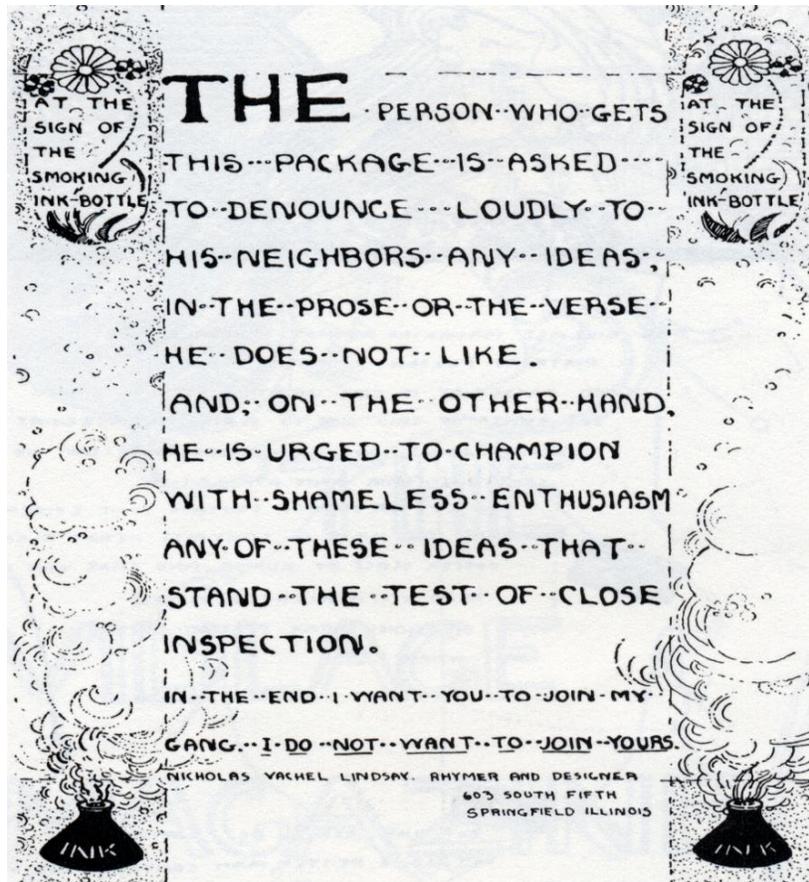


Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Eight



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

by

Dennis Camp
 Professor Emeritus
 University of Illinois at Springfield
 Springfield, Illinois

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



8. HIRAM AND DETERMINATION [1899-1900]

“Gutta cavat lapidem.”

1

Vachel spent the summer, 1899, in Springfield and in Colorado, likely writing long, introspective letters to Ruth Wheeler, the kind of gossipy letters that he had sent and would continue to send to all his inspiration girls when he could not be with them in person. During the five or more years that Wheeler held a special place in her friend's heart, she must have received hundreds of such letters, although not one, apparently, has survived. Along with writing to friends, Vachel may have struggled with Caesar's *Commentaries*, in accord with promises that he made to his parents in May. How much he studied is moot, however, since he never did pass college Latin and since his mother thought he needed rest.

Months after the fact, on Christmas day, 1899, Kate wrote and told her son how anxious she had been the previous June: “When you came home [from Hiram] last summer I felt alarmed about you. You were in a state of nervous exhaustion bordering on that dazed condition that ruined [Springfield businessmen] Arthur Wines and Geo[rge] Brinkerhoff.” Once again, she confessed her fears (and supported her son's intimations) that she was to blame: her children had inherited her own susceptibility to “nervous exhaustion.” As a victim herself, though, she knew what must be done: “So you must get command of your forces.—Take enough outdoor exercise, quiet sleep, complete recreation: not loafing, that isn't the thing at all. Eat the right kind of foods at the right time and in the right quantity. Make all your habits subservient to your purpose” (December 25, Virginia). The advice was sound, but her son's “purpose,” as we shall see, was not in agreement with what his mother had in mind. [Note 1]

For Kate Lindsay, summer vacations were a time for rededication and recovery. Year after year, she witnessed her hard-working husband regain his strength, usually in the Colorado mountains, sometimes in Europe, all because of “enough outdoor exercise, quiet sleep, complete recreation.” In summer, 1899, it was her son's turn as well. Almost miraculously, he decided to return to Hiram in the fall and resume his premedical studies. “Lets^ be good boys this year, Paul,” he wrote confidentially to his friend Wakefield: “I am going out to preach, if you will write the sermon. And I must review anat^. To be a sucessful^ Physician, and amass wealth in a long professional career, one must be a little thorough in the science of the human frame” (September 9, 1899, Ward).

On the other hand, Paul's confidential friend demonstrated that he also wanted to be “a little thorough” in his pursuit of literature, public speaking, religion, and art, especially the art of illustrating. Before classes began, he purchased five notebooks and wrote on the opening page of each one: “This book belongs to Christ.” Over the summer,

he had resolved not only to return to Hiram but also to do everything he could to study the art of Christian beneficence. The notebooks were dedicated to Christ, because beneficence, in their author's mind, meant preaching Christ. Understanding his concept of Christ, however, is vital to understanding his purpose, since his concept of Christ was anything but simple. He thought of Christ as the wisest individual of his age; in classical terms, Christ was the epic poet of Christianity. One who would preach Christ must prepare at least as long as Christ prepared. He must study until age 30; he must comprehend and be able to communicate, both in art and in words, this world's greatest ideas, this world's culture. With such a concept of the Saviour in mind, Vachel singled out five study areas that he intended to master for Christ, presumably (during the first weeks of term) in addition to mastering medicine: "Culture," "Speaking," "Illustrating," "The Disciples of Christ," and a subject vaguely called "The Typical Saxon versus The Ideal Saxon: Notes on the Mastery of the Saxon . . . The Mastery of Men." Interestingly, there is no evidence of a notebook for Histology, the one science course in the would-be doctor's third-year curriculum. [Note 2]

Vachel's doubts about returning to Hiram, as it turned out, were not unique. Once back on campus, he was surprised to discover that 60 per cent or more of his classmates failed to register for their junior year. Of the 52 who had matriculated as freshmen, only 20 were left. The Hiram housing market now favored the renter, and Vachel was able to escape from the difficult Mrs. Miller. He moved into the private home of Professor Hugh McDiarmid, who supplemented his meager college salary by renting rooms at the bargain price of thirty dollars for the entire school year. Jim Henry, the brother of Vachel's Latin teacher, Marcia Henry, also roomed at McDiarmid's, and the two boys soon became fast friends. They dined at Miller Hall, although Vachel's assigned seat placed him between his cousin, Mary Frazee, and Katie Teachout, the daughter of another Hiram professor. In addition to Histology, he was enrolled in Caesar, Logic, and French, with the latter representing the key course in respect to his own purposes. Of course, he started the term with chronic high hopes: "I am studying just what I ought to study and rooming just where I ought to room I think." He promised his parents that he would not draw anything "till Christmas" (October 16) but, instead, focus his energies on his studies. Compared to other years, he sent few letters home, because, he explained, there were those studies.

What he did not explain was significant: the studies were becoming more and more independent, less and less related to his Hiram classes. When he promised his parents he would not draw until Christmas, he had already purchased a new notebook, his sixth this term. Like the others, it was vaguely dedicated to Christ but specifically, and perhaps humorously, dedicated to a particular area of study: "What I remember^ of The Science of English . . . 11 October '99." The English language and English literature comprised, at last, a science that Dr. Lindsay's son could enjoy. Fortunately, a table-of-contents page, occurring as an afterthought at the end of the book, illustrates the inclusive, if not the conclusive, nature of the new science:

Being a study of
 The Dictionary—
 Rhetoric—
 Phrases—
 Verses—

Writers—
 New Words—
 when nothing else. (78)

The entries focus on what the author called his “inner currents,” rather than on what his teachers expected him to know. The index to the value of any truth, he had come to believe, was internal and personal, not external and academic. Truth must correspond to the student’s own ideas, actually, to the student’s own purposes; otherwise truth is not worth remembering. In Vachel’s words: “A true thought read should be tested, and not remembered loosely, but put into its proper relations with its brethren^ before it is laid away” (“English” 2). By the end of this academic year, he would fill many pages of his notebooks with what he felt were “true” thoughts, that is, by definition, thoughts that he felt would help him prepare to preach Christ. Some insights were derived from classes; most, though, resulted from independent reading, particularly in the classics of English literature. Now, however, we are ahead of the story.

In spite of his studies, his search for truth, Vachel found time to perch with Ruth Wheeler, Vesta Schumacher, and Ruth’s sister Jane. At midterm, though, he assured his parents: “Your son is perching seldom, spending money and wasting time not at all” (October 23). With Olive off campus (she was at the New England Conservatory for a half year), her brother claimed that his social obligations, and therefore his expenses, were much less than in past years. His penchant for mischief also was less, although he still had his moments: “I hunted up Ruth at Bowler, and since it rained hard we perched in Bowler parlour^. We hadn’t had a word for a week, and were so glad to see each other, and so pleased over the holiday that we took the afternoon. We went to the Library, (it was closed) and talked till half past four in there. (I have a key). It was the worst thing Ruth and I have done in Hiram, and we enjoyed it immensely. (Ruth has a little new blue hat that is dangerous.)” (October 29). Looking back at the end of term, Vachel realized that Ruth had been “conscientiously trying to supply Olive’s place in the way of a general headquarters and advisory superintendent,” although her temperament, he judged, lacked the fire of his big sister and his Mama: “She has done as well with me as I have allowed her to—is a first rate scolder, but rather too much afraid to scold” (December 26).

The obsession with oratory, along with the perching, also continued, although the letters home were more politic than they had been during the previous year. At one point, Vachel pointedly thanked his mother for insisting that he learn to write and speak, although he admitted his pessimism and resignation in regard to the impending, literary-society competitions scheduled in December: “Things look better for the Delphics than they do for me. But I am not a glory hunter” (October 29). Suddenly, though, and unexpectedly, he had occasion to boast of some oratorical “glory.”

On November 17, to everyone’s surprise, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay placed third in the fall chapel competition, number 3 among 17 participants. His oration was entitled, portentously, “The Strength of a Purpose,” and he was given a 94 for thought and a 90+ for delivery. Since the winner received 94 and 92 in the same categories, Vachel’s confidence was bolstered at just the right time, at least in regard to his own intentions. Pessimism and resignation turned into optimism and hope, and looking forward to December, he dared to dream of earning a share of Hiram’s true rhetorical glory. With all the strength of a purpose, he redoubled his already-considerable effort on “William the

Conqueror,” the title and subject of his Delphic oration. He had started his research in early fall, long before he even thought about his chapel speech. “William,” in fact, was one of the reasons Dr. Lindsay’s son wanted to study French.

2

In spite of his excitement, for one of the few times in his life, Vachel continued to be politic about what he disclosed to his parents. In November, for example, he repeated what he had written in October, and included the same old vagaries: “My studies are more of an anxiety to me than my [society] oration. It is not an anxiety at all. Nothing depends on me” (November 12). The sin, if any, was an error of omission: he simply did not offer details on what he was studying. The subject of the society oration, moreover, could be construed as further evidence of filial loyalty. The Norman “d’Areci,” as we saw in chapter two, was identified by family historians as a Lindsay ancestor who had come to England with William the Conqueror. If the story were true, a drop or two of Norman blood flowed in the Lindsay family’s Scottish veins, and any praise of William and his victorious comrade was praise of Dr. Lindsay and his forebears.

