta Schumacher, he observed: “That Miss Shoe-maker^ is the only new girl that can compare with Ruthie-May, or anyone of her kind. I am to consider myself quite fortunate, for she gave another fellow the grand bounce who was worth two or three of me. Rice [H.W. Rice] wanted to take her home one night, and she wouldn’t let him. He had chased her around all that evening at a party. I do not like such a heavy responsibility” (October 14). Paul Wakefield also admired Vesta, but Vachel was not concerned. Generally, it seems, he was less impassioned in his college romances than he was in his college orations. On one occasion, in fact, when the two young men were spending the night together (as they did twice a week this fall term), Vachel engineered a practical joke at his friend’s expense: “I tried Papa’s old scheme, I heard him tell about once. . . . I woke up in the middle of the night, and squirmed and wiggled, and moaned till I heard him wake up, and then I commenced to talk in my sleep. I spoke very tenderly, I said but two sentences. The first was ‘Vesta’s eyes, Vesta’s eyes.’ Then I paused. Then I whispered, confidentially ‘Vesta, Don’t tell Jane, O, Don’t tell Jane.’ I suppose Vesta will not tell, what ever^ it was. But Paul did not get over it.” When friend Paul took the bait and convinced himself that he was in love with Vesta, everyone else, according to Vachel, had a good laugh.

Vachel’s letter recounting his joke, as his other letters this academic year, reveals a new self-confidence in his feelings of maturity (that is, superiority) in relation to his friends and their worldly affairs. The uncle side of his nature was beginning to flourish: “I encourage him [Paul] in his little delusion. If he has not some such thing to dream and speculate and be wise about, he will get to imagining worse things. He might as well be innocently amused” (December 3). The same letter demonstrates Vachel’s sense of superiority and detached amusement at the intensity of a basketball rivalry between the girls of Miller and Bowler Halls. Jane Wheeler, he decided, was “especially bad”: “She makes a life and Death matter out of it, instead of a frolic for fun and excitement. But I keep insisting to her that this is not the Battle of Santiago. She will be all right after while, but she is quite amusing at present. Poor child.” On another occasion, while perching, he delivered one of his orations for Jane. Afterward he shared his rather smug perception with his parents: “She was much impressed with my wisdom, poor child. But she made a splendid audience, especially her eyes” (November 22). The epithet “child,” as we shall see, especially in regard to girls, would continue to be a Vachel favorite, mainly in the early days of any romantic relationship. In later years, it would appear as a frequent endearment [?] even in letters to his wife.

Actually, the presumption of exceptional maturity largely sets the tone of Vachel’s letters from the latter months of 1898 through the remainder of his Hiram years. When Vesta Schumacher, for example, increasingly commanded his attention, he characteristically attempted to analyze her nature for his parents’ benefit: “You ask who Vesta is. Vesta Shoemaker^ is a girl whose sister came to Hiram in years past. She is 18

years old, a child in experience with life, and responsibility, but with a well proportioned start toward womanliness. She was more like a Gibson Girl, than any one else, in the 'Gibson pictures' of the Delphic and Olive Branch entertainment, the other night. . . .” Vesta was more like a Gibson girl, he reported, than even Mary Tiffany: “A Fool that could know her, might say that she was born to be a princess, but I say she was born to be an American girl. The child has strong possibilities of developing into a leader and inspirer of mankind wherever a woman can do it and be womanly. . . .” He did admit, on the other hand, that his information was limited:

I do not know the girl well enough to know just whether she is overburdened with any kind of malice, or envy, or covetousness, or fickleness or selfishness. She probably has all of these in due proportion, and before the year is out I expect to find some one of them dominant and flourishing, just as in these last days I have come to find that Jane and Ruth are impregnated and soaked with and unreasoning, blind, childish, uncontrollable pride, that is so intense that it makes its own hidingplace.

This particular Uncle Boy letter finally swells to the playfully pontifical: “They are dear good children for all that, and I think more of them today than I ever did before in my life. . . . But Vesta is a lovely child, that we intend to get acquainted with, as fast as possible” (December 21).

Paul Wakefield's immaturity was the avuncular writer's next subject. Paul and Olive had perched together on numerous occasions, and brother Vachel was concerned about, and especially defensive of, his “twin”: “Ruth [Wheeler] told me quite confidentially one night that Olive was far more womanly this year than she was last, and I was glad to find that she noticed it for I was sure of it myself. She is making a hard fight to get over her childish simpering when the occasion calls for self-respect, and she has broadened out and become stronger since she has quit trying to suit Paul. He has asked an interview with her the beginning of next term, he thinks her resolution to stop being his kintergarden was just for the term, but she will disabuse his mind.” [Note 1] Vachel inherited his family's tradition of speaking frankly concerning relatives and friends. The closer the friend, the more frank the criticism was certain to be. (It is the one family trait that outsiders will likely find difficult to understand or, perhaps, to forgive.) Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay, however, realized that Paul was their son's best friend, and that fact alone permitted, even required, utmost candor: “Paul never got a thing into his head that was not bent and twisted before it got half way in. Olive did her best to impress him with the fact that she had quit being a kid forever, but now he comes around assuming that all he will have to do will be to pet her a little bit to make her a kid again. He says he don't understand her, and I don't believe he ever understood anybody or anything. He has a genius for seeing things cross eyed.” [Note 2]

Typically, before dropping the subject, Vachel felt the comparative need to emphasize his own superiority: “[Paul] reads Carlyle, now since I have let him know I liked him (Carlyle) and he makes Carlyle the preacher of his notions, and the excuse for very narrow and foolish prejudices. He feels quite a big philosopher, now that he thinks he can prove that Carlyle and he think much the same things. It is astonishing, when we read Carlyle together. When I stop at the end of a paragraph, Paul has taken figurative things literally, and sarcasm for dogma, and dogma for sarcasm, and poetical speculations and rhapsodies as the guiding principles of Carlyles deepest sympathy.” Mercifully,

friend Vachel concluded that he had “blistered Paul enough, now, but I have to once in a while, or I catch myself lazily agreeing with him in his most morbid assumptions. The boy thinks lots of me, but I do not want to come down to him” (December 21). In the Lindsay family ethos, such critical roasting was expected, because Paul Wakefield was not only their son’s best friend but also their daughter’s suitor. They were not at all surprised to read several weeks later: “Paul does me more good than he does anybody else on earth, he is willing to tell me anything he thinks of me, and sometimes he is right, and I profit thereby, and when he is wrong it is interesting” (February 23, 1899).

Before concluding his December 21, 1898, letter, Uncle Boy let the superiority expressed toward Vesta Schumacher and Paul Wakefield spill over into comments directed at “young Spurrier” [Whitelaw Reid Spurrier], his roommate during the fall and winter terms. “I am determined to do my best to make a man of the fellow,” the would-be physician promised: “I really anticipate the job with pleasure. It will lend variety to my present occupation of dealing out sugar and paregoric to a colicky but charming infant. I have to talk baby talk to him too much.” Thus, Uncle Vachel was at his smug best this night in 1898, the night of the winter solstice, “The darkest evening of the year.”

Unfortunately for Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay, their son’s feelings of superiority did not extend to his fall classes: Anatomy, Botany, and Psychology. In fact, his academic struggles seem to have commenced with the term itself: “All of them [his classes] are pretty stiff,” the “chronic starter” admitted on September 28, although, of course, he was optimistic. Stiff or not, he knew he would succeed, and he requested that his father send the same medical-school skeleton that had proven to be so puzzling in earlier years. Predictably, his thank-you letter, written after the skeleton arrived, was radiant with hope: “[The skeleton] has been quite indispensable in getting the lessons well since. I think I will be able to get a good grasp of Anatomy. I really feel quite hopeful, and surer of myself than I expected to be. Dr. Page is the best teacher along such a line I have ever had, except Miss Wilcox, and the Doctor manages to get more into a lesson than she did, and seems to have his Anatomy perfectly” (October 7). By the end of term, however, after writing comparatively little about his studies (at least in comparison to his extracurricular activities), he had to confess that he was “conditioned” (with approximately half the class) in Anatomy. He earned a respectable 90 in Psychology, on the other hand, but only an 80 in Botany. To mollify his parents and to assuage his own guilt feelings, he announced that he would stay at Hiram the following summer “and make up about three studies” (December 29). His self-sacrificial attitude was obvious, since a few weeks earlier he had expressed eager anticipation of another Colorado vacation.

In retrospect, when Vachel failed to pass Anatomy, he realized his errors in judgment. He had thought that he could pursue his own objectives and still earn passing grades in his medical studies. He was wrong, and now everybody knew it. Even during the term itself, in the heat of the moment, he seemed to recognize what he was doing (and not doing) and what the implications could be: “This year I am a great deal more active in the general Hiram life than I was at any time last year, and there is prospect that I will be more so every day. I do not accept any work that is not in my line, but I take my full share of that. . . . I am trying hard to make a man of myself, that people will want to do their work, because it will be surely well done.” After commenting that he was studying

anatomy with Paul, he added: “I want to get over being an irresponsible kid as fast as possible. I think working in the College activities will do that as fast as anything can. . . . I wish every fellow in the world had my chances now. Many of them would be able to make themselves into big men that would move the world, in a few years of such training” (November 22).

If his parents read between the lines, so to speak, they knew their son was defending his vigorous pursuit of nonacademic affairs. He was also hinting at impending failure, excusing himself as “an irresponsible kid.” A bigger man would have prospered in his personal life choice. Finally, when his lack of success could no longer be hidden, he was perfectly candid on the subject: “I have got to get to work, and have got to do it soon. I was not in such a hurry last year, or this fall, because I realized that I was as far from being a man as I was from having a beard. But I think I can say certainly, without being misunderstood by you, that I am growing more mature, and see the prospects of development coming rapidly on, since I have ceased to grow physically.” After the fact, he also admitted that Vesta Schumacher, contrary to her role as a “child,” manifested “a ward-school conscience about studying that I would do well to acquire” (December 21).

Curiously, at the same time he apologized about his failure and boasted about his renewed feelings of responsibility, he also intimated that his own priorities were not entirely irrelevant to his parents’ wishes: “I am going to be a Doctor, and intend to accumulate everything that will tend to make me an all-round man at the business. I do not want to temperize[^] or shift, so that I will be handicapped, in any way, and then I will be able to meet any variety of physician on his own ground.” One battle had been lost, but the war had just begun. As if to punctuate his determination, he went on to announce that, in addition to continuing his other activities, he had accepted the position of athletic reporter for the *Advance* (December 29)—just the thing, his parents must have thought (if they were given to irony), that would earn their son Prexy Zollars’ “high standards.”

3

Letters from Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay at this decisive time in their son’s life are not extant, but occasional references in the son’s letters home suggest some of the things his parents may have written. Surprisingly, both parents seem to have managed their disappointment with heroic restraint. Dr. Lindsay did mail his son a religious tract, *The Unwavering Aim*, the theme of which reinforced the constant parental admonition that successful persons focus their efforts on one thing at a time. Both parents endorsed the power of the platitude cited in Samuel Smile’s popular book, *Self-Help* (1859): “The shortest way to do many things is to do only one thing at once.” As we shall see, it was a platitude that would play an important role in both the son’s and the parents’ lives for the next few years.

The winter of 1898-99 brought the senior Lindsays pressing concerns other than what they must have felt was their son’s wavering aim. In an effort to augment the family income, they decided to build a tenement flat and, to their son’s chagrin, to help pay expenses by renting out rooms in the family home. For one time in his life, the younger Lindsay seemed concerned about appearances: “It doesnt[^] look right for us to be reduced to the extremity of advertising, when one of our rooms is to be filled,” he complained

(January 4, 1899). In turn, his mother used the occasion to remind him yet again that he must concentrate all his powers on his anticipated profession. Medical practice, she warned, was fraught with “dangers and uncertainties.” Her son’s response was immediate: “While I do not deny the ‘dangers and uncertainties’ of my profession— they are no more nor less than any other—it is a remunerative business for the hustler—just like anything else—and I think you both borrow a little trouble, and make too much of a forlorn hope out of it—instead of a happy anticipation” (January 10). Three days earlier, with the inveterate optimism that always seemed to accompany his defeats, he had suggested that he plan to attend the Stanford University medical school after his graduation from Hiram.

Notwithstanding the hopefulness, as expressed in letters to his parents, at least one portentous characteristic in Vachel’s life story emerged during the winter of his second Hiram year. For the first time in his life, he was forced to wrestle at length with guilt feelings. An unyielding wedge began working its way into the very center of his existence, splitting him between what he believed was in his own best interest and what he knew others expected from him. Increasingly, what he wanted to accomplish proved irreconcilable with what he considered to be his social and familial duty. In one form or another, for the rest of his life, the wedge persisted as his painful and durable companion: a divided self is evident in much of what he thought and wrote. Although the wedge was half created by his parents (and by authority figures such as President Zollars), its duration was mainly his own achievement. The resultant guilt feelings constituted his initial exposure to the rites of passage. He learned firsthand that few, if any, adult human beings are, in the literal sense of the word, *individuals*. [Note 3]

Inner pain, hidden suffering, anger, frustration, and even hatred are evident in the one poem that Vachel himself claimed to have written at this particular time in his life: “The Song of the Garden Toad” (*Spider Web* 1932, 49). The gardener in the poem attends to daisies and roses, but the toad narrator has an ear to the soil and perceives something of which the gardener is unaware:

Down, down beneath the daisy beds,
O hear the cries of pain!
And moaning on the cinder-path
They’re blind amid the rain.

The red rose tries to tell the gardener of the suffering subsisting amid its roots. “He kissed the rose,” the toad remarks, but otherwise the gardener gives no indication that he understands. The infernal suffering, meanwhile, continues, and finally turns to hatred:

Down, down where rain has never come
They fight in burning graves,
Bleeding and drinking blood
Within those venom-caves.
Blaspheming still the gardener’s name,
They live and hate and go.
I wonder if the gardener heard
The rose that told him so? (*Poetry* 26)

Vachel likely identified with the narrator of his poem, that is, with the toad, who is a somewhat detached observer, at least in comparison with the rose. The rose, however, is another Vachel figure. It is immersed in the contrasts of life: the darkness and pain at its roots, on the one hand, and the beauty of its flower and the warmth of the gardener's attention, on the other. At the extremities, the hidden sufferers are unaware of the surface tranquility, while the gardener is unaware of the subterranean anguish. Both inhabit one-dimensional worlds. The gardener's world is where most parents want their children to live, but the gardener is the one figure in the poem with whom Vachel is not sympathetic. He is in charge; he is an authority figure who seems unwilling or unable to recognize that an orderly surface hides (and subsists on) private misery. This knowledge belongs to the toad.

The "Song" unveils one of Vachel's darker moods. His toad is not the first to "sing" in a garden (see *Paradise Lost*, Book IV), but Vachel was the first poet to identify with that toad. His inner anguish was two-fold and self-contradictory. He suffered the pangs of one who cannot openly pursue his own values, and he suffered the devilish guilt pangs of one who feels desires that seem to betray the expectations of other people, especially people closest to him. He could not follow his own inclinations and still prepare to participate in the world of his parents' choice. He tried to maintain surface tranquility, but he was too human to suppress entirely his self-pity and untold anger. Poetry proved an ideal refuge, and potentially self-damaging emotional distress was safely buried in the arcane caves of figurative language. The all-important surface, meanwhile, remained peaceful and "So carefully in line" (l. 10)—in line, that is, for the time being.

4

In point of fact, the story of Vachel's second term this academic year is partially a story of pouring oil on troubled waters, partially a story of continuing his same old patterns. Along with the formidable Anatomy, he registered for Materia Medica, Law of Contracts, and Latin. Typically, he assured his parents on January 4: "I am starting out all right, and expect to keep it up. I like Materia Medica all right. Dr. Page has given us some fine introductory talks." His candor was such, however, that he seems not to have thought about deception in regard to extracurricular activities. He bragged about biweekly athletic and book columns for the *Advance*, as well as a host of other responsibilities: "I have to write a review of *Cristable*^, and an article for the Medical Association, before Monday. I also am going to try to write something for the Delphic number of the *Advance*. I am on the basket-ball comitee^ of my class, and will have to help arrange the games, and boom the practice. Then I am on the Y. M. C. A. membership comitee^, and will have to boom that, too." He also was perching: "Vesta is back, so everything is lovely, and the goose hangs high" (January 6). Then there were the coming oratorical contests, although here Vachel's choice of subjects suggests a new desire to appease his parents. "Next time," he advised Papa, he was going to speak on the temperance issue: "When you and Mama talk to me about taking a current issue—that is the only one I ever think of. If you are looking for issues at all—you must look at this one. . . . I never just felt quite big enough for such a question—but have decided to take the bull by the horns. If it has got to be a current issue—it must be— liquor. That is the only way I could ever see it" (January 10).