The close of the doctor’s son’s oration, on the other hand, suggests the son’s true purpose, as well as the reason he wanted to study French, the language of William and his fellow Normans: “When there shall be one people, one language and one law, when the Empire of the races shall be knit together by sturdy Saxon sinews, and fused into the brotherhood of man by the flames within the burning Saxon heart; the Norman will be master still. When he has crossed and claimed all waters for his own; when the lands of all mankind have been entered in his Domesday book; William of Normandy shall be crowned in the mystic Westminster of the nations, and no Conqueror shall come after him forevermore” (Virginia). The energies of society are Saxon, but the Saxons, in spite of their industry, were conquered by, and are now governed by, the intellectual, structure-engendering Normans. Vachel knew that Saxon blood flooded his Scottish veins, but he also believed that his drop or so of Norman blood explained his desire to be an artist, a creator of form. His belief, moreover, constitutes the main theme of “The Typical Saxon versus The Ideal Saxon” notebook, where the author identifies art consciousness as the index to the Norman, in contrast to the Saxon, mind: “The French [Normans] are the greatest specialists in the world. They must expound art. Where they fail in this—they are not entitled to credit in my biology. The Saxons as teachers teach everything else but art. If the Saxons ever have art they don’t teach it anyway” (30).

The ideal Saxon, unlike the typical Saxon, seeks to develop his Saxon energies within an artistic, form-giving, Norman frame of reference. Vachel saw himself as an ideal Saxon trapped in an artless educational system run by and for typical Saxons. Although he knew he was the son of a mainly Saxon father, he felt that his drop of Norman blood explained or at least symbolized both his father’s unusual love for art and literature and, more importantly, his own creative urges. In short, through appropriate education and art training, he aspired to cultivate the Norman aspect of his nature. He wanted to learn to speak French; he wanted to become Vachel the Conqueror, Vachel the master of men; he wanted to become, with apologies to Shelley, an acknowledged legislator of the world.

At one and the same time, Vachel did not deny his Saxon, Scottish blood, something that is obvious, not only from entries in the “Saxon” notebook but from entries in the other notebooks as well. Racial pride, however, is expressed in terms of the “ideal” or Norman-governed Saxon, not the “typical” Saxon. The Lindsay blood mixture was an ideal blend of Saxon energy and Norman control: “The ideal Saxon will see in the people from whence he came all the glorious functions they have carried out in the state and the civilization, be it known or unknown. He will see in his best work what has been prophecied[^] by their best self denial, he will see in every ambition their unselfish hope for him, he will see in life itself nothing but what they have seen, in different terms and a different language before his day. He can expect to be no better and no wiser, and may well be thankful to attain their high” (“Saxon” 10-11). The “different terms” and “different language” are the heart of the problem that Vachel felt he faced, at least when he first began to think about his goals in terms of his ancestry. His overall purpose was no different than his parents’ purpose: he wanted to help other human beings, he wanted, as he put it, to preach Christ. He viewed culture, however, especially art and oratory, not medicine, as the primary requisite for anyone who aspired to establishing a compassionate and just society. He desired to help others by cultivating his artistic, ideal Saxon self—and that meant he must escape the educational traps set by and for typical, materialistic Saxons. His intentions, after all, sprang from his heritage, from his portentous mixture of blood. His values and his parents’ values were the same: the difference was merely “terms” and “language.”

With this minor (to him) difference in mind, and flush with the success and the principles of “The Strength of a Purpose,” Vachel sent his parents what he would in time refer to as his “revolutionary letter,” a 16-page, rambling, declaration of independence written, for the most part, during the afternoon and evening, November 27, 1899. He was naively certain that his parents would approve his purposes, once they understood that “terms” and “language” constituted the major, if not the only, possible disagreement. His parents would see that, in all important respects, he was still a dutiful son.

This revolutionary letter opens calmly enough, with a concerned son advising his mother to seek a new house servant, “a better girl.” He then admits that “the fellows have been in all morning and I have had no chance to work and now it is dinner [lunch] time.” Professor McDiarmid has put a new stove in his room, and Hiram has won a basketball game, 30 to 0, over “the best team of Cleveland.” He then tells how he went to his noon meal and did not pick up his pen again until after supper. He spent the afternoon organizing “the noon papers in the Library” and perching with Jane Wheeler. They talked about Ruth, who was not feeling well. Anyway, Vachel explains, “Ruth perches with Pat McCray now. It takes time and money to perch, and I have not the time, I have not the money, and I have not the presistency[^] and the constancy.” Still, he reveres Ruth: “Pat is as big as Hiram can furnish, but Pat isn’t half good enough for her.”

After perching with Jane, Vachel relates, he worked on “William the Conqueror” and attended an *Advance* staff meeting until supper, which on this occasion he took at Professor Wakefield’s, with Paul and his sister Cornelia. Though very young, Cornelia Wakefield was an Uncle Boy favorite, perhaps because she enjoyed his “famous manner”: “Cornelia looked mighty sweet. She likes to have me make love to her. She is more of a woman than some girls of twenty five.” [Note 3]

After supper, he missed the evening Delphic meeting because, in his words, he had “to write this letter” and because “I havn’t time to go.” His parents may be excused if they found their son’s explanation bewildering: by self-admission, he had hardly spent the day in pursuit of academic glory. Parental wonder, however, could only have increased as their son’s communication wound on. At times in his life, Vachel seemed mesmerized as he pursued an idea with what might be called incremental repetitiveness. He wrote his thoughts over and over again, each time revealing a bit more of his “inner currents,” especially, in this letter, his resolution to pursue his own purposes. Typically, the stimulus for his thinking is half hidden in what seems to be a matter-of-fact statement, actually a comment on an apparently innocuous announcement: “as chairman of the Delphic Book committee, after much tribulation, I succeeded in having the Charles Dudley Warner Library put in [the Delphic Society’s library].” The significant comment then follows: “The faculty rave, and the students express delight. I wish I had time to read it. I wish I had time to read a hundred books on Criticism that I know, and a hundred more on History and a hundred more on Art.” [Note 4]

The wish, of course, may have consisted of nothing more than a college boy’s desire to pursue self-improvement. Vachel, however, no longer considered himself an ordinary college boy. Ordinary college boys were typical Saxons, and he was resolved to become an ideal Saxon, a master of men. He believed, moreover, that breadth of learning was tantamount to breadth of power. He relished the fact that the other students turned to him as something of an oracle. (For his Shakespearean quotation, his classmates chose: “I am not in the roll of common men,” *Henry IV*, Part I, iii—see *Spider Web* 1901, p. 18). They made him their YMCA and Delphic Society librarian. He was sought after as a well-read, a literary man, and the resulting experiences appealed to his avuncular instincts. The other boys, and even some of the girls, had recourse to him for counseling and advice. They spent mornings in his room, and he thoroughly enjoyed the feelings of superiority that necessarily accompany such efforts to assist others. His advice was sought, he knew, because of his reputation as a knowing, a creative individual; and his purpose now was to enhance his philanthropic credentials. He wished to be a doctor all right, but a doctor of souls, not of bodies. He wanted to preach Christ, and he could prepare for his chosen profession only if he could find time to direct his Saxon energies toward mastering those aspects of culture that would stimulate his artistic Norman blood. Here is how he expressed his thoughts in his revolutionary letter:

My friends assume I am better read than they are, yet all my book knowledge is based on what I read before I was thirteen. In two weeks I could cover well all I have read since. I have been struggling with a theoretical education, abstaining from those things which might “divert” my mind, and fire my brain with enthusiasm, but I have never been quite strong enough to stand by the theoretical education, and profit by the discipline of routine and uninspiring unfruitful “mental drill.”

If six years cannot give me anything from discipline of this sort, sixty cannot. All I have that sticks to me, has come to me in those scattered moments when I struck out under the power of the currents within me. All my purposes, my thoughts, my ambitions, my ideals come from my hours with Carlyle, and Thoreau, and Altgeld, and The Christian Baptist—Nothing I claim as my own, or will ever use as my own has come to me from my lessons. I cannot take hold of anything except in the hour when I see its use in building up my life, or building my thoughts and my fancies, and

in creating and planning creations, of the pen or the pencil. In order to hold anything, and appropriate it, I must be in the creative mood, and I am always in some sort of a creative mood. The ordinary system of education is for those who want to be scholars, who want to be storehouses of intellectual paint, rather than painters of intellectual pictures, framers of messages, makers of sermons.

The “ordinary system of education” was for the typical, not the ideal Saxon, for an ordinary college boy, not for a very seldom Lindsay.

Predictably, the aspiring ideal Saxon repeated his thoughts, and then, with strength of purpose, he announced his next wish. He wished to abandon Hiram’s typical Saxon curriculum: “From now on after this term I want to educate myself according to the instincts and currents within me for a while rather than by a system of assigned lessons, that are for people who can make themselves study only because it is assigned, and because they go to class. The teacher is the moral taskmaster. He is essential to them. . . . I never am happy because a task is done, I am always happy when I am creating. I am studying hard only when I am hot in pursuit of that which I know will enable me to create, till the search itself becomes part of the act of creation.” He wrote, he claimed, “from a retrospect of years, and a prayerful searching of my own soul for two years. My life is empty when I try to enjoy what the uncreative enjoy, it is empty when I try to find in myself the motives that they have, their reverences, their hopes and their fears. Life itself does not appeal to me but as a chance to build thoughts and motives as men may build a picture with mosaic stones.”

As an example of the kind of education he wanted to pursue (and was already pursuing, for that matter), he cited the independent study that lay behind “William the Conqueror” (in spite of previous assurances that his oration was second to his “studies”): “If you think I was too hot upon William the conqueror^, and too deep in his study, remember I was hunting paint that I knew I could find, to paint a picture I knew I could paint. I could not have studied a ‘term’s work’ on ‘The Norman Conquest’ as deeply and passionatley^ to save my right arm. I would have gotten it loosley^, with the help of many resolvings and many shrinking feelings of weakness, and it would have all gone from me, except a little meagre^ bit. As it is, I have nothing now to show but the oration—the creation. I remember those hours of the search for William—as the happiest of my life, yet nothing but pure gold I hold today.” In contrast to himself, he averred: “The ordinary citizen, the scholar, educates himself to be somebody, to have a trained brain, a perfect training of mental habits. I don’t want to be somebody^ in myself. If I should be able to form ‘habits’ every faculty of my mind would be chained in a tangle of mannerisms that would baffel^ every attempt to isolate and rearrange and create. It would be like paints hardened upon the artists^ palette. Dry paint in regular checkers, is the ideal educated brain, on the conventional system of study and recite. I do not care to be such a one, I cannot be such a one, yet I am endowed with the instinct and the ability to create and I want to live for my work, and I want to educate myself upon a basis of the forces I find in me, rather than a weak will and theories without.”

His “only intellectual shame,” Vachel further argued, was “a literary ignorance,” an ignorance that the Dudley Warner Library could begin to alleviate: “No other [shame] can ever strain my pride. Yet I have avoided the study of books, of criticism, of the science of writing, for indulgence in these would lead to ‘educational destruction’. . . .

Yet to my mind the greatest and most lasting discipline of all is the discipline of construction. Most people can only acquire, few can create, or are endowed with the pride of creation. College courses are for learners and teachers, they are framed for the great absorbing body of men beyond the reach of the higher discipline.”

Although he may not have realized it at the moment, he then announced his academic agenda for the next few months of his college (?) career: “The pride of careful writing and careful drawing, backed by will and purpose must be the educator I must turn to. All the development, all the order of brain and the training of ideas I have are derived from my limited indulgence in these. I must change it from indulgence to duty. I must be the ally^ of the former enemies of my peace of mind. I hunger to read history in search of material to feed my hungry imagination. I desire to inspect literature, that the best paragraph makers may not excell^ me in their mastery of words. I desire to read across the surface of the field of Philosophy and metaphysics, that I may know the possibilities of the keyboard on which I am to play. I want to know the old tunes, so I can play newer ones in human thought. If I seem anxious to be my own master in all things, it is something I must be sometime. I want to make my blunders early, and profit by them soon. I may burn my fingers, but in life, as in the arts, it is only by doing for myself at last, and choosing for myself at last, that I come to the true, the beautiful and the best in living.” Should anyone wonder why he stayed in his room the next few months, reading what he wanted to read, rather than attending his classes?