Whether or not they approved of his subject choice, Vachel's parents obviously inquired about his priorities; and, on January 22, he announced that he was planning to resign from the staff of the *Advance*. He also hinted at a new sense of responsibility in accord with his father's pamphlet, *The Unwavering Aim*. In the next sentence, though, he added that he was putting the YMCA reading room in order: "I have not done anything, however, without consulting half a dozen people, on the cabinet. They are all tolerably willing to authorize most any scheme, just so some one else does the work. . . . I am studying a little better than I did last term, and expect to keep on improving . . . I have done a thing I never did before in my life—gotten up at five in the morning, instead of sitting up late at night."

Four days later, he had to answer another question from home, although, adroitly, he apologized that he lacked the time to send a detailed response: "I was never quite so walled in with work as I am at present, and never enjoyed existence quite so thoroughly. . . . You people do not understand my reading room duties. I am not college librarian. I simply go to the post-office and the news-stand twice a day for the newspapers and magazines. I go into the reading room, once a day, and see that the papers are in their right places. . . . I spend no more time at the library than I would anyway, as member of the council of five and magazine editor of the *Advance*. I have the book and magazine column there, and my work all falls in together, you see." It is likely that his parents saw even more than he wanted them to. Moreover, he must have reconsidered his decision to resign from the *Advance* staff, and he continued to immerse himself in nonacademic affairs. Indeed, he acknowledged: "I have not gotten to the place yet where I need to learn to take a rest, on the contrary I have got to learn to rest off on resting. I have got to learn to work" (January 26).

Hiram's 1899 winter term provided further opportunity, not only for Vachel's physical courage but also for his resoluteness in pursuing social success. On January 29, he disclosed to his father that he was writing a letter "with my fist, literally There are blisters on the end of every finger of both hands, and on every knuckle[^]. They had yellow matter in them this morning. There is a fierce-looking scratch on my face, that will be healed and forever forgotten before the week is over, but which makes me picturesque at present." It seems the night before had featured an array of college antics, such as forced hair cutting, and outright fighting—sophomores pitted against juniors and freshmen. At one point the freshmen ran their class flag up the pole located atop Hiram's "Old Main" building. At 3:00 a.m., Vachel Lindsay, with his friend and fellow classmate Pete McKinlay, ladder in hand, went to pull the flag down:

I was hardly sure yet, the flag was there. We did not know what we would do if there were a dozen fellows guarding the flag, up on that roof, but we calculated to find out in a hurry. But the poor children did not know enough to guard their flag. So Pete and I spliced the top of the fire-escape with the ladder, and I got over into the gutter of the roof while Pete held the bottom of the ladder. I tobaggoned[^] up and down that below-zero slate roof on my bare hands for about three quarters of an hour, and finally made the ascent. It was harder, to the square inch, than Fishers[^] Peak, but it was not a bit dangerous. I finally got up, crossed the roof flat, shinnied up the pole, and got the flag. We got home with it at 4:00. Its[^] a whopper. Much bigger than two

bed-quilts. Its[^] in yellow and blue, their class colors. We tore part of it into badges, and wore it, we Sophs. Everybody had their badge on at six o'clock, girls and boys.

His ingenuous conclusion was: "I had a good time." [Note 4]

In a matter of hours, Vachel was proclaimed the hero of the "Class of the Spheres," as the sophomores referred to themselves in their class "Yell":

Mercury! Venus! Earth and Mars!
Comets! Meteors! All the Stars!
Planets! Systems! Moon and Sun!
Class of the Spheres! 1901!!!

And in the annual *Spider Web*, the sophomore class historian retold his classmate's feat with obvious relish: "They [the freshmen] also remember the swift fate of their flag, which they foolishly attempted to flaunt upon the college tower and how a little later, from the same place where for one or two short hours of the night their's[^] had hung, the flag of 1901 unfurled its graceful folds. It is true indeed, that they with their big brothers [juniors], in impotent rage, met to see what could be done; but the brilliant idea being put forth that it would be a fine joke just to leave it alone—since they couldn't do anything else—and those assembled having a well developed sense of humor, especially those who didn't want to get their heads broke, this expedient was adopted" (*Spider Web* 1900, 41).

Meanwhile, the antagonistic juniors, who were responsible for the 1900 *Web*, devoted two full pages to the incident. On one page a photograph of Vachel's face resembles a comet that cuts across "the sophomore heavens," threatening to eclipse the class president, J. Ezra Mason, who is depicted as the sun. In "An Explanatory Text," the anonymous junior writer attempts to elucidate "The Comet" (and, in the process, provides one of the earliest efforts to define Vachel as a person):

It would require a volume to give a full explanation of this strange comet. It was seen approaching from the western portion of the heavens in the fall of 1897 and since then has been visible to the naked eye. Its strange appearance was the cause of much interest and comment. During the past year it has vied with the sun for prominence. At one time during the winter it flashed with tremendous speed across the heavens so that the sun was for a time obscured, but it soon returned to its position as a body of secondary importance. How shall it be described? Erratic, freakish, unique, eccentric, ah, words are powerless to do justice to this comet. What power in Heaven above or Hades beneath governs its movements we know not, but we can simply hope that it may keep its course away from the other bodies or else disappear.
(237-238—also see Note 12 of this chapter)

Even in the eyes of his opponents, Vachel achieved one of his primary goals for the year: peer recognition. He was not a permanent star in the "Class of the Spheres," but at least he earned the transitory prominence of a comet. On the other hand, the juniors took a hint from the poster in Vachel's room and chose as his song, "This is a Weary Life at Best." Their choice for his quotation was: "Nothing but himself can be his parallel" [a common misquotation of Lewis Theobald's "None but itself can be its parallel," *The Double Falsehood*, iii (1728)].

Vachel's parents, as we may well imagine, were not thrilled by their son's notoriety. They answered his January 29 letter promptly, and although what they had to say has been lost, we can easily guess the substance from his response:

I was sorry you got the wrong impression of my good time Friday a week ago. I ran no risk of falling, or being injured in any way, and no one here thinks so, much, I do not believe.

At least I know there was no risk as far as falling was concerned. . . .

Going up the roof was not a risk at all, it was not even a test of endurance, but rather of patience, persistence[^], and self-possession[^]. I could have done nothing worse, if I failed, than go down with the ladder again. . . .

I certainly risked my neck for three solid hours, every minute, when I climbed[^] the Mesa at the top of Fishers[^] peak. I heard no protest, though, afterward that I remember. No doubt I deserved one, but it didn't come then, and I never expect to risk as much as I risked then. . . .

I was more fortunate, in coming through alive, that day than I dared expect, for about one-third of the trip, and it was a rare and enjoyable sensation.

As a further attempt at appeasement, he then confessed that the primary cause of his recent failure was nonacademic interests, and he resolved to make amends: "I did not do any brilliant[^] class-room work, last term, on account of my oration. I am trying to make up lost ground, now especially in Anatomy. I slighted Botany, most of all, last term, and made 80. I was conditioned in Anatomy, with about half the class, over half, I believe. I think I will be square, before this term is over." Oddly, he also confessed that he had successfully debated the affirmative of: "Resolved that the doctrine of eternal punishment is compatible with the doctrine of love and mercy." In reporting his victory, he likely thought that Papa and Mama could not help but approve of his religious zeal. Lest it also occur to them that some of the zeal should have been directed at his studies, he hastened to comment on a new-found enthusiasm for anatomy: "They have had vivisection[^] of cats, in the Anatomy class twice. I like it like everything. It does not hurt the cat, we keep it well chloroformed, and it is plainer than any drawings or descriptions" (February 5).

Vachel's new resolve toward his studies impinged on his perching time, although his letters occasionally refer to casual dates with Jane and Ruth Wheeler, Vesta Schumacher, and several new love interests: Florence Hathaway, Lois Hurd, and Julia Bythewood. [Note 5] He was not an eager suitor, and at one point he boasted that Paul had scolded him for breaking the hearts of two girls: "I felt highly flattered at his stern taking of me in hand, but I am sure I have improved on some of my male relatives in just this one particular—I have quit trying to make a fool of the female sex, since thereby I am liable to do it for myself. It is one place where I have been conscientious for the last two or three years. And so he gives me confidence, that in spite of this fact I am able to break hearts unintentionally. It will give me confidence when in a dozen years or so, when I grow up, it may be necessary for me to seek a dishwasher" (February 23). This was another prophecy, as we shall see, that time proved false, more often than not to Uncle Boy's deep distress. At Hiram, though, there was little or no distress. When Vesta took increasing interest in another boy, Vachel simply turned his attention to the Wheelers, especially to Ruth, for whom he had the ultimate compliment. He compared her to his mother: "Ruthie May . . . is older than Mama in some ways, and so can be her

friend, who has the dainty ways of a fancy-child, and the dignity of a woman, and eyes that it is dangerous to look straight into, and a faithful heart underneath” (February 5).