As Vachel brought his peroration toward a close, probably not soon enough for his parents’ peace of mind, he also revealed his missionary or avuncular intent, and the satisfaction he felt when he was trying to help others: “This age is unlike any other in that creative ability is rarest and shallowest and brings the highest price. Whatever else I may be, I am with many here the final source for ideas. And you do not know how the best literary lights in America squeeze themselves for inspiration. I can see it even in Kipling. And you must be sure also there is an ocean of the stuff that makes literature and art within me. There is many a well paid magazine writer who would give me a fortune for it. It is long within me. I could have written you this letter when I entered high school. I need the technique^ that comes only with trying hard to write and to draw. No one can teach me, and nothing can discipline my mind but the pride of the artist. Nothing so well, at least. Let me try.” Writers and painters, he proclaimed, “belong to the same clan,” and it was a clan that this Scot-Norman wanted to join: “The day must be when no man in America shall be above me in the one or in the other, and I will speak with the voice of authority in the one or the other. If in art, I will redeem it from pernicious^ and degrading forces, and use it to expound a gospel that all the people shall understand, if in Literature, I and my vassals shall do a like labour^.” Someday, he suggested, he might be able to leave either art or literature behind him: “But the next thirty years of my life they must go together.”

Vachel tried, at last, to close his declaration on an assuasive note, pledging, ingenuously, that when he pursued his own ends he would be financially, as well as intellectually, independent: “Art first, for my living—good illustrations, good designers, even poor illustrators make more than avrage^ preachers. And you would not shrink if I talked about the ministry. Literature for my relaxation, till my art has brought me bread, and then I will know the publishers. I must be in with magazines, and my pen shall bring

me butter. . . . This letter is not even for Olive,” he warned finally, and promised (threatened?) that he would “write more soon”: “Don’t be afraid of it. Yours with love—Vachel” (November 27). The gauntlet of Vachel the Conqueror had been thrown at the feet of Saxon Springfield—in the form of an epistolary effort to clarify his purposes. The writer himself, however, did not feel that he had issued a challenge. He was simply explaining how family disagreements were little more than “terms” and “language.” [Note 5]

3

Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay’s reaction to their son’s initial declaration of independence is not extent, but somehow they were successful, at least temporarily, in bringing the dutiful “boy” side of their son’s nature back to the fore. On Wednesday, December 6, Vachel addressed a follow-up letter to “My Dear People”: “My revolutionary letter seems to have worried you too much. I wasn’t feeling bad and erratic, but particularly confidential.” He conceded that “Your letters help me to see things right,” although he also intimated that his intentions had not changed, only his timing: “I thought you would agree with me more. Nothing can change my aim in life—but with patience I can wait, to graduate here. Don’t be so panic stricken. You spoke of Grammar and Rhetoric,—which you cannot get here—I wanted the privilege of putting in twelve hours a day on an exhaustive study of both from Christmas to June, before I started to art school. That was the way Caesar learned to write. You didn’t understand. Yours with love, Vachel—” In turn, his father sent him additional money, and Vachel answered: “I am sure it touched my heart for you to want me to blow in money like the rest, on young ladies—but I was not complaining, my dears. I am sure that I did not intend to ask permission to perch. One of the few reasons I rejoice in Olive’s absence is that my social obligations, are thereby, for several reasons, nil.” The renewed humility, perhaps, reflects the important news of the letter. In spite of one competitor’s anticipation, the December oratorical contest turned out much the same as past affairs. The Delphics won the competition; but, Vachel reported, he “didn’t get on” (December 12). Still, his letter includes the usual campus gossip—perching, etc.—and all seemed back to normal.

Five days later, however, the Lindsay son sat down and essentially rewrote his revolutionary letter, besieging his parents with a second, 16-page, filibuster summarizing and attempting to explain his changing intents and purposes: “Tonight I have been looking over the course of study I outlined for myself last summer. It was, in general the course I would be obliged to take, should I complete the work of getting a diploma, in two years more, considering the studies already taken. I must revise it a little.” For various and sundry reasons, the “little” amounted to omitting chemistry, physiology, rhetoric, and grammar There remains Latin—French, and Anglo Saxon. I want these thoroughly—as much more from my own private investigation^ as from class room^ droning. (Believe me, as individuals, Hiram students are interesting, as friends they are unparalleled^, as students, as inspiring fellow students—they are nothing. Their culture is not unequalled by the eighth grade, Stuart school, nor their knowledge of this world, or of books, or of their country.)” He needed the French “most of all,” he claimed: “I must be in Paris some day, and I must read the best French Art Journals as soon as possible. They are on the reading tables of our Art Schools”: “There are so many things that I should do these next two years—or I can never do them. When once I enter the field of art—that

will be my life work—and preparing time will be past. And too many unessential labors demoralize me utterly.” An ideal Saxon must be able to speak and read the language of William the Conqueror, as well as master English, that is, Anglo-Saxon. He would need to study words, “enlarging my vocabulary—correcting my mispronunciations, and verbal inaccuracies, and crystallizing my speaking style, if possible—so that when I speak in public I will do it with confidence, authority, and an easy flow of words. I am intensely anxious about this work . . . I may have as many chances to speak for a Christ consecrated art in America, as to write for it. And this discipline works toward both. It requires self-possession.”

The dutiful Lindsay son sought to be an artist but an artist that would reflect his parents’ values, that is, a missionary, a Christ-preaching, a doctor-of-the-soul artist: “I must learn to preach my purpose into other Artists. Think of the Magazines—I must preach Christ into the leaders—at Art Conventions—and in Art Magazines. Now I must learn to preach first. I want to make a thorough study of Christ—for myself—with a special reference to this work. This requires an easy, unburdened mind—and no man can do it for me.” To this end, he wished to concentrate on public speaking. He could assist as a substitute minister in the Hiram area, and, of course, it would be in his best interest to concentrate on his society orations: “I have a chance to learn to handle an audience. Without half trying I have learned to speak better than many here—and if I could put in one day a week in thoughtful practice and effort—instead of about three hours a term of thoughtless extemporizing—I could learn the practical art of thinking on my feet. This is another ‘current’ within me that I have well nigh suppressed because I stuck to the theoretical mental discipline of half learned and never digested text books. It is an undeniable unalterable fact of my make up that I can abstain easier than I can grasp the unfertile unstimulating things. Wherefore I insist as I did before—that the main part of my development will come by expression rather than suppression. There is too much in me to keep it all conscientiously corked up—waiting for the time when the chores are over—a time that will never, never, never come with me. I am always trying to struggle through them, when I do my best I fail, I am confused, mixed, blundering—and all the things I love—that I could do—whereby I could gain strength and growth and self-possession—are left undone. . . . Now this is not an argument,” he claimed: “There is nothing left to argue. I am going to study about what you want me to study. But . . .,” and he repeated much of what he had just written. [Note 6]

Vachel’s bottom line, so to speak, was that he wished to limit his formal courses to French and Caesar for the winter term. In the past, he maintained, his classes had only interfered with what he really needed to learn: “My studies were like dogs in the manger—for I got nothing from them. I am not complaining—but rather explaining. . . . My brain and self possession have been scrambled eggs since the first two weeks of this term. This was all the more confusing because I felt myself strong enough and earnest enough to do the work. I am going to get through in everything,” he added, “but—it has been unprofitable.” More unprofitable, we may add, than he knew. In a few days, when grades were posted, he would discover that, in fact, he got through very little this fall term, that “scrambled eggs” was, indeed, an apt metaphor. At present, though, Vachel claimed his parents simply had not understood his first declaration of independence, and he suggested that they read “a few essays on the artistic temperament—and do not judge me by any standards but those of a successful, earnest artistic career.” He also disclosed,

somewhat naively, what he had been studying: “I shall never be a trial to my family—I am not a complaining dyspeptic like Carlyle, nor a drunkard, like most all of the artists from [John Philip] Sousa to James Whitcomb Riley. Read a few biographies in the Warner Library—from Henry James to Hawthorne. Mark you—I am not seeking excuses for any weakness or irresolution of mine—they are heavy on my heart—but remember—unless you try to show me how to be a manly artist, you are speaking to an imaginary son. I want you to read up and study on the characteristics of the creative and artistic life, and the creative and artistic temperament, till you are in sympathy with it, as an abstract thing, even as you are already with me as a concrete individual.” Almost patronizingly, he agreed that his previous letter had indeed been “a little careless and extreme . . . I was feeling that night strongly upon me the desire to spend a year or so doing my own studying in those matters I mentioned, and many more. I did not intend seriously to ask just that—my plans then were just about as I have stated them tonight—and if the letter had not spun itself out so long, and it had not grown so late I would have stated it then. I intended this letter should follow the next mail—but I was crowded—crowded—and confused.”

Finally, in another disingenuous attempt to be placating, he proposed that he focus on French, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon at Hiram during the winter and spring terms, after which he could spend the following summer and fall studying “in the post-graduate department of Chicago University in Literature, and have the credits put on the Hiram books in substitution for the stuff I do not want. I want to be so unconfused that I shall be able to absorb, between now and the time my art study begins—all the good English I can hold, and make myself as much a man of letters as possible in that brief time.” The purpose was not vain self-glory, the purpose was to help others: “I have more friends in Hiram College, of more diverse propensities, tastes and attributes than any man else here. I do not hold myself aloof from the ‘common people’—as Mama calls them—all people are common people—the only differences to me between people are in their ideas of the good and the beautiful. Miserable sinners are they all, and he has done the most who has brought Christ home to the greatest number of souls by the best means that has been granted him. Yours with love[,] Vachel.” The “best means,” of course, was art, not medicine; but the end was in accord with his father’s profession: the common people would be helped. In the meantime, the same day that he wrote his second revolutionary letter, Vachel recorded in his “Science of English” notebook that he was currently reading Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Hamlet*, not for a Hiram course but for his own edification. Next, he decided, he would take up Tennyson (December 17).

On December 22, without waiting for a response from Springfield, the Lindsay son wrote again, this time in an apologetic, dutiful mood. He had received his grades and, unfortunately, he “didn’t get on.” He was conditioned in French and he failed Caesar and Histology. His only credit came from Logic, where he did earn a respectable 90. Predictably, he was not discouraged: “I have hopes of doing better work next term, and I am conscious of having improved this last in several ways, along several lines. I am sure, on the whole I have not really retrograded in anything—though I took too much work this last term. Next term, I hope to make up anatomy towards^ the latter end.” Still apologetic, he turned once again to the subject of “William the Conqueror,” the oration that had demanded so much of his study time. The defeat made him humble, and humility, characteristically, made him feel like a boy. He had thought to become Vachel the

Conqueror, but for the moment he was Vachel the Conquered, although, of course, he was hopeful for the future. Someday he would be a man: "I remember that I almost did my best writing the oration—and speaking it. I will grow up to a bigger better oration—writing and speaking—by next fall. From my most intimate^ friends to my most casual acquaintances I remember I was congratulated. But I have been thinking more of the contest as a minor step in the long road I am going. . . . My subject had infinite possibilities—I lost—in the main—just because I am not a big enough man. I will be more mature," he mused with impeccable logic, "as time goes by" (December 22). The same day he celebrated his expectation of maturity with a new poem for his growing canon: "A Midnight Fantasy—The Shadow and the Sentinel" (dated, in his hand, "December 22, 1899"). A discussion of the poem, however, will be delayed, since he waited a few weeks and then, in mid-January, mailed a copy to his parents—along with an interesting authorial explication.

Meanwhile, Kate Lindsay's answer to her son's second revolutionary letter has been saved, and it manifests unusual understanding, especially when we consider that in later years, when perturbed, Vachel suggested that he had received little cooperation from his parents in his efforts to pursue art rather than medicine. In part, Kate wrote that Dr. Lindsay would be "very disappointed" if his son refused to be his successor, although she added: "at the same time if you feel sure that you can, without any antecedents, acquire a better and more useful business by following some other line, then he is willing to do all he can to help you with it. His heart-ache is because he fears you are throwing away a certainty of a very useful vocation for a very uncertain dream. . . . If you are very sure that you have talent enough to make any one line of Art a success, then shape your studies with reference to that. You seem to have in mind a large field that is certainly unoccupied, that of Christian art, in the way of illustration. . . . You speak of three lines of work: literature, speaking, and illustration. The two first are a great help to the last, but the last should be your final aim because there are thousands in the other two fields. In order to be a good illustrator and come into touch with the living masses of our people, you would be greatly profited by mingling with them just where you are. Nowhere could you have a better opportunity. If you can succeed at all in preaching occasionally, it would be a fine training for your ultimate purpose." To that end, she maintained (with further advice that her son did not care to hear): "You ought to get an A B [degree] at least."