Two weeks later, Vesta provided her former admirer with a perfect opportunity to emphasize once again his devotion to the Delphic Society. On February 16, he wrote that Vesta had given “the finest oration I ever heard from anyone, not a professional speaker.” Her theme was “Old Glory” and patriotic fervor, and “some of the audience were almost tearful when she finished.” The eyes of one member in the audience, though, were not wet. Nothing had changed since the high-school dispute with Susan Wilcox concerning the patriotism of James Russell Lowell. Patriotic fervor, for Vachel Lindsay, was still an overrated virtue: “I regretted I was not patriotic, and able to sympathize. I might do as much for the flag as she would—but I could never love it like that. How the mere symbolism of red and blue bunting can move people to bunkum is almost beyond me. But then I guess I would say almost as much for the Delphic cross as she has for ‘Old Glory,’ though I certainly think more of my country and my duty there, than my duty to my society. But I have really fought and lost, and fought and won the hardest battles of my life so far, for Old Delphi, and there is where the difference lies. . . . Vesta is a fine child,” he concluded with now-characteristic smugness: “But she is not more than seventeen in anything. She is wonderfully wholesome and well rounded in her child like^ ways, thoughts, and feelings.”

In the throes of his self-proclaimed superiority, Uncle Boy next turned to the subject of his roommate, Whitelaw Spurrier. Paul Wakefield’s efforts to understand Carlyle, as we have seen, provoked scorn. Imitative behavior and dependency were evidence, in Vachel’s mind, of immaturity (in comparison, of course, with his maturity). His roommate was another case in point: “Spurrier uses my writing tablet among other things, and I suppose he thought I intended it for some one a little younger, and not quite so kin to me. He is a pretty good fellow, but a sponge, most decidedly. He doesn’t waste my time for me, but he uses my pen and ink, my boots, my lamp, my coal oil, my matches (he smokes, so that is an item) but that is the worst I can say of him” (February 16). Less than one month later, the felt superiority led to a physical confrontation with the younger but larger Spurrier. Vachel himself described the incident in detail in a letter to his parents:

Spurrier and I were chatting pleasantly, and feeling good and brotherly, when Spurrier said something decidedly disrespectful, of some of my friends, which I kindly asked him not to repeat, and which he so persistently^ repeated and added to that I was finally forced to smite him on the jaw to keep my word with him, since I insisted that if he repeated very extensively, such a thing would happen.

Spurrier was quite surprised He gave me a black eye, which didn’t worry me much, since he has continued ever since to be respectful in his language. He insists that he will be disrespectful when ever he chooses, but since I have told him I will smite him each several time, the disrespect has not commenced again. He has talked like a gentleman for the first time since he has been in Hiram. (March 17)

Paul Wakefield remembered this incident, as we shall see, during the final tragic months of Vachel’s life. Paul knew that his friend was not lacking in physical courage (although, understandably, his friend did lack a roommate at the end of this term).

Ironically, success in the classroom, especially in Anatomy, is something of a theme song throughout this winter term. Back on March 2, for example, the morning after an unexpected basketball victory, a tired but happy Vachel overslept and, of course, let his parents know: "I slept so long this morning that I got to Anatomy class late. But I had studied the night before, so when Dr. Page jumped me,—he called on me before I got my hat off, and rode me all round the room till he got tired, I was able to give him almost all the anatomical information he wanted, at least almost all he asked for. That is the way the Dr. does. If you miss the first half of a recitation he makes it a point to give you five times as much reciting to do, and do in a hurry, as any other man in the class." Three weeks later he emerged from his final examinations, still in a positive frame of mind: "I really felt more self-respectable than I have at the end of any term in Hiram, for while I have been rather unsteady, I came in at the finish without my wind and resolution completely gone. I will not have to do so much re-resolving this time, for some of my resolution has stood the strain of a whole terms[^] work. . . . Hereafter you people need not worry about my studies being crowded out by anything else. Whether I succeed at them the best or not, they are the things that this last term have taken precedence in my mind and my anxieties, as well as my time and my intentions" (March 24).

On April 8, however, a week or so into the new term, final grades were posted and the results of Vachel's self-proclaimed "resolution" were known. He did indeed earn a respectable 94 in Law of Contracts and a so-so 85 in Materia Medica, but he failed Latin and, once again, he was "conditioned" in Anatomy. "I am sorry to say that I did not get through in Anatomy," he apologized to his parents. Still, there was reason to hope: Dr. Page had promised to give him, in Vachel's words, "a thorough test on the whole book" at the end of the academic year.

In anticipation of his parents' disappointment, Vachel vowed to continue his resolve to study. He also included his own evaluation of the winter term, claiming that he had learned more than his grades indicated: ". . . with what I have of the Anatomy already, I think I will have it in hand much better than before, Review[^] and advance. The Thing[^] that disgusted me in the test most was that every question was one that I had had quite thoroughly in hand, at some part of the term. Of course there is a great deal you can know in Anatomy, and still flunk. I cannot feel heavy hearted over my failure to pass, though, since I succeeded[^] in studying in a way that surprised me when I looked back upon it. Be patient with me for three months longer," he pleaded, "before you allow yourselves to feel that I have been throwing away my time or neglecting my duty, and my opportunities. I was never as hopeful or determined in my life. It does not bore me to study it [Anatomy], it is not an ordeal at all, I have no such obstacle as I had in latin[^], and so if I do not make an Anatomist, it will not be through lack of interest or of work. I know lots more about it than about many a thing I have made 95 in" (April 8). His parents, however, knew there was a problem with their son's argument. Things in which he made 95 were printed on his official transcript: Anatomy was not.

Hiram's spring term, 1899, began in late March, and Vachel was registered for Higher Criticism and Law of Torts, along with third-term Anatomy. The second failure in Dr. Page's course proved to be more distressing than the first, since the problems with

Anatomy no longer could be construed as a one-time aberration due to poor judgment. For young Vachel, the second failure could hardly have come at a worse time. Just when he was feeling increasingly more mature, just when he was desirous of more independence, his grades suggested a lack of effort and errors in judgment that are normally considered characteristic of, in his own words, “an irresponsible kid.” Indeed, his letters this spring are a curious mixture of self-assertiveness, on the one hand, and appeals for assistance and advice, on the other. For the first time, two Lindsays are apparent in his everyday correspondence: an independent-minded, would-be man and a dependent, dutiful, sorrowful boy. The adamant wedge was piercing ever more deeply into the heart of his existence.

On April 8, for example, when Vachel wrote to apologize for his grades and to beg for three additional months of parental patience, he also asserted his right to independence. Once again his parents had made a unilateral decision to allow outsiders to read his writing, this time his personal letters. And once again he responded with self-righteous indignation: “. . . I want you to be very careful as to what kind of things you read from my letters to the children, or anyone else. I do not mean them for newspapers, and would not for anything show any of your letters to any of my friends here. I cannot understand it. I want to feel free to write anything I want to say, and I cannot feel that way, if there is a prospect of you finding it an item to interest outsiders. Whether the letters seem confidential or not, they are more in the nature of confidential talks than anything else, not general conversation for a roomfull^.” Then, as if to renounce any claim to a mature sense of priorities, he turned to the subject of his art work for the new *Spider Web*, naively disclosing that, “the first half of the week, I spent from the ‘last hour,’ till supper working on the Annual cover.” He also acknowledged: “That is done now, but the more I worked, the harder it was to quit working. I have all the rest of my work mapped out now, by Gibbs [Walter C. Gibbs, the editor], and as he wants it before the middle of next week, and since I have three cuts allowed in every class, I took them, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and today, and am spending from Breakfast in the morning till half past nine at night rushing it through. I am not getting it done fast, it all takes time, but I am working harder than I can at anything else, without getting tired.” He had also been asked to design a special cover for the *Web*, and he was confident this effort too would be good: “I know the Annual cover will be a success^, as far as my part is concerned, though the engraver may not do a good job. It is the finest piece of designing, that I ever did, considering its purpose, and use.” Borrowing a thought from John Keats’s poem “Sleep and Poetry,” Vachel finally assured his parents: “I feel as fresh at night as in the morning, after drawing all day” (April 8). How could his parents not question the verity of his promises that academic affairs had “taken precedence” in his thoughts and intentions? [Note 6]

The very next week, when Vachel mailed his college picture home, his father sent back some unflattering comments about his long hair. Vachel responded that the hair of all the other college boys was “either on their forehead, or in the air. I am censured for mussing mine, here, it stays in the air so much. On a rainy day . . . my hair curls up. But I cannot order a rain with every photograph.” He then used the occasion to contrast his manly feelings with his unmanly appearance and his father’s unmanly suggestions: “When you write letters, do not write them to an imaginary boy that you never knew, who looks as sweet as a peach, but means everything for downright disrespect and never

says anything with any possibility of meaning it for other than disrespect and trivial and impudent fault finding—but write them rather to Vachel Lindsay, who is trying hard to learn to be a man who will honor his name, who wants to be manly, and incidentally, very incidentally, regrets that he cannot look that way. . . .”