Perhaps to reenforce her point, Kate also remarked on the subject of "William the Conqueror," a draft of which had been sent to Springfield. Her comments manifest another masterful manipulation of circumstances, as she found a way to encourage her son's creativity and, at the same time, a way to encourage him to stay in school. His oration had its strengths, all right; it also had its weaknesses. The latter, though, could be attributed to immaturity and inexperience, to lack of development. The remedy was time and a proper education: "It seems to me, considering your youth and inexperience, a very strong address. I would like to hear or see those that were considered better and know in what respects they surpassed yours. Your writing is always, however, uneven in the same way that mine has always been, but, I think it is much less so than mine was at your age. You'll overcome that in time. There are decided marks of strength and originality as well as imagination in the address. These can be indefinitely developed, if you can keep your

health.” She did not add the obvious: and if you stay in college and earn your degree (December 25, Virginia).

Vachel’s struggle to abandon the ordinary-Saxon-Hiram curriculum in favor of pursuing formal art training had only just begun. The effort would continue until his ultimate victory, in early summer, 1900. His battle plan persistently emphasized God’s purpose for his life. God intended that Dr. Lindsay’s son attend to human weakness and suffering, but as a Christian illustrator with an unusual background in the “Science of English,” not as a physician. Appropriately, the son’s class motto at Hiram was “Gutta cavat lapidem” [Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto*, IV, x]: “The drop [that is, persistent drops of water] hollows out [wears away] stone.” Vachel’s speeches and letters during academic year 1899-1900 were equivalent to the assiduous drops of water. The eroding stone was his parents’ resolve that he would become his father’s successor.

4

In fairness, although Vachel’s Hiram notebooks are filled with insights, the majority were written during the winter term (when the author admitted that he did not attend classes) and during the summer and fall, 1900, after he had left Hiram altogether. End pages also reflect extensive reading done in Chicago during the first half of 1901. The earliest entries, on the other hand, are chiefly classroom notes or random observations, although a few of the latter are significant. Then, sometime during the fall of 1899, our would-be ideal Saxon decided to withdraw from the ways and means of ordinary Saxon education in favor of independent study. It was the determination that lay behind both of his revolutionary letters, and it led to an ongoing debate with his parents during the first months of the world’s newest century.

College classes, Vachel observed in his “Culture” notebook, are tantamount to “capital punishment,” that is, punishment for the head. Genuine learning could be achieved only through reading what the student chooses to read, not through what teachers assign. Genuine learning is what leads to culture, and culture, in contrast to education, must be the goal of the ideal Saxon. Mere education is for typical Saxons, ordinary individuals who do not possess the strength of purpose to establish their own priorities: “Education is education, and needs a tutor-master, perhaps,—culture can be attained each one for himself, and culture owns no tutor-master, but itself. Culture scarcely creates, scarcely develops, it harmonizes, suppresses, polishes, decorates. It is the doctrine of personal beauty—the hygiene and football of the soul. It is not military drill, nor yet capital punishment nor imprisonment for life” (“Culture” 7). And, in the privacy of his notebooks, Vachel jotted down several thoughts as to why he should be allowed to pursue culture, “the doctrine of personal beauty.” The following, though, taken from the “Culture” notebook, is a summation, as well as an example:

Reasons why I should be allowed the privilege of self education:

1. Every other sort has had a fairer chance.
2. I have never had a fair chance at myself.
3. I have initiated and fostered without help, all my most promising lines of development in a large measure—in proportion to the other possible lines.

4. The time to work on an idea is when it is burning in the brain, and not when it is applied like a cold salve from without.

5. Ideas will not come on scheduled time. Neither will thoughts. They come and go. They are like sunshine—to be taken when they come.

6. There is a fixed law of routine within me, but one that does not correspond to anything without. It can be depended upon to keep me constantly and earnestly at work on one of three things—drawing, writing and speaking.

7. I have ambition that may be depended upon to be steady, fierce and relentless. [In February 1901, he added a “?” and a comment: “This is pretty strong.”]

8. I have constant motives to insure safe and proper direction.

9. I have ideals high enough to lead me on and keep me constantly unsatisfied with present progress.

Wherefore it is safe, reasonable and logical from the broadest ideas of an education to allow me largely my own study, my own studio and my own teachers. (8-10)

The Romantic nature of the ideas, particularly the influence of Thoreau, is evident in the introspective remarks that follow:

If a man’s body is the temple of God—are not his hours of inspiration the breathing presence of the Creator? If his body is to be treated with reverence—is it not a crime to choke off his ideas for the sake of an arbitrary routine that corresponds to nothing demanded, within or without.

Plants develop when the sunshine strikes them. The only hours of real educational development in a man are when he is putting the shackles^ of his own making on ideas of his own. (This is a mixed figure). (11-12)

In succeeding months, when Vachel was well into his so-called “real educational development,” he added two complementary citations, both discovered as a result of his independent reading: “‘Nothing is of the least use to young people, but what interests them’—Ruskin” (8); and “‘Models are difficult—enslave one, efface from one’s mind a conception or reminiscence which was better,’ Blake” (9).

In accord with his own purposes, the pursuer of culture remained on campus during Christmas vacation, 1899, ostensibly to review Latin and Anatomy but, in actuality, to continue his independent study. He was reading Shakespeare, Tennyson, and *Paradise Lost*, with the latter providing the seeds, as we shall see, of “The Last Song of Lucifer,” his most ambitious Hiram poem. Not all of the time, though, was spent with books. On Saturday evening, December 23, accompanied by Paul Wakefield, Vachel called on international students Yao Ho Torada and Kimi Sato, converted Christians from Akita, Japan. The two girls were staying at Hollyrood, an annex to Hiram’s Gerould Cottage, where special female students were housed, and at least one of their visitors was favorably impressed: “Saturday evening we [Wakefield and Lindsay] called on the Japs, at Hollyrood. Now that most of the students are away, they wear those wonderful costumes of theirs—and I love to look at them by the hour. In American dresses the Japs look like little brown dwarfs—but in the proper environment of Japanese silks—they become decorative as Japanese vases. They seem to be good little girls, and they are as interesting as—Arenemians^. I must surely call on them again—before Christmas [vacation] is over” (December 26). Apparently, he did call again, the very next night. The annual *Spider Web* includes the following squib in the historical summary for the

academic year: “Dec. 27—Lindsay calls on the Japanese ladies and departs entranced, his hat remaining upon the hall rack” (126). [Note 7]

Unfortunately, the entranced student’s enthusiasm for Japanese girls did not extend to his winter-term courses: Caesar, French, and (probably as a compromise with his parents) Advanced Rhetoric. As usual, he began with great expectations, but this time the enthusiasm died early. Within weeks, he stopped attending most classes and poured his Norman-Saxon energies into his volitional study and his art—but not without paying a severe emotional price. As early as January 6, the conflicting sense of purpose is apparent in a confidential letter to Aunt Fannie: “If I have quit talking about myself as much [in recent letters],” Fannie’s nephew declared, “it is because I am sometimes a little tired of myself—and not because I do not want you to know.” Then he opened his heart: “. . . 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 uncontrollable^ 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”:

But one thing you speak of you must not take so seriously. That is that I do not tell what I have been doing and what I am going to do. Well—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. Otherwise I strive to so number my days that I shall please my friends and behave as a Christian and a gentleman. But I have no interest in anything this side of the New York Art Schools. I never was much of a person to express anything to my dearest loved ones unless it bubbled up—and I have ceased bubbling,—for the most part.

Fannie’s nephew’s nature, in other words, was divided between his parents’ and his own sense of purpose, and he was unhappy, “for the most part.” He was a man, however; and consideration for loved ones, as well as shouldering distasteful responsibilities, is part of maturity. He was unhappy, but Fannie must not worry “any more”: “You are the only person in the world I would have written this letter to. I have compared my old self with the present ego just for your sake, and only your letter would have enabled me to have written this straight off as I have. Another thing—as an observer of this world, and as a student and pupil of experiences, I am nearer kin to you than to my mother, who acts on the idea of the universe born in her—regardless. I felt that we, you and I had something in common that no one else in the world has with either of us. I think you and I have come to the same conclusion regarding this world and the people in it. It is to me a place to do my duty and not worth much to me otherwise. I expect to learn to allow for incomplete humanity and expect anything from anyone. That you know, is the

only safe basis of friendship, of peace of mind, of serenity or of any high philanthropy[^]. I have made up my mind that there are as many diferent[^] sorts of people as there are people in the world—miserable sinners are they all—we all—and since we shall all stand before the perfect judge I have no judgement to pass on anyone, and am going to love and forgive as many of them as possible” (January 6, 1900, Blair).

Frank as he had been to date, Vachel was not yet ready to share his true sentiments with his parents, although he did, a week or so after his letter to Fannie, send a copy of his new poem, “A Midnight Fantasy—The Shadow and the Sentinel”:

1.

And thinking all the stars will fall
The frenzy of the ancient watches
Comes upon him now.
Knowing not he brings his doom
His hot and horrid fears to cool
He bathes his wrinkeled[^], care-worn brow
And speaks into the pool.

2.

The tresses of the ancient sod
The water whirls about
Sky shadows under shadow banks
Keep crawling in an out
Through cracking boughs of barren trees
The whirling winds go by
A million million shaking stars
Are scattered through the sky—

3.

A shadow, taller than the rest
Steals out to speak to him—
Its long mane like a lion’s mane
Its quiet voice is grim.

4.

“The stars are like the hearts of men
Though dizzy watchers cry again
No watchman yet may hide from them
The winds are like the deeds of day
Unheeded when men’s shining hearts
Shew forth that life transcendeth Arts
As flowers are brighter than the clay—”

5.

“Oh, shadow, I could love you well—
For you have made me wise—
For you have answered to my cry

And shown the secret of the skies"—

6.

“Oh, shadow, steal not back to me
 Before you came the stars were nigh
 I do not love your strange cold breath—
 The stars have risen far and high—” December 22, 1899 (Virginia)

With the manuscript came both an explanation and a challenge:

You will probably say you do not understand it. So I will explain it a verse at a time—and then you will read it in a flat monotone as you do all my verses—and say I do not write plain enough. Now do not be offended. I mean this for a joke.

In the first verse imagine a gray haired sentinel—in a wild place. In the second verse imagine him speaking in a wild phrenzy[^]. In the third watch a Shadow come out to him. In the fourth listen to it speak. In the fifth watch the shadow fade away—and hear the sentinel speak. In the last see the shadow coming again—and the sentinel in despair.

I will never make money from my verses, and they are seldom written to please anyone but myself—but it is a great pleasure and relaxation to write them. (January 15, 1900, misdated 1899) [Note 8]

Biographically, “A Midnight Fantasy” is a significant work. It hints at Vachel’s earliest movement away from Poe’s aestheticism (the world of the stars) toward a human-oriented art (“life transcendeth Arts”). The sentinel learns—and it is a lesson that causes despair—that life is of more consequence than art. And this realization utterly changes his perspective on the stars. The author, as he told his aunt, wanted to learn to love and forgive as many miserable sinners “as possible.” The irony of the poem lies in the fact that Poe’s views are rejected in verses that reverberate with Poe’s imagery. Sentinel Vachel’s changing perspective is also obvious in various notebook entries, as in the following excerpt already cited in respect to his democratic ideals: “There is one thing infinitely better than art for arts[^] sake, and that is art for Love’s sake” (“Illustrating” 77). For that matter, all of the Hiram notebooks manifest their author’s developing consciousness, not only that he must be an artist but that his art must have a humanitarian focus. His purpose in life was to be “a Christian love—alive,” a Christian illustrator whose work would be “the expression of the deep heart of man” (“Illustrating” 13).

In the meantime, just as Vachel anticipated, his parents claimed that they did not understand “A Midnight Fantasy,” even with the author’s explanation. Their son, in turn, let his frustration be known: “I am not a rapid penman when I try to write plainly—it took me about half an hour to copy off the ‘Midnight Fantasy,’ besides the time of composing—three days. If you had spent as much time trying to read it as I did in trying to copy it for you—you would probably have made it out. It is a good thing I am not one of these silent and misunderstood souls hungry for sympathy along the poetic line. I would die from cold water shock.” He also took a cue from his mother and used the occasion to reenforce his views: “Scholarship—Ultra Scholarship—is folly. At the same time it is the inevitable logical culmianation[^] of the College Education System. . . . The only thing a man should learn is to learn how to work among the people” (January 21).

The importance of “the people,” after all, is the essential message of “A Midnight Fantasy”; and Vachel’s perspective in his new poem likely reflects his knowledge of Keats, as well as Poe. In Keats’s last poems, we find a similar conflict between the artist’s love for art *qua* art, on the one hand, and his emerging but painful sense of social responsibility, on the other. No matter what the source, though, ideal Saxon Lindsay was certain of at least one thing at this point in his young life. Ideas that have genuine value seldom (if ever) evolve from a college educational system founded on typical Saxon fantasies, midnight or otherwise. Such a system is a nightmare in its own right.

Kate Lindsay responded with a spirited and, in the clear light of hindsight, an ironic rebuttal to her son’s allegations. Kate was not one to dodge a confrontation: “As to your poem, I did spend quite a while trying to read it, but failed on a few of the leading words. You must remember that my time is more than closely occupied. I don’t want to throw ‘cold water’ on anything in which you are interested,—but—though your bits of verse sometimes contain strong expressions, and the practice is no doubt culture in composition, I do not see you in the future as a poet. Poets are certainly born, not made, and I do not think you have the flowing ease of language or facility of expression that is necessary to give marked success in that line. I believe you can learn to write, however, and to speak, and ought to cultivate both lines—but—study ways of expressing the best you know of the best in life to the masses of people. If you can learn to do it through illustration, it is a wonderful field.” Then she added another conciliatory note: “Another pamphlet came today from Chicago. Your father will read it and then send it to you. We are not qualified to inspect Art Schools. . . . It would be reasonable I suppose that the old schools in New York would be better in some ways than Chicago—but—they may be, like the Eastern Universities, slow mills that grind too fine for your purpose” (January 24, Virginia). [Note 9]

The stony parental resolve was eroding away, and the next corrosive drop was on its way to Springfield even before Kate’s letter arrived in Hiram. It was on January 25, 1900, that Vachel came about as close as he would come this winter to sharing his real intentions with his parents: “There has been quite a change in me in the last twelve months. About last January I was taking a passing interest in everything—and puzzled in my serious hours about the way I could avoid being an illustrator and still living a life in any way satisfactory to myself. Now I cannot undertake anything for the pleasure of it for there remains no more pleasure to me in miscellaneous enterprises—and I do not find myself interested in anything that happens—and what I accomplish is on the strength of a meager sense of duty. And in my serious hours which are all my waking hours—I am not in the least puzzled about my future. There is just one thing I want to do—and I want to get at it and keep at it and never quit—I am going to have my drawings and designs in the best magazines in the country before I am thirty years old, and keep it up forever.”

In response, Vachel’s concerned parents apparently expressed fear that their son had transformed the concept of “one unwavering aim” into something like art monomania. Their letter is lost, but their son’s answer suggests what they wrote: “. . . your fears of my being a mono-maniac[^] on art are warrented[^] not by the facts so much as my efforts to persuade you that it is a very real part of myself. Art shall be my servant and not my master. If I could be as good a speaker and as effective as I could an artist—I would give up my art immediately. I want though to thoroughly establish your confidence

in my prospects of success in my work.” Several of “the strongest fellows,” he added, had asked him to run for president of the YMCA: “I mention this to dispell[^] your fear that I am morbidly anti-social here.” At this time, though, he indicated that he had refused to become officially involved, not because he was anti-social but because he was a true Lindsay: “I prefer your method of working privately and unofficially—both in the pushing of an organization and doing the good I can.” [Note 10]

The subject of doing good brought him back to the idea of assisting people, the so-called common people: “They are my people—and I believe for all the sermons that I am truly and practically the most thorough democrat in the tribe.” The sermons, of course, were from his mother, who still treated her son, in his opinion, as a boy. Her son, however, had other ideas: “Even some of the faculty mind their P’s and Q’s and get fearful of their ignorance when I speak to them—and I am as much consulted on miscellaneous matters of abstract intellection—of practical policy—and the truly beautiful, as any member of the student body. In short I am twenty—not ten—neither am I twenty five. I am soft—ready for new impressions—rather than old ones—. In a few years I will be hardened up” (February 5). Two weeks later, Vachel complained to Olive on the same subject: “She [Mama] keeps saying that she is thirty years my senior—and I try to assure her that I am thirty years her junior—yet still twenty.” Still, he promised, he would cease being critical, especially since he had forgotten to acknowledge their mother’s birthday: “I want her to feel that she is more able to call forth my best by feeling that her past exhortations have been of avail and that I am ready for more than she realizes” (February 19).

Earlier, after he had learned that his parents had changed their minds about a planned visit to campus, Vachel sent his own exhortation to Springfield. If Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay’s decision reflected a desire to save money, their son offered a few words of “practical policy,” along with a few intimations of self-pity: “What is the use of planning great big pleasures way off? You will be young but once—your youth may leave you as hopelessly as mine has left me. Instead of some one who always loves the graver things, you and Papa are still young—and Hiram is a great place for young folks on a lark” (February 7). By implication, of course, he was not one of the young folks on a lark. He had lost his youth while “planning great big pleasures way off,” namely, a stint in art school, sometime after he suffered through Hiram, just to please his parents.

This time, one entire week passed and, remarkably, Kate Lindsay’s boy retained his mature posture. Normally, it would have been time for an apologetic letter from a dutiful son, but Vachel was concentrating, once again, on earning oratorical glory. He was working on a speech designed to demonstrate his evolving maturity, and also to demonstrate that he was, indeed, “truly and practically the most thorough democrat in the tribe . . . by geometrical progression my ideas seem to increase in number, size, force and essentialness every six months. The old ones do not leave me, but are constantly renewing their shells and growing larger, like the crustacea. And they find their places in the system in my brain, as starting points for better things. The old high school speeches, my first efforts at oratorical generalization and creation, are vital parts of my present system of thought, though grown beyond recognition. ‘The former times were better than now’ is the father of my new idea—‘The new Art’ ‘The last Art’ or ‘The art of Democracy’” (February 15). The oration would finally be entitled “The New

Democracy,” but we shall hold discussion for a brief interval, just as the author himself paused in his own efforts. He had a convention to attend.

5

It was in the spirit of “the art of Democracy,” Vachel maintained to Papa, that he had changed his mind about “working privately” and had agreed to join Hiram’s official delegation to the national convention of college YMCAs at Findlay College, in Findlay, Ohio. “I want to see how strong men have actually become in this present age, that I may know my own possibilities. I do not believe in going to a convention to sponge up inspiration to come home to be squeezed dry again.” His parents were to have no more anxieties about his being anti-social: “When how to reach the people is the burden of my spare thinking, and how to serve the students here is the burden of my spare time, you and Mama I think do a great deal of unfounded worrying about me, isolating myself, now and hereafter” (February 18). Findlay “supports a ‘Church of God’ college,” Vachel explained a few days later: “they are foot-washers” (February 22). He was among some 700 student YMCA men who were spending the better part of a week listening to nationally recognized speakers and debating college YMCA issues. The entire convention, in fact, proved to be a very meaningful experience: “It is strengthening to meet strong men. . . . The Y.M.C.A. men come the nearest to looking the practical situation in America in the face. They are the nearest to Christians [Disciples of Christ]—and the freest from fungi in the way of any sort of theology, or theory or cant” (February 23).

As interdenominational organizations, the college YMCAs mirrored the ecumenical spirit of Alexander Campbell, as Vachel himself pointed out a week or so after returning to the Hiram campus: “The college Y.M.C.A.’s now extend . . . over every theological school in the country—almost. That means that every minister is in the next generation going to be raised up with the inter-denominational^ idea, the ‘three sided man’ idea, body, mind, soul, and that is the least that the Y.M.C.A. is doing. The interdenominational idea is greatest because it cuts practical Christianity loose from the ball-and chain^ of dogmatism, and men cannot begin to theologize for fear of being misunderstood—and their minds reach out for the things they have in common.” He continued that, while he was formulating “such views on public questions,” he was “the more convinced that all a man does of which he may be sure is the personal contact work, in private life, with personal friends. Public works, public sermons, public example are chiefly negative in their results—and preventative. They should be done—but more should be done also. In Christianity a man cannot ever become statesman and general enough to excuse him from the functions of a private” (March 4).

Occurring at a critical point in his life, the Findlay convention demonstrated to Vachel’s satisfaction that his thinking over the previous six months was vital, not only to his own future but to the future of society itself. His values in religion, politics, education, and art all seemed to come together—merging in his particular concept of democracy. All humans are equal: “miserable sinners” are we all, just as he had informed Aunt Fannie; and he became more and more resolved that his lifelong purpose would be to understand, to assist, and to forgive as many as possible. Equality was the very essence of the YMCA spirit, and equality must be the goal of a Christian, as all practicing

Campbellites knew and believed. Equality is also the essential meaning of democracy, and true democratic leaders must be men of, by, and for the people, that is, all the people. Since what America most needs is a sense of beauty, an amalgamation of Saxon energy and Norman control, the democratic leader of the future must be a Christian artist, a creative man trained to produce art with broad appeal. Indeed, the democratic art leader's primary emphasis, his chief value, would reside in his enduring faith that all are created equal and that art can be developed to the point that it could delight and instruct the world's masses, not just a handful of museum aficionados.

The one art form with such potential was illustrating, the art form published in every newspaper and in nearly every magazine. The democratic art leader of the future will be the missionary illustrator, not a crude political cartoonist but a Christian cartoonist, a Christian illustrator with genuine concern for and control over the principles of artistic beauty, as well as a desire to assist and correct his fellow human beings. In so doing, the Christian cartoonist/illustrator will approach his audience as though they themselves are the stuff of art: he will shape them into a just and caring society, just as a potter shapes clay.

As we may suspect, helping people by means of a politicized art was the burden of Vachel's spring oration, "The New Democracy." It is significant, moreover, that he often pointed to the work in later years as one of the essential achievements of his college career. "I have had in mind some time the conception that Democracy could be considered and theorized upon as an Art," the orator advised his father the night before the speech was actually written: "—that it would be the last and highest of arts in the evolution and perfection of all the types of art—that it would result in a complete distribution of the perfectness and ideal realization of all the arts that came before it—that the Art of Democracy would be a complete ideal Democracy of all the arts" (March 6). He added that he planned to follow this oration with two more: "The Silent Man" and "The Coming Leader," with the latter being nothing less than an account of the consummate artist, the ideal Saxon, the man who could create beauty through the artistic use of human beings, not through mere pencil and paint. The central paragraph of "The New Democracy" is illustrative of the whole, in that it depicts how the great sculptor Phidias prefigures the democratic art leader of the future:

Even as the ancient Phidias looked upon the marble with the desire for its greatest possibilities for beauty within him—and then wrot[^] it into a beauty that was absolute—so—if this age will look upon humanity and human conditions—and dare to conceive of the highest beauty—the deepest harmony—even the perfect democracy—the thing will come to pass. (Virginia) [Note 11]

For religious reasons, for political reasons, for humanity, and for the coming age, Vachel stressed that the ideal man, the democratic leader, must be the Christian artist. He intended to be that man, although he freely admitted to his present ineptitude in drawing. It was simply a matter of time, time and proper training, preferably in a New York art school.