At the same time, in the very same letter, the would-be man declared that he wanted, in his words, “some vigorous letters full of what his parents expect of him in the way of hard earnest work”: “There is nothing that puts me to work like a letter that lets me know and realize that you are working and hoping for me there at home, it will always pay you to assume that I am not working hard enough, or with sufficient concentration. I want to be told, with emphasis, at least once a week, that I must try a little harder the next time, and that I must curb my tendency to mental scatteration.” As for Anatomy, where the class had advanced to human vivisection, Vachel was cautiously optimistic but also very frank: “We are dissecting now. I confess that it is not fascinating. My turn comes tomorrow. I will do my best. They have a good stiff. He was cured with Acohol[^], carbolic acid, and glycerine. He does not smell at all. I like to look at him, and watch the work but am not interested in taking hold. He is quite picturesque.” Returning, then, to an emphasis on manhood, he assured his father that he did not harbor bad feelings: “But I want to set you right, about that imaginary boy of yours. . . .” Ironically, though, the person who was “trying hard to learn to be a man” concluded his letter in the words of a child: “With much love and many kisses, Vachel” (April 14).

In a second encyclopedic letter to Papa, written five days later, an apologetic son called further attention to his renewed dedication to study. He had gone so far as to drop several of his extracurricular responsibilities, such as his participation on the YMCA membership committee: “I see more and more the necessity of concentration, and taking the most important things, and leaving the rest to some one else.” He disclosed that he had “cut chapel all this term, and gym, in order to get my work done up by eight o’clock at night so I can sleep.” Regretfully, he also decided not to compete in the athletic activities scheduled for the now-annual college field day, “though I would enjoy it immensely.” He would limit oratorical competition as well, and the reason, he hinted to Papa, was not just devotion to academe. The reason was an ancestral tendency to nervous exhaustion, something beyond his control. He would not compete, and he was unsuccessful when he did compete, because he had inherited Mama’s nerves: “I think that my system and organization are not near enough to the normal to go through without just stringing up my nerves a little more. . . . I am going, in the future, to try to keep down any kind of excitment[^] . . . my utter lack of control over my nerves is such a direct impediment when I speak, and in general my nervousness leads me to misrepresent myself, and I think, distorts my judgement, so that I think that If[^] I ever get my nervous system established to the normal I will have to do it now. I am hard to kill,” he assured his father, “but I am not endowed with your strength, and since I would not feel that I was a worthy doctor at all unless I stick to the pace you have set at hard work, I will have to get the nerves somewhere. So I seldom leave my desk for anything but my meals and my classes, and take my meals regularly, and go to bed at a respectable time of night. I have to be more completely the master of myself before I can be a worthy bondservant to any principle, or any cause. I will have a long road to travel before I am able to concentrate myself like a burning glass. But I am thoroughly convinced of its necessity, in my own mind, and I am making myself feel its necessity a little more very day.”

Vachel's confused priorities, however, were still manifest, especially in his introspective and candid conclusion: "I am master of the thing I choose to do nowhere, as yet. I cannot write as I know I ought to, my limitations in drawing are obvious enough, as a speaker I hardly know the A.B.C.s. And as a student, my attention is almost a cipher, my concentration is nil, though, I have laid, and am laying a foundation for these, since no one these days can question my conscientious application to anything I take seriously. I am trying to cut off the things that used to disiapate^ my energies, and learn to focus my efforts as much as possible" (April 19). His will was unwavering, he intimated; but until he had something that he could "take seriously," he was uncertain as to his aim.

When both parents questioned his priorities, an increasingly independent-minded Vachel offered an explanation that must have been anything but encouraging. In fact, he made crystal clear that the one thing he could "take seriously," at the moment at least, was art: "You speak of my drawing. Well, I contracted for that last fall, and cannot allow myself to start anything I do not know how to finish. And besides, next year I will have full charge and superintendence of our Annual drawing, and I want to accumulate all the experience and knowledge between now and then that I readily may." The implicit independence is remarkable, even for Vachel. There are only passing references to course work in this typescript letter, although his "task" during summer vacation, he promised, would be "to master Caesar, if possible." Instead, what is included is a frank confession that, even what he wanted to do, he could not do well. His artistic associate on the *Web* staff, according to Vachel, was "a trained artist, and my work serves well to set off what he does. The two things can well be told apart": "I wish I had his training. I would use it to more advantage than he does. I am forced to be merely a worker in mosaic, so to speak, given to tricks and twists and turns with ink, from two things, a lack of training, which I expect to remedy somewhat, through the correspondence school of illustrating, and also a lack of absolute control of my hand. Just what this is can be shown by my writing, (handwriting.)" and the latter word is handwritten.

Of course, he continued, knowledge of illustrating would have practical implications. If he learned to be an effective illustrator, he could earn enough money to put himself through medical school: "I think that by the time I illustrate the next two Annuals, and I have illustrated two already, and picked up all I can along that line, as I work, I will be able to judge how much sucess^ there would be for me if I struck out in a professional way. I do not want to spend a cent on drawing unless I can get good money out of it, but if there is any prospect of ready money in it, I want to make some money. It would be a fine thing for me if I could pay for my medical schooling on what I gathered together on these four Annuals. There are fellows here, lots of them, paying their way through school, and it does them too much good, for me to deprive myself of that pleasure. These Annuals are my open door. If year after next, I have learned all I can pick up, then I can take the last Annual I illustrate around to the engraving department of some publishing house, and stand or fall on the strength of it. I have seen the pictures of people who are working along the line of decorative design, in 'Printers^ Ink,' who do not do such big work, perhaps, as Gibson, or get as big pay, but they make money, and I judge they make enough to pay their way through school." Vachel's priorities, at least, were obvious, but not exactly what his parents had in mind. As for his parents' priorities, that is, his studies, his conclusion was honest, if not politic: "It is not hard for me any more to

keep at work, but there is no certainty in my knowledge, and continuous attention is a hard thing. Yours with love, N V Lindsay” (April 24).

Ironically, just two days later, after a college assembly in which President Zollars and a visiting preacher had spoken of their personal priorities, Vachel the independent man gave way to Vachel the dutiful boy: “It makes a boy feel small to see two big men, (after two weeks of seeing nobody,) to see them full of their purposes, and working for them determinedly and effectually, thoroughly identified with the causes they serve, and giving their lives for them. It opens a long road ahead for me when I think about it” (April 26). Temporarily, anyway, the assembly seems to have achieved its desired effect. On April 29, Vachel assured his parents: “We will begin reciting Anatomy Tuesday, again. I intend to recite well. That means hard study. We have a review of the arm,—muscles^, bones, nerves and blood-vessels. I have learned it all once, but will have to do it over again. . . . I want to get my Anatomy all over again, from the first.” Parenthetically, he pointed out the obvious: “(It has not stuck to me in any definite way.)”

By early May, though, independent Vachel resurfaced, at least sporadically. More and more, he was convinced that the road ahead of him, as he put it, led to art, not to medicine. And, characteristically, he tried to break the news to his parents as gently as possible: “The only thing I am anxious about is to teach myself what I have got to do in the world,” he declared. Then he fired another shot in the ongoing family struggle: “Everyone here, in the Anatomy class and out of it tells me that I have no business being a physician.” [Note 7] Then quickly, and defensively, he promised: “They have received no encouragement from me, however” (May 5). On the other hand, the battle lines were being drawn: the Lindsay son wanted to pursue a purpose for which he could work “determinedly and effectually.” He wanted a cause with which he could identify, a cause he could pursue with one unwavering aim. And the medical profession was rapidly becoming a nonviable option.