Once more, Vachel's parents likely inquired about their son's wavering aim, and on this occasion their son's answer was perfectly frank: "I havn't[^] been able to do much studying this term—I was sick for about two weeks and no account about a month. So

those eight credits in two terms are not forthcoming. . . . The Histology work remains a good intention. So does the Anatomy. . . . I havn't^ made much progress in the Hiram College course—but I do not think I have ever grown faster.” What growth there had been, he did not add, was due to his independent study, undertaken in lieu of attending classes. He did, though, offer a lame attempt at conciliation: “There is one thing that ought to comfort you—I havn't^ drawn a single picture since I left Springfield” (March 18).

For the moment, anyway, art was not a diversion, but the same cannot be said about Vachel's decision to be a master of men. He had decided that Hiram constituted a perfect environment in which to exercise his avuncular skills, and in several letters he boasted about how he had tried to save several of his peers from a variety of heinous sins, all, of course, to the detriment of his studies. Charlie Russell was urged to quit smoking and drinking; other boys were reprimanded for swearing or card playing or equally grievous behavior. On one occasion, several “wild boys” spent the morning in Vachel's room, “talking religion,” etc.; and another study opportunity had been lost to another worthy cause (March 18). In fact, just a week or so after “talking religion” with his wild friends, the would-be master of men tried to justify his purposes for the benefit of his parents' understanding: “I have known lots of different kinds of people here in Hiram—and studied most any normal phase of life. The people of Hiram are an education. Hiram conditions are such that they open their hearts to you easily—it is starteling^ at times—and their behaviors are easily observed, their public life. Hiram is a great little world. The way people are willing to trust the secrets of their souls to a friend of merely four years, sometimes a friend of three weeks—is charming, is astonishing—and fills man with reverent humility and a desire to know more of the human heart” (March 27).

Serious perchers, he claimed in a follow-up letter, especially sought his council and advice: “I have been allowed to see the inside of so many—through my capacity for keeping still, and my tendency to be encouraging and sympathetic, that it almost makes me feel that some of it is my fault. But fate is fate, and I can't help fate.” He had the chance to do a great deal of “cutting out” himself, he reported, but he seemed better at giving advice to others than in confronting his own difficult situations: “The only thing that prevents me is that they [the girls] get suddenly so dead in earnest and I am not an adept at graceful retreats in the face of the foe” (April 5). [Note 12]

In addition to his advising and counseling, and in addition to his independent reading, Vachel had again taken up drawing, about two weeks after he bragged that he had not drawn any pictures since he “left Springfield.” On April 3, very near the end of term, he announced in all innocence that he was totally immersed in a two-week effort to complete his *Spider Web* illustrations: “It is absolutely impossible for me to start to drawing and do it by installments. I have to love it all in all or not at all.” He knew that he might as well concentrate on his annual work, since his non-attendance in all of his classes precluded earning any credits. In the end, though, the *Spider Web* illustrations were “not much of a success” either, by his own admission: “I do not believe I will try to illustrate another till I learn to draw.” Learning to draw, though, was no problem; it was “merely a matter of practice and time”: “Illustrating does not require talent. It just requires patient proficiency—a practical conscientious training. Wherefore great artists look down upon the most popular illustrators—even. So the argument that I have little

real genius for the work, if it ever presents itself to your minds—is one you ought not to allow to discourage you. It is just a question of liking the work and persistently putting conscience into it.” The New York art schools would also be a big help.

He was attracted to illustrating, Vachel explained, because “it is a new field, as a high art it is less than fifty years old—while every other high art is centuries old.” He would not have giants like Phidias and Raphael towering over him, “saying ‘you can’t be as big as I am.’” As a popular art, it would give him “a chance to earn [his] bread and butter in the shortest time” (April 12). Most importantly, however, and in the spirit of equality, illustrating is the art of the common people, the people who read and look at newspapers and magazines. Illustrating offers the ideal medium for the Christian artist’s democratic message.

The rhetorical drops of water continued to fall on Springfield—and with increasing intensity and forcefulness. In the process, the stone, the parental resolve, was not simply worn away. In the process, the stone became internalized, sharply dividing Vachel between an unshakable sense of responsibility toward others and an equally unshakable sense of responsibility toward his own inclinations. Like most sensitive Americans, he had received the gift that keeps on giving: a lifetime membership in America’s guilt culture. He sought one kind of culture; in the process, he gained another.

Finally, at the end of term, he had much to feel guilty about. He was conditioned in Advanced Rhetoric and again conditioned in French. He also failed to earn credit in Caesar. “Miss Marcia Henry, my good friend, ‘tutored’ me in the first book of Caesar,” he explained to the Hiram students in 1930: “and I admired Marcia and utterly hated Caesar. Marcia in desperation did all the translating” (*Spider Web* 1932, 43). He could be amused in 1930, but in the spring, 1900, he had reason for concern. He had reached the nadir of his college career: how much more (less?) would parental patience endure?

6

A few days before the end of winter term, Olive returned to Hiram from her half-year sojourn at the New England Conservatory of Music. Her proud and politic brother remarked on his sister’s new self-possession and commended their parents’ wisdom: “You have done as much for Hiram as you could possibly have done, by sending Olive to Boston” (April 3). Two weeks later, at the beginning of the spring term, he also served notice that his sister would be a useful ally in his struggle to pursue his own purposes: “After much thoughtful consideration Olive and I decided that I am to take French and Homeletics[^]. There are so many other lines of study of my own that I have been interested in—that I can crowd into this—the Doctrine of the disciples, the study of rhetoric and words etc[^]—that I do not want to take much else. So Homeletics[^] and French are just my two studies. If you think these are not enough—say so.” He hinted that his inheritance of his mother’s nerves prevented further study: “But anything more would rattle me on the French and take the time I would put in on Homiletics.” Of course, he was optimistic: “I hope for great results.” He also began a seventh notebook dedicated “to Christ”: “Homiletics—Spring term—1900.” [Note 13]

In the correspondence concerning his spring-term courses, Vachel admitted that there was, in his words, “little consistency between my proposed schedule and my

avowed plans heretofore,” but he asked for understanding and indulgence: “All I can say is that I hope you have patience with me, and faith that I will come through in the long run—and I will not disappoint you altogether.” The Homiletics class would give him eleven or twelve sermons that “may last” for eleven years, although he confessed: “I couldn’t be a preacher by profession—my ideas of life and of people in no way justify it—but I think it will greatly enlarge my possibilities of usefulness if I just know how to preach” (April 19). No matter what his profession, in other words, homiletics would play an important role. And, of course, the French was vital: there were those “best French Art Journals” that he needed to read “as soon as possible.”

Vachel’s last term at Hiram, unlike his penultimate, was not an academic disaster. The highlight was a new poem, however, not a return to decent grades. The initial draft of “The Last Song of Lucifer,” an expanded version of lines 55-191 in the published poem (*Poetry* 361-369), was written sometime in mid-April, 1900, although the seminal idea, as the author informed his parents, developed over the preceding Christmas vacation, when he was reading *Paradise Lost*: “I could not have written it three months ago. It rejoices my heart—for it gives me confidence that my powers are growing—and are going to keep on growing. It is my most ambitious literary attempt so far, and therefore in proportion to itself—the most imperfect. But it shows larger power than anything else I have done.” Why should he write at all, especially when his avowed interest was illustrating and his academic endeavors were hardly flourishing? He anticipated the question and offered a parenthetical “justification”: “(The better poetry I can write the more I am able to argue with artists and men of letters that there are greater things than artistic creations)” (April 19).

Behind “The Song of Lucifer,” as Vachel first entitled his poem, is the belief that art, genuine art, is a gift from the Creator, whereby human beings can effectively communicate with one another as democratic equals in all the essential concerns of life. Genuine art is art for love’s sake, art for homiletics’ sake, not art for art’s sake. Unfortunately, as Vachel’s poem reveals, society’s response to the poet’s love, if society responds at all, is contemptuous or downright hostile. The would-be savior-artist is condemned to a hell of eternal silence. Although he was exaggerating, the poet likely had in mind his parents’ and his friends’ reactions to his work. He received no encouragement from Springfield, after all, when he sent home works like “The Midnight Fantasy,” with or without authorial explication. From his independent reading, he was also beginning to realize the self-serving efficacy of Romantic melancholy: “We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end despondency and madness” (Wordsworth, “Resolution and Independence”). How could any reader not pity Lucifer’s plight, especially if the reader were the poet’s father or mother?

“The Song of Lucifer” is, transparently, an imaginative expression of artistic despair. It is unlike Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode” only in that society is blamed for the poet’s failure, not the poet himself. In Vachel’s case, the proud poet mailed a copy of his new work to Springfield, along with another attempt at explanation: “Lucifer . . . was a study in perfect despair; it was the Sorrow of sorrows, the hope of despair—it was like the voice of a soul going down through the darkness and calling” (April 19). Ironically, “Lucifer” depicts the emotions of the alienated, the frustrated artist, although, as we shall see, the full story of the poem did not emerge until the idea was finally integrated with

the personal system delineated in *Where Is Aladdin's Lamp?*, Vachel's first "book," and in the correlative "Map of the Universe" (completed during the summer and fall, 1904). "The Song of Lucifer" is only the beginning of what would become a rather elaborate cosmology. In April 1900, the work amounted to little more than a thinly disguised plea for sympathy, quite in the anomalous spirit of Romantic melancholy: look at what great poetry I can write when I write about my poetic despair. In fact, Vachel's paradoxical phrase—"the hope of despair"—captures the spirit as well as, or better than, anything he could have read.

Years later, in 1922, Vachel announced that "The Last Song of Lucifer" was written "at Hiram College in 1899[^] when I was re-reading John Milton" (the basic concept of the song that ravished the universe was likely derived from *Paradise Lost*, II, 552-555). He added that he presumed to have read the work "to fifty fellow-students throughout that year, correcting immediately by their suggestions, making it all casual and conversational." Moreover, he tied the poem to Hiram's oratorical traditions: ". . . the college undertook to make every student a trained public citizen, capable of holding for the length of an oration the student and village and faculty assembly, four hundred strong. We had great speaking field days with all the victors heroes. There was as keen oratorical competition as there is athletic competition in less classical schools. Yet Hiram had the astringent New England mind, with the astringent, non-rhetorical standards of speaking. I submit the poem as one which has suffered if not survived this test, and being as full of the rigid Hiram rhythms as I and my fellow-students knew how to fill it and also as containing all the tunes and rhyme-schemes which are supposed to have first appeared in later work" (*Poetry* 942). These assertions, however, reflect the mature Vachel of 1922, a man uncertain of dates and a man inclined to use any occasion to denigrate his popular reputation as a jazzy parvenu. The Vachel of April 1900 identified with Lucifer, the genuine artist whose music was cursed because it devastated "the established order of things" (*Poetry* 361).

Vachel's was "the voice of a soul going down through the darkness and calling"; his was "the Sorrow of sorrows, the hope of despair"; his was the isolation, the loneliness, and the Romantic anguish. He was frustrated in his struggles to pursue art, and his frustrations led to self-pity and heartache, emotions that found relief in the portrayal of Lucifer as the misunderstood, the rejected artist. Although Vachel's was not an ordinary despair, it was anything but unique. It was the delicious Romantic agony of a Dostoyevsky or a Wordsworth: "Sorrow, that is not sorrow, but delight" (*Prelude* 13). It was dejection expressed in characteristic hyperbole, dejection that begs for sympathy but, with its histrionics, verges on the absurd:

Alone, alone, afar he lies. . . .
 Fearfully alone, beyond immortal ken
 He is further down in the deep of pain
 Than is Hell from the grief of men. (*Poetry* 368)

"Lucifer" is Vachel's version of the melancholia that many would-be intellectuals have cultivated almost from the beginning of recorded time. "He thought about himself," Sherwood Anderson observes, "and to the young that always brings sadness" ("Loneliness," *Winesburg, Ohio*).

As early as his freshman year, as we have seen, Vachel decorated the walls of his room with a poster featuring one of his favorite songs: “This is a Weary Life at Best.” And there is ample evidence that his fellow students recognized and responded to the pensive, earnest aspect of his nature. Aunt Fannie may also have noticed the anomalous, sad, self-satisfied tone of her nephew’s letter (January 6, 1900, see above), especially when her nephew described himself as a “sadder and wiser man.” At first, Vachel seems simply to have enjoyed melancholy feelings, the hope of despair, the satisfaction of self-pity; but he soon realized that his professed sorrow could be a powerful ally in his attempt to convince his parents that he needed to pursue his own goals. In this respect, “The Song of Lucifer” represents one of the older games in human history: if you do not let me do what I want to do, my despair will know only the bounds of hell.

If we look ahead for a moment, we may see that “The Song of Lucifer” represents more than familial game playing. By September 1900, after the battle to attend art school had been won, Vachel did not abandon his belief in the value of affliction. The seed of melancholy, once planted, took on a life of its own, bringing with it intimations that superior persons, would-be democratic art leaders, should expect hostility and, what is more significant, should go so far as to cultivate affliction. In his “Culture” notebook, for example, Vachel mused: “There is the personal equation, in everything; mysteriously involved in everything. Take suffering. To high souls it is a blessing and a final expansion—to others it is a plain, straight, downright sterile curse” (23—dated September 7, 1900). A few days later he added: “There is nothing like a sense of the suffering world to give keenness to pleasure, and gratitude for joy; to give zest to any effort to fight the misfortunes of humanity, and reverence for the greatness of the love of a God, who allows it to be, without being overcome” (57—written just before an entry dated September 16)

“The Song of Lucifer” may be the first Vachel work to mirror Romantic “sorrow that is not sorrow,” but it is by no means the last. Indeed, we should not be surprised to learn that the idea of suffering, normally depicted as crucifixion, lies at the very heart of Vachel’s personal cosmology, as it is expressed in *Where Is Aladdin’s Lamp?* and “The Map of the Universe.” He discovered the usefulness and satisfaction of intellectual melancholy early in life. When he was attending Hiram, though, sorrow represented only one of Vachel’s moods, and it was more consciously cultivated than moods generally are. In broad perspective, his 1899-1900 letters manifest more puckish humor and quotidian good nature than anything else. Overall, the author of “The Song of Lucifer” seems to have been a confident and reasonably cheerful young man. Most of the time.

On the other hand, Lucifer-Lindsay’s moments of artistic and intellectual reflectiveness enhanced his role as Hiram’s shoulder, Hiram’s understanding-and-advice-giving counselor-uncle. It was a role that he dearly loved, and he saw a direct relationship between his independent studies and his indulgent reputation. On April 19, he boasted to his parents: “I have a larger flock of troubled sinners on my hands this year than most pastors—and signs of more coming to tell their little worries. I am a great man for non-committal^ good advice on both sides of a question—but there seems to be a great demand for it. A good many of them that I don’t see once a month tell me I am their best friend in Hiram. Well—they must be lonesome. I don’t know whether I ought to have written this—but now it is written.”

The very next week, he expressed amazement that men “who have the Gospel most in their hearts and lives[,] in their walk and conversation and in their life purposes—utterly fail to apply it with any regulating power to the boys they are in school with.” He vowed to enter the fray: “It is my ambition to learn to do the thing they have failed in. This is a field where a man does not get college credits—but it is a work my whole heart is in and if I fail, I will have done no worse than my betters. . . . Now if I learn to reach the Hiram boys I will learn something that has not been understood here for three years, and in that time Hiram has turned out preachers splendid and effective for certain classes of people. . . . I think if I work hard enough at this problem, I will learn some law of Christian work that most workers do not realize, and help out the boys a little” (April 26). A few days later he added: “People that I don’t see once a month, and who work with each other every day, come to me to find out the simplest facts of character and disposition” (April 30).

In the meantime, it was people that he saw too often that seemed to concern his parents, especially when the people were Japanese girls. There is no surviving parental correspondence dating to this time, but one of Vachel’s letters reveals what he likely read in a letter from Springfield: “I have accepted Mama’s advice, and let the Japs severely alone. That was not hard to do for our acquaintance is based on two or three Calls^ Christmas and two Spring vacation. I will call around and say good-by next June.” However, after describing the two girls in some detail, Vachel concluded with more of an apologia than an apology: “They have broadened my horizon of the real world by just one hemisphere—so to speak. They have doubled the diamater^ of my outlook” (April 23). By mid-May, he confessed that he had been “hearing so many beautiful things about Ya^ Ho Torada, the almond eyed lady, that it is hard for me to deny myself her acquaintance. She is a regular little oriental poem—song—whatever you like” (May 16).

Exactly one week later, after hearing a missionary to Japan preach, he further admitted to “a weakness for the Japanese,” and attempted to explain his partiality: “Now it is hard to believe that a whole blood, a whole nation can be artistic—but it is not half so hard if you can conceive of them dominated by Pantheism. Their selective worship of the beautiful—of the most beautiful spirits shining from the most beautiful flowers, or mountains or most glorious heroes—these maintain and develop the artistic spirit, and they go so together they must be the same thing—and neither the one nor the other the cause nor the effect.” Japanese individuals may not amount to much—but the Japanese state may be captured as a whole for Christ and made the mightiest gospel engine of the orient. It is impossible to have a Christian nation in the West. Western individualism forbids it. We will always have the greatest Christian Church in the West. But in the East we will have, in two hundred years—the greatest Christian Nation. The Whole Japanese nation will some day have a Christian Nationalism and an aggressively Christian government. I think when Christ was offered the Kingdoms of the world, the greatest temptation to power was the throne of Jimmu Tenno” (May 23).

More than a decade later (July 1913), just after finishing “The Jingo and the Minstrel,” “a poem of friendship with Japan” (*Poetry* 932), Vachel complained to fellow poet George Sterling that “few really cultured people know even the merest backbone of Japanese Feudal History and customs”: “They imagine the Japanese as a bunch of monkeys of most immoral breed who by some Satanic chance have suddenly learned to

become perfect wizards at fighting and building warships. The same people twenty years ago thought of Japan as a Nation of Dolls that could somehow talk and walk—and wore exceedingly pretty costumes.” In contrast, he asserted: “I have been such a passionate admirer of Japan all my life I can scarcely conceive of human beings who have never heard of Hideyashi or Iyeyasan. Yet I have to just pound those names into my most intimate friends.” The purpose of “The Jingo and the Minstrel,” then, was “to make out Japan as the last refuge of Chivalry”: “the issue is international” (Chénétier 73-74). He was reflecting on ideas, in his poem and in his letter, ideas that date back to his last spring at Hiram College. [Note 14]

Meanwhile, as this spring (and his college career) wound to a close, Vachel enjoyed several successes. On May 25, he gave the toast at the junior-senior banquet, speaking on “Expansion.” Expansiveness, after all, was what his independent reading was all about. On May 28, he delivered his final oration to his fellow Delphics. “Your son has just left the Delphic hall, amid great applause,” he bragged to his parents: “I happened to have a paper that took tonight.” The address was on Henry George and the “Single Tax,” and earlier, while preparing the oration, Vachel had written: “I believe I believe in that [the Single Tax]. I think it is very sensible, but don’t know much about it. But it is a radical change and will not come for a hundred years” (April 30). We know, however, that Vachel would not wait for “a hundred years”: the Single-Tax concept would be an important part of his political thinking within the decade.

Of all the late successes, none matched the satisfaction that Uncle Boy experienced on his last night at Hiram (June 13). From 8:00 p.m. to midnight, he scheduled appointments to counsel several boys that he had tried to help over the preceding months. How much assistance the boys received is moot, but there is little doubt that the occasion benefitted the counselor: “I believe in these latter years I have improved my standing on Hiram Hill—for the fellows have forced these appointments on me. I haven’t asked for them. Two of the fellows I think a great deal of have started out in all seriousness to be great men—and have given up drinking—and I hope they will stick to both.” The afternoon of this same day, an hour before dinner, Ruth Wheeler received her parting words of advice, as, Vachel reported, he and Ruth “perched our last perch for the year. . . . I leave at four tomorrow morning” (June 13). [Note 15]

In 1930, Vachel alleged that, during his last year, he “stayed at the McDiarmid’s house, and scarcely went to class at all.” In lieu of attending classes, in his own words, he “read Kipling from cover to cover, . . . and read everything on art, Japan, Ruskin and poetry I could find” (*Spider Web* 1932, 122). Although the comment certainly applies to his winter term, when he failed to earn any credit, he actually finished his Hiram career on a moderately high note. He finally received credit for third-term French (a so-so 85), and he earned a respectable 93 in Homiletics: “Professor McDiarmid gave me a credit in hermeneutics,” he commented in 1930, “when he found I had read H[enry] W[ard] Beecher’s lectures on preaching straight through” (*Spider Web* 1932, 43). He neglected to report that he also had written several sermons, one entitled, as we know from a letter home, “Christ as a Friend” (April 30). [Note 16]

It was “One night toward the end of our junior year,” Olive remembers, that “Vachel suddenly said, ‘Well, Olive, I’ve made up my mind. I’m writing home to tell Parents that I must go to art school. I just can’t be a doctor. You know I can’t. I’d be sure to kill people by mistake. I’m asking Parents to let me drop medicine and go to the Art Institute in Chicago next year. I want to learn how to really draw. I want to draw pictures that will make people think. I just can’t be a doctor. You know I can’t’” (Lindsay-Wakefield 86). When their mutual friend Paul Wakefield graduated in June (1900), Vachel sent his congratulations, adding he had broken the news to his doctor-father that he must study art: “By the time I am thirty I shall be the biggest man of my age you ever read about. By the time I am forty everybody will be just acquiring that opinion of me, and you and I will be just outgrowing it. When I am sixty and a graybeard, I will be a wreck in your hospital. And you must learn to speak well enough to preach my funeral.” His father’s conclusion, according to Vachel, was that “he sees no use in my going to Hiram any more then. This sudden change of front is a great relief to me. I hope for further Developments” (June 21, 1900, Ward). [Note 17]

Three weeks later he confirmed: “By Jove, I am going to study Art. My Pa has ceased to kick, and to Chicago I go, before next Christmas. Just watch me. Having nothing else to live for I hope to be able to live for my art. I hope” (letter to Paul Wakefield, July 9, 1900, Ward). The external stone had worn away, but nothing less than an internal adamantine wedge had taken its place. The internal sense of duty, the censure of conscience, was destined to conflict with innumerable Lindsay penchants and inclinations during the coming years. The obligatory urge no longer depended on mere parental discipline. After the spring and summer, 1900, it was self-imposed, self-dividing, and, finally, self-immolating. No drops, moreover, rhetorical or otherwise, would or could wear this stone away.

Historical Postscript

By 1898, the depression of 1893 had nearly run its course, ended, in part, by the most important political event of Vachel’s college days, the Spanish-American War. As early as February 1895, Cuban insurgents had begun their struggle for independence from Spain. Spanish leaders, especially Captain General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau (the “Butcher”), responded ruthlessly, herding Cubans into ill-equipped reconcentration camps in and around several major cities. Here thousands of the reconcentrados died; and the horrors were graphically reported in sensational newspapers, such as Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal*. In December 1897, riots in Havana brought the U.S. battleship *Maine*; and, on February 15, 1898, a powerful explosion on the *Maine* killed more than 260 sailors and brought the ship itself to the bottom of Havana’s harbor. The sensational papers left no doubt as to who was responsible, and Americans were soon chanting: “Remember the Maine, to hell with Spain!” On April 20, 1898, Congress passed several related propositions, one of which declared the Cuban people “free and independent.” On April 24, Spain declared war on the United States, and Congress reciprocated by declaring war on Spain the very next day—and making the declaration retroactive to April 21. Before dawn, on May 1, Commodore George Dewey, commander of the U.S. Asiatic squadron, sailed into Manila

Bay and gave his famous order: “You may fire when you are ready, Gridley.” When Gridley and the other American sailors ceased firing, Spain’s anchored ships had been destroyed. (Manila itself was not occupied by the American army until August 13, 1898.) In late May another Spanish fleet was blockaded in Santiago Harbor on Cuba’s southern coast. When the American army (including Theodore Roosevelt and the “Rough Riders”) landed east of Santiago in late June, the Spanish were trapped. After the battles of El Caney and San Juan Hill on the outskirts of Santiago, the Spanish fleet tried to escape (July 3) and was destroyed. Two weeks later Santiago surrendered; and, on July 18, Spain asked France to arrange an end to the hostilities.