To be dependent on money from home and at the same time to pursue one’s own choice of professions is difficult, if not impossible. Predictably, on May 21, Vachel disguised his true intentions by first telling his father what he knew his father wanted to hear: “We are having tall times in Anatomy. The reviews are big. We swallow about half a man, whole, every day. We have everything from the knee to the hip tomorrow to study, muscles^, nerves, vessels, and fascia.” Then he adroitly returned to the subject of how a few of his fellow students were struggling to pay their own way: “I envy them quite a little. It would do me a great deal of good to be hammered out on the anvil of self support, I believe. I think it is the thing that I need more than anything else. I am getting tired of feeling like a sunflower made sensitive to the wind by being raised all its life in a hot-house. It is not a beautiful figure, but you see what I mean.” He raised the possibility of part-time and summer employment for himself. The work that interested him was engraving, as many artists fail because they do not know how their work is reproduced: “Now if I go into the engraving business for six months, what ever I learn in the drawing line I will know how to apply. I will know what is wanted, and I will know the things that will give me an advantage over my betters, if I ever draw. And besides, I may make enough money to help me out a little in paying my tuition, and then I will be proud of myself, and feel that I deserved to belong to the family. . . . I have been notably

irresponsible all my life. I find myself a hard case to handle now, and I must crash against the hard facts of existence in order to make a speedy and radical cure.”

As he warmed to his subject, he seemed to forget that his future had already been determined: “. . . before I am twenty one I want to know the best way to be earning my own living. I want to be doing it temporarily in some little chore, even then, and before I am twenty two I want to have a purpose before me that has been tried and found not wanting before any possible obstacle that life by that time has afforded me.” He went so far as to use his father’s platitudinous tract to support his own purposes: “I believe most heartily that one unwavering aim is my only salvation, and the only thing that will focus my energies and make my erratic impulses consistent, and of service to me. I need to be tied together in a hard knot” (May 21). Then, without waiting for a response, he announced in a follow-up note that in June he was going to Cleveland to talk with engravers about a summer job (May 25).

Vachel’s parents’ response has not survived, but two apologetic letters from their son, one to each parent, suggest that Papa and Mama were less than thrilled. To Mama, Vachel explained: “I would not like to jump straight from my education into my Fathers’ shoes without having enough education in hard knocks by myself, to fit them at once, or sometime” (May 26). He went on to assure her that he was not interested in art for fame and glory: it was strictly business, strictly as an adjunct to his life as a doctor. To Papa, on the other hand, Vachel indicated that he would save time and money by not attending the annual junior banquet (May 26). The dutiful boy returned to the fore and family peace was restored, at least for the time being.

6

The one competitive event no Hiram student could avoid was the required term “oratoricals.” The Lindsay son’s own interests (and his desire to please his parents as well) led him to prepare a spring oration on the family’s former next-door neighbor and the ex-governor of Illinois, John Peter Altgeld. Vachel dipped into his limited funds for \$1.50 and purchased the newly expanded edition of Altgeld’s book, *Live Questions* (1899), advising his parents in late April: “I am spending my scraps of time now on my Oration. I have read a great deal upon it. Altgeld’s book is a thousand pages, and the more I read of it the more I understand his temperament, and the closer I come to his individuality” (April 26).

Altgeld’s courageous “individuality” impressed Vachel, especially since he felt himself in an ongoing struggle to establish his own independence, his own individuality. “I have chosen my subject,” he admitted to his parents, “because I have been thoroughly identified with it for a long time. I believe in it more than anything else along the line of a public question. . . .” Ironically, he also lamented that when Altgeld “finally dies there will be no voice raised in the nation to show the world the man he was” (May 13), not knowing that he himself would provide that “voice” in one of his best-known poems: “The Eagle That Is Forgotten” (written in March 1911, nine years after Altgeld’s death). Vachel’s college effort, unfortunately, lacks the magic of the later poem; the forgettable climax reads: “Honor then to his labors. Honor upon honor to his name. He has done the best a man may do. He gave all his heart to humanity, and all his strength and wisdom to

the state, and to the law” (May 25, 1899, Virginia). Where the speaker finished in the competition is not on record, although we do know that he was disappointed. When he proudly related to his parents that Olive had placed high in her competition, he expressed disgust with his own performance. He blamed himself and, by implication, his mother: once again he had been unable to control his nerves (May 25).

On the social scene, Vachel’s letters this spring indicate that Ruth Wheeler had emerged as a favorite, especially as a companion during church services. Ruth, according to her admirer, is “the most spiritual” of her family (May 2). Four weeks later, after the oratorical competition, the two Lindsays were invited to spend Memorial Day weekend at the Wheeler home in Akron, Vachel escorting Ruth and her brother Willard (who should not be confused with Vachel’s Springfield friend and New York roommate, Willard Wall Wheeler) escorting Olive. One afternoon, Vachel walked an Akron golf course while Willard Wheeler played. It was his initial exposure to the sport of his Scottish ancestors, and his overall impression is interesting. Golf, he judged, is a “good” game, although it has “its limitations. It takes big grounds that only a few can use, and quite a little^ money, on lost balls, and broken sticks and a caddy to trot around and carry your weapons” (May 31).

Vachel was writing from Hiram, and as he looked back over his Akron weekend, he could not resist the familial inclination to analyze the nature of friends. Willard, of course, was immature, at least in the opinion of his guest: “Willard . . . drownds^ himself in magazines. He is a rare boy, not a bit of fight in him, but sensitive and manly, nevertheless. He is neither a leader, nor a master of men, but most everything else a boy ought to be.” As a family, moreover, the Wheelers were rather ordinary and, in this respect, quite unlike the very seldom Lindsays: “To be brief—they are not notable for creative, pioneer force, but seem to be strong steady conservative refined people. . . . They do not chase their ideas as relentlessly as we do, nor are they as prone to sacrifice the habitual ruts for special emergencies of the hour, as we are. What pride they have, when they allow it to rule them, consists in a sensitiveness to the respect of the best outsiders. I think if our family pride should be stated, it would consist, when we allowed it to rule us, of a desire to be independent of any high standards or low, that are not our own. They are as family, notable for their uniform, childlike affection for each other, blind and cherishing. The more they like any one, the less they are able to see his faults, while I think that the more we respect our good qualities in each other and are proud of them, the more we resent anything below the standard, and the more we are apt to see it. Their affections are deep and unquestioning and dependent, while ours, in their activity are more a desire to help and serve, than a mere call for something in return.” The Wheelers “are not endowed as we are,” Vachel continued, “but what they have they use more quietly, figuratively, more smoothly, and are not so likely to make big dents in anything they think worth opposing, as we are. They are not fighters at all. . . . On the whole,” he boasted, “they do not weigh as much as we do, but are remarkably uniform, and cannot do as many things to regret as we sometimes find ourselves doing, neither do they rise to do as many things to be proud of” (May 31).

The mixed review did not deter the reviewer’s growing regard for the Wheelers’ older daughter. He requested that his parents invite Ruth to visit Springfield before the weighty Lindsays left on their Colorado vacation: “I know Mama would think lots of

Ruth, and of course it is to be taken for granted that Papa would. He is too near kin to me to fail at that” (May 31). Such a request, as we shall see, was always forthcoming whenever the Lindsay son had so much as a casual interest in a girl. It was essential that the girl meet Mama, his personal paragon among women—in spite of her nerves.

7

Whether or not Vachel focused his efforts on his studies, as he claimed all spring, by early June he confessed that the subject of anatomy “takes lots of conceit out of a man. I could not have a better or kinder teacher anywhere than Dr. Page. These weeks must be crowded with work, though, for he is always thorough in his tests. Last term I could not get a passing grade on things I knew the best of anything in the book” (June 5). Two days later, he described how he studied with the help of his friend and fellow classmate, Harry Hurd: “I have a tall lot of work keeping brushed up on all the anatomy at once. I study it with Hurd and recite it to him at night—he is a fine boy, and takes an interest in my case, and does not let a muscle go by till I have given origin, insertion and enervation three times, backwards and forwards. I have lost about half of it by recitation time, and Harry looks sick and tries a little harder next time” (June 7). But the study was to no avail. Vachel’s third-term grade for Anatomy was the lowest to date, a mere 50. Even that grade, he later acknowledged to his friend Paul Wakefield, was something of a victory, since he had been unable to concentrate on Anatomy the way he knew he should. To his friend, he was candid: “I would trade my socks to be able to study like a man” (August 6, 1899, Ward). [Note 8]

The grades in Vachel’s remaining two courses, on the other hand, were outstanding: a 94 in Law of Torts and a 95 in Higher Criticism. Contrary to the legend that he was a college failure, a legend that he himself fostered in part, the truth is that he received high or passing grades in the majority of his college classes, at least during his first two years. Indeed, he offered only a partial summary of his academic work when he confessed to Hiram’s students in 1930: “I hated trigonometry, astronomy, anatomy, French, Latin, chemistry, physics, materia medica, etc. I loved speaking, writing and drawing with all my heart and soul and kept a big series of notebooks in all three, and came out last in the oratorical contests” (*Spider Web* 1932, 122). He failed to mention that he had received grades of 90 or better in no less than 12 of his classes; he received 80 or better in another 5. [Note 9]

At the end of term, on Saturday, June 17, Vachel was as good as his word. He found a way to nearby G’ville, where he boarded the train to Cleveland, in order to, in his words, “see what I can see.” In his letter to his parents, written two days prior to the trip, he dropped a rather ominous, offhanded remark: “For myself, I will have to be very active indeed, next summer, in something entirely different from the last nine months, to be reconciled to coming back.” In the meantime, he thanked his father for mentioning “the fact in one of your late letters that if we wanted some more money, to ask for it. It breaks the ice for us, for we do” (June 15). One week later, he reported that he had profited, paradoxically, from his search for a position: “Saturday I went to Cleveland—and the visit was of great profit. It will not pay me to try either lithographing or engraving. I talked to about fifteen artists, engravers and lithographers. There is not ready

money in either” (June 21). For the time being, then, the matter of a future profession remained medicine, but only by default. [Note 10]

At the end of term, Vachel escorted a new girl, one Katherine Merrill (if we accept his spelling) to the commencement play, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Since Merrill was not a Hiram student, she perhaps was on campus to visit friends at graduation time. Six months after the fact, Merrill’s date commented on his evening in a letter of reminiscence addressed to his parents: “we perched out to the stand-pipe till two o’clock—(and got home before some of them).” When he added, “I got pretty well acquainted with Katharine^ that night,” someone, likely Papa or Mama, placed two large question marks in the margin of the letter (December 22, 1899). By the time the senior Lindsays learned of their son’s late-night perching, however, they had little to be concerned about. Paul Wakefield was on a two-day visit to the Merrill home in Akron, and their son’s romantic inclinations increasingly focused on Ruth Wheeler. [Note 11]

Finally, by way of a postscript to Vachel’s second Hiram year, we may note that he continued to share his innermost feelings and intents with his aunt, Frances Hamilton, although most of the correspondence between them is apparently lost. The one letter of Aunt Fannie’s that is extant suggests that the loss is indeed unfortunate. On the way to Hiram, back in September 1898, Olive and Vachel had stopped in Indiana for a visit, and Fannie wrote a follow-up letter to her favorite nephew, once she knew he had arrived in Hiram: “A medical student! I declare don’t that sound tough? Or am I mistaken? Did I understand you to say you would begin this year studying medicine? oh well, it’s all the same you intend to. When you get fully into the merits of the science I want you to send me a prescription for cold feet” (Hamilton, October 26, 1898, Virginia). In the light of Vachel’s year and his changed attitude toward his presumed profession, Fannie’s humor expresses more than she intended. In succeeding years, though, when her nephew needed friends in his fight to pursue his own goals, Fannie proved a comforting source of support and encouragement. She was, in his words, “my loyal partizan^ when most everybody else about was denouncing me as a blithering idiot or worse” (Chénetier 111). With Fannie, he could express himself openly, whether he felt like a man or a boy. [Note 12]

Notes for Chapter Seven

[Note 1] In his guardian brother role, Vachel urged his parents to send Olive to the New England Conservatory of Music (Boston) for the fall and winter terms, 1899. When his mother demurred, he responded: “Mama says that she don’t^ see that the graduates of Eastern Universities are developing any force of individuality. Perhaps the people she has inspected were not born with any. Individuality that is worth while is as rare as genius, and when it comes, it will let nothing suppress it, not even the crushing weight of an Eastern University” (January 10, 1899). Olive did attend the Conservatory from September through February, 1899-1900. She returned to Hiram for the third term (March-June, 1900).

[Note 2] A copy of a Vachel letter to his Hiram Latin teacher and friend, Marcia Henry, sheds additional light on Vachel’s adoption of his family’s critical traditions. Writing from Chicago on May 19, 1901, Vachel advised Henry that he had sent a letter to the mother of their mutual friend and Vachel’s fellow Hiram student, Charlie [Charles D.] Russell, a letter in which he had analyzed the woman’s character: “The other day, just

because of old times and out of a good and honest heart I sat down and wrote my opinion of her. I have not the least doubt that it puzzled her quite a little. I should have restrained myself I suppose. I do not believe I am constructed on conventional lines, for whenever I do anything that pleases me best and supremely, and satisfies my inward self, irrespective of things human and expected, why it looks as though I had acted from no knowable or conceivable motive other than whim or fantasy. . . . Not that Mrs. Russel[^] has objected. But tonight it occurred to me that she was probably a trifle puzzled over my effort, if she exerted herself to read it closely. I believe if the letter would have come from any other mortal, she would have put him down for a suffering idiot with the heart of a—a dove we will say. On the contrary it was my most instinctive way of expressing friendship” (a typed copy of this letter is at Hiram and at Virginia).

For a literary parallel, see Emerson’s “The Transcendentalist”: “These exacting children advertise us of our wants. There is no compliment, no smooth speech with them; they pay you only this one compliment, of insatiable expectation; they aspire, they severely exact, and if they only stand fast in this watch-tower, and persist in demanding unto the end, and without end, then are they terrible friends, whereof poet and priest cannot choose but stand in awe; and what if they eat clouds, and drink wind, they have not been without service to the race of man.” Not surprisingly, Emerson was one of Uncle Boy’s favorite authors.

[Note 3] Arthur Holmes, one of Vachel’s peers at Hiram, also felt that there were two Lindsays, although Holmes identified two different personalities: “To many Vachel was an enigma, a fact later justified by his changeable, restless but always original career. From what we know from his diaries kept at that time, two very distinct personalities dwelt in more or less uneasiness in this young genius. There was the student, outwardly almost totally irresponsible, negligent of curricular studies of certain kinds, erratic, quick-witted, smiling, lovable, mirthful, youthful; and inwardly, the great soul, filled and agitated with vast plans for the future, and for service to spiritual America and the whole world, which he loved and aimed to elevate, and for which he eventually laid down his life” (139). Holmes’s statement on Vachel’s death, as we shall see, is more dramatic than true.

[Note 4] Ruggles cites Olive’s memories: “Vachel said to Charlie Russell, ‘Russell, she’s got to come down!’ Mr. Russell with his ready nerve replied, ‘I’m with you!’ . . .

It was three a.m. Snow lay deep on campus and the temperature was five below zero. For three-quarters of an hour Vachel slithered back and scrambled forward on the steep slate roof above the topmost rung of the ladder till he achieved the sharp summit. Then he shinnied up the thirty feet of the flagpole.

He held his gloves in his teeth . . . and in the terrible strain he chewed great holes in them. At last he gained the glorious trophy and stuffed it into his boot and climbed down. (Ruggles, 63)

Vachel’s letters, however, make it clear that his companion was Pete McKinlay, not Charlie Russell.

[Note 5] With the departure of Harry Harts, the “Sextette” underwent metamorphosis. Several other students, including Vesta Schumacher, joined with the remaining “Sextette” members, and the clique took a new name: “The Electric Light Plant” (March 2, 1899).

[Note 6] Vachel described the drawing for his parents: “It covers the whole front of the book, and is in two colors, their [the juniors’] class colors—old gold and cadet blue. Now these colors I used in sharp-cut surfaces, mixing them in with the back-ground of the book, which is buff, I believe. The title, in large letters, at the top and bottom is ‘The Hiram College Spider Web, published by the class of 1900 in the year 1899.’ The middle of the cover is occupied by Hiram Hill, done in gold. It is decidedly conventionalized, and contains the main buildings, also conventionalized. The Figure of Arachne occupies one side. She holds a spindle, from which golden threads radiate^ all over the book” (April 24, 1899).

[Note 7] Vachel likely refers to a rumor cited in later years by fellow student William F. Rothenburger: “The story floated about the campus that one evening while preparing a hard lesson in Gray’s ‘Anatomy’ with a fellow student, Vachel paused abruptly and said, ‘Price [James Caldwell Price], if you were ill and I were a physician, would you call me to treat your case?’ The answer was, ‘Frankly, Lindsay, I don’t believe I would.’ Whereupon Lindsay closed his book pounded it with his fist as he exclaimed, ‘Well, I don’t believe anybody else would either. I’ll never make a doctor’” (Rothenburger 144).

[Note 8] Olive commented that Vachel “was not really meant for anything scientific. His fellow students have many stories to tell of his ridiculous answers in anatomy class and his theories about the life story of the ‘stiff’ in the dissecting room” (Lindsay-Wakefield 85). Arthur Holmes relates one story, although Holmes exaggerates Vachel’s lack of study: “. . . Vachel’s recitations on anatomy in Dr. Page’s classes were moments of much wonder and delight to other students. Usually he was perfectly innocent of any textbook knowledge of the subject. But with a peculiar lurch, a kind of sailor’s weaving motion, he rose to his feet with the indescribable squint in his eyes, head tilted to one side and upward, displaying his irresistible^ smile, he would attack the description of the femur bone, and relying upon imagination and bits of common-sense lore, proceed to tell minutely and exactly how the Creator ought to have made it so as to perform its appointed function in the human economy” (139-140). *The Spider Web* (1900) cites “the inimitable witticisms of Mr. Lindsay” among the highlights of the year for the Medical Association (p. 116). Holmes provides an example. In one speech, Vachel speculated “that if germs multiply by fission into two, and these two into two, and so on until one becomes millions in a short time—what then in the thousandth generation would be the relationship of the germs to each other?” (Holmes, 140).

[Note 9] Ann Massa, for example, brushes off Vachel’s Hiram career in one line: “from 1897 to 1900 he studied medicine unsuccessfully at Hiram College, Ohio (a Campbellite institution)” (8). Mark Harris suggests that Vachel’s grades placed him “a little behind the crowd, precariously along the thin line that separates the passing from the failing, now this way and now that” (66). Vachel himself asserted that he “quit Hiram, the spring of 1900, with credits that would make me less than a full sophomore” (*Spider Web* 1932, 122). Masters simply echoes Vachel’s claim (56).

[Note 10] Vachel needed the money, he advised his father, “to pay for the Stiff” (June 21, 1899). Vachel’s Hiram letters constantly refer to his shortage of funds. Olive recalls: “I had a single room in one of the girls’ dormitories. Vachel was allowed to come each night to tell me good night. The preceptress rang a warning gong and said, ‘Vachel’s coming up to the second floor, girls! Vachel’s coming up now.’ And so by special

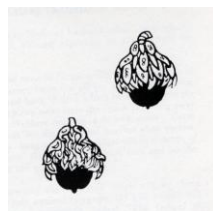
dispensation of the authorities we had our daily confab on the affairs of the world, or on whatever important problems Vachel had on his mind. I was the practical one so it was always necessary for me to remind Vachel, when our checks came, that his board bill must be paid first before the whole amount melted away in the bookstore and candy shop” (Lindsay-Wakefield 85).

[Note 11] In his 1927 essay, “Gibson GIRLS, Gibson MEN and the Chicago World’s Fair,” an ostensible review of Mark Sullivan’s *Our Times, the Turn of the Century, 1900-1904*, Vachel recalls: “. . . in Sullivan’s book, is a picture of Richard Mansfield, who introduced Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* to the American stage in 1898. At that very moment my future bother-in-law and I had persuaded the local Delphic committee of Hiram college to put on this, our favorite play, for commencement Week. We, and everyone else, coached the principals for six months, and had every word of the translation by heart. There were some very beautiful girls in this coeducational school, who took the part of Roxane and her bevy of beauties more beautifully than it has ever been done since. Right now I can recite that balcony scene, and so can my brother-in-law” (21).

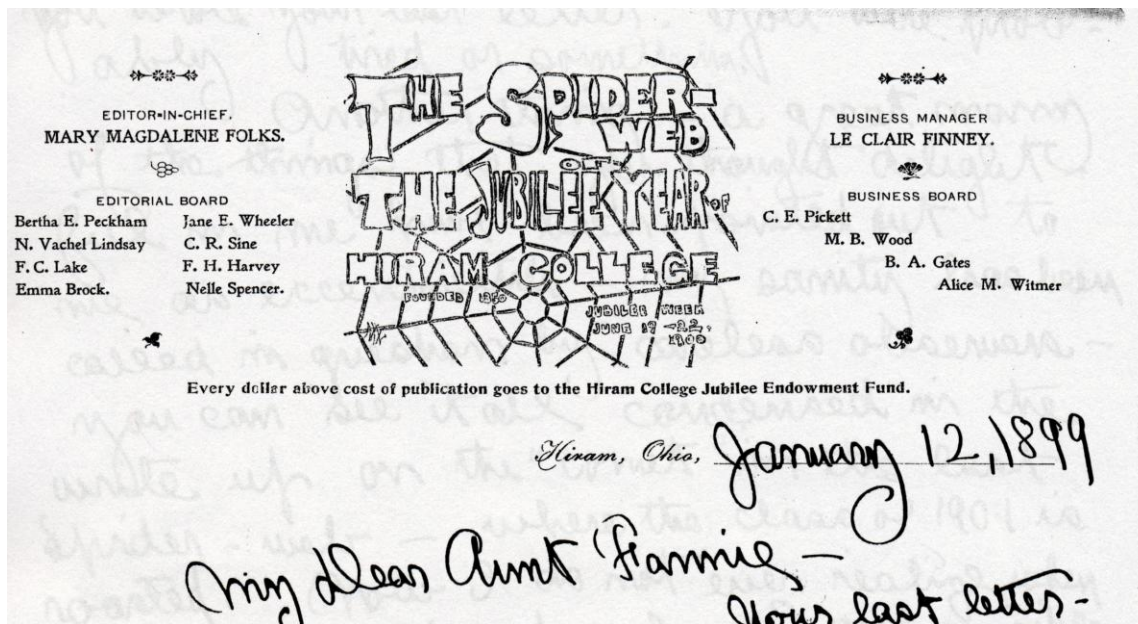
[Note 12] The dearth of correspondence between Vachel and his Aunt Fannie at this time is likely due to Vachel’s failure to write. “Your last letter—your letter that came this morning—is a little hard to understand,” Vachel wrote to Fannie on January 12, 1899. “If I have quit talking about myself as much—it is because I am sometimes a little tired of myself—and not because I do not want you to know.

“Another thing—a great many of the things that you thought delightful in me have been pointed out to me as eccentricities—my sanity has been called in question by careless observers—you can see it all condensed in the write up on the ‘comet’ in the last Spider-web^--where the class of 1901 is roasted. Now I do not ever realize when I am eccentric and when I am sensible. The admonitions of my friends have made me coltiavate^ a habit of restraint—not to please myself—merely to please them. This has made me a sadder and wiser man. Wiser—because I know just how uncontrolable my nerves have been and how wild my impulses. I am sensitive as a snail till I get in my shell—and then after I am in people wonder why they cannot touch me.

He has not written about his life, he explains, because “the minor details of existence have utterly lost their charm for me—I do not care what happens—so I do not remember—and it does not fire my *imagination* and my fancy as it used to. I find myself slowly organizing and centralizing into a machine for the searching out and digesting and reincarnation of beauty. What I have been doing?—only waiting! What I plan to do? The only thing I plan to do is to be an artist. That is all the tomorrow I have” (Blair).



For an example of Vachel’s college drawing, a copy of the Hiram College stationery he helped design and used for many of his college letters is reproduced below:



Stationery designed by Vachel for the Hiram College annual, *The Spider-Web*. Under the word “HIRAM,” the block lettering reads: “FOUNDED 1850.” Under the word “COLLEGE,” the block lettering reads: JUBILEE WEEK: JUNE 19-22, 1900.” In the lower left-hand corner of the web are the initials “NVL.”



Uncle Boy's Hiram class (1898-99). Vachel is at the upper left, Olive at the upper right. This picture hangs in Vachel's bedroom at the Vachel Lindsay Home State Historic site.