When the peace treaty was finally signed December 10, 1898, Spain relinquished Cuba and ceded the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam to the United States. Many U.S. citizens objected to the nation’s new “imperialism,” and the treaty was finally approved in the U.S. Senate by a margin of only one vote—on February 6, 1899. Two days earlier Filipino insurgents had begun guerrilla warfare against U.S. rule. Historical consensus credits the Spanish-American War with the American nation’s emergence as a world power. In the midst of the war, Hawaii was peacefully annexed on August 12, 1898 (formally becoming a U.S. territory on June 14, 1900). In 1899, Samoa was partitioned between the U.S. and Germany. The same year, in September, U.S. Secretary of State John Hay issued notes that led to the declaration (January 2, 1900) of the Open Door Policy regarding trade with China. The Chinese Boxers rebelled against exploitation a short time later but were defeated at Beijing by allied troops in August 1900.

In the world of technology, Pierre and Marie [Marja Sklodowska] Curie announced the discovery of radioactivity (December 21, 1898), based on research they conducted on two new elements found in pitchblende. The first they named Polonium, after Mme. Curie’s homeland; the second they named radium. The discovery ushered in the sciences of nuclear physics and chemistry, as well as radiotherapy. Meanwhile, Italian [Marchese] Guglielmo Marconi had brought his experiments with Hertzian waves to England in June 1896, where he demonstrated sending and receiving radio signals over four miles (on Salisbury plain) and nine miles (over the Bristol channel). In 1897, Marconi founded his Wireless Telegraph Company and established a station at Needles on the Isle of Wight, where he accomplished a number of firsts. In 1897, he demonstrated the first maritime use of wireless communication, talking by radio to a tugboat 18 miles away. In 1898, he arranged the world’s first paid-for, wireless telegram. In September 1899, he outfitted two ships with wireless communication devices, in order to report the progress of the America’s Cup yacht race to the New York newspapers. In 1898, when a typhoid fever epidemic broke out among American troops in Cuba, U.S. Army doctor/bacteriologist Walter Reed was asked to chair an investigatory committee. His report, published posthumously in 1904, shed new light on the disease. In 1900, Reed chaired the commission to study a yellow fever epidemic which also struck the American military in Cuba. Using theories developed by Cuban physician and epidemiologist Carlos Juan Finlay 20 years earlier (1879-81), Reed proved that the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito was the carrier of the disease (February 1901). Meanwhile, in 1897, Sir Ronald Ross identified the *Anopheles* mosquito as the carrier of malaria. The same year, [Henry] Havelock Ellis published the first of seven volumes in his monumental *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, a work that Sigmund Freud found useful for *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900, but completed in late 1899).

From May 18 to July 29, 1899, 26 nations (including the United States and Mexico) participated in the First Hague Peace Conference, which succeeded in adopting several rules pertaining to war and to the treatment of prisoners (such as prohibiting the launching of projectiles from balloons and banning the use of asphyxiating gases and expanding bullets). The conference also established the Hague Permanent Court of Arbitration to deal with international disputes. (However, arms control, the primary objective of the conference, was not approved.) On March 14, 1900, Congress passed the Gold Standard Act requiring the Treasury to maintain a gold reserve worth at least \$150,000,000. On July 2, 1900, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin's airship, the LZ-1, flew its maiden voyage from a floating hangar on Lake Constance (Germany). The LZ-1 almost achieved the target speed of 20 miles an hour.

Notes for Chapter Eight

[Note 1] Lindsay family members continued to be concerned about one another's health. When Vachel urged his parents to visit Hiram, his mother answered that she was extremely busy and suffering from nerves: "If I can make out to keep you informed as to our health and doings, acknowledge the receipt of your letters, and sometimes try to express a little of the love we feel for you and the unceasing interest we take in whatever you are doing—that is all that it is possible for me to do." She added: "As to visiting Hiram, I can't leave your father. He is not well: symptoms of diabetes again, very sore mouth etc.—not cheerful—though not so bad as he was last winter" (February 17, 1900, Virginia).

[Note 2] Edgar Lee Masters uses the early notebooks liberally in his biography, but nearly every citation, no matter how brief, contains errors. The quotations from pages 69 to 76, purportedly from the "Culture" notebook, are in reality from "The Typical Saxon versus The Ideal Saxon" notebook. (Masters' excerpts from the "Culture" notebook begin on page 76 and continue to page 83). The notebook that Masters refers to as "Pictures," Vachel identified as "A Notebook on Illustrating." I use Vachel's title.

[Note 3] In 1913, Vachel wrote to Cornelia, reminiscing about their Hiram days: "I am indeed glad to hear from you, dear little sister, and I have all kinds of fellow-feelings for you. You will never be over sixteen years old to me, and I will never forget how we used to run down the East Hill together through the black night, just to work off our nervous enthusiasm" (May 21, 1913, Hiram).

[Note 4] Charles Dudley Warner (1829-1900), essayist, surveyor, lawyer, journalist, and novelist, was general editor of the *American Men of Letters Series* (1881-1904), consisting of 22 critical biographies of American authors. Warner wrote the first volume, *Washington Irving* (1881). Hiram College's Teachout-Cooley Memorial Library and Observatory was not completed until 1900. Until that time, students relied on the libraries of the individual literary societies and the campus YMCA.

[Note 5] Vachel's concerns over receiving money from home continued throughout his last year at Hiram. On February 28, 1900, for example, he wrote to ask his father for more funds, adding: "But it makes me want to earn my own, this thing of being out of money, I tell you. It is wearing on the nerves." Vachel's friend Paul Wakefield insisted to Edgar Lee Masters it was "not true that Vachel was ungenerously treated by his family. I

was with him in Hiram and Chicago and he always had a great deal more money than I did, and while the family were concerned and wished him to ‘adapt himself to the needs of the common people,’ they were not at all niggardly in supplying him with funds that he needed. But in those days Vachel was very independent and felt that he should not lean on the family for funds. He was far more sensitive to his dependence than they were” (November 11, 1935, Virginia).

[Note 6] Vachel later regretted having referred to his college work as “chores.” On March 27, 1900, he wrote: “Mamma^ never did get over my calling necessary^ duties ‘chores’ though she would not let me explain what I meant. It is not the doing of things that makes them chores, but the spirit in which they are done. It wasn’t necessary^ to go at them in the chore spirit to get them done. I believe in the dignity of duties. There is no need of making a thing contemptible and irksome and a task just because it must be done. We might as well rejoice in our labors. I can’t stand it to have ‘chore’ with quotation marks preached at me anymore. If you don’t want to understand me, don’t use it. I never said chores as you mean them were a waste of time, but it is a waste of heart power to shrink them into chores. They are a waste of time as long as they remain just plain chores. Nothing is worth doing if it has to be done that way.”

[Note 7] The 1901 *Spider Web* (published June 1900) contains a page dedicated to “The Achita^ Roses” (162). There are three pictures of Torada and Sato, along with anonymous verses, identified by Vachel as his own (see Byrd 66). The final stanza reads:

Roses from the Orient!
 Graces from the Orient!
 Hues and draperies have lent
 Witchery! You charm our gaze,
 Happy maids, with gentle ways!
 Bearing each a thoughtful mind,
 You are humble, you are kind.
 Sweetly full of dignity!
 Hearts and hues in harmony!

After leaving Hiram during the summer, 1900, Vachel wrote his friend Paul Wakefield, asking about Yao and Kimi: “They attract me as much as they repelled you at the worst . . . these earnest little girls are all bound up in the sorest place in my heart, and I am continually afraid they will fall into the careless religious^ spirit of the people about them, or become vain or deficient in zeal” (August 21, Ward).

[Note 8] Vachel generally had difficulty dating his letters, especially at the beginning of a year. (The first letter in Chénétier’s edition is dated “January 4, 1903,” but it was written from New York, so that the correct date is January 4, 1904.) The letters of 1899-1900 are particularly confusing. Several January letters are dated 1899, rather than 1900. Fortunately, Vachel designed new *Spider Web* letterhead stationery for the year 1899-1900, Hiram’s 49th or jubilee year. Many of Vachel’s letters, including the letter to his Aunt Fannie (misdated “January 12, 1899,” instead of 1900), were written on this stationery. Also, the manuscript copy of Vachel’s poem, “A Midnight Fantasy,” was dated “December 22, 1899,” but Vachel’s letters discussing the poem were dated January 1899, an obvious chronological impossibility.

[Note 9] On January 21, 1900, Vachel returned one pamphlet to his parents: *The School of Illustration*, an advertising brochure for the new Holme School of Illustration, opened in Chicago (1898) by illustrator [John] Francis (“Frank”) Holme (1868-1904). Vachel’s parents continued to assist his art interests. On March 18, 1900, for example, Vachel asked his father to buy Holme’s new book, probably *The Training of an Illustrator* (1899). On April 12, Vachel wrote to thank his parents, adding: “I looked over those 5 books Papa sent, very carefully. The first one of them has work enough to keep me busy all summer. I get so disgusted when I cannot draw as well as I want to, and I know it is merely a matter of practice and time. I am afraid I am destined to be an illustrator or something kindred.” He closed his letter with a quote from Frank Holme: ““The newspaper art of today offers a vast field for improvement and the beginner may almost regard himself as a pioneer in a new country. If he has talent and ambition joined with patience and industry—his chances are much brighter than those of the older illustrators of today.””

[Note 10] Vachel’s lack of enthusiasm for his Hiram life is evident in another letter to his parents from this time: “my soul utterly abhors turning my letters into perpetual chronicles of the things I scarcely know have happened—and certainly do not care. I have tried to write the things that came from my heart this year. It is hard to keep on gossiping about just the same old things. After I have told you my schedule of classes—and that I am running the reading room—and go to see Paul once a week—I have told you everything that has happened or will happen—except just the things that have gone into my letters this year” (January 21, 1900, misdated 1899).

At the same time, Vachel likely shared some of his views with Hiram President Ely Zollars. On January 18, 1900, Zollars wrote to Vachel, in part: “Your inclinations ought to be a pretty safe guide in this matter. Doubtless the work will grow upon you as you advance and if you do what falls to you in a strong way your life will be a great success. I am getting to see more and more that it is a question of how rather than what. There are many useful callings in life. He who does his work in a masterly way will not only win the approval of his fellows but have the consciousness of living a worthy life . . . Do not be satisfied with anything that does not rise above mediocrity” (Virginia).

[Note 11] In 1911, Vachel summarized his entire college career for Peter Clark Macfarlane in two sentences: “Spent 3 years at Hiram College—gradually abandoning medicine[^] as a prospective career and resolving to learn to Speak[^] to Write[^] and to draw. Gave a chapel oration on Democracy and Art” (Macfarlane, Virginia). In her 1916 memoir, Kate Lindsay wrote: “His [Vachel’s] sterling principles and his democratic ideas have been quite as marked from childhood as his imagination and characteristics as a writer.”

[Note 12] Although Vachel did not inform his parents, he seems to have renewed his interest in Adaline Mugrage during the spring, 1900. He met her again in March, at the Hiram home of a “Mr. Smith,” a man that reminded him of his father. He did relate to his parents: “my old girl Adaline was there—developed and blooming more than I ever hoped to realize—though I always saw it was possible. She is distractingly happy. She has an infinite development before her—and I was glad to see her so well started” (March 27). He did not mention Adaline again to his parents, but when he returned to

Springfield, he wrote his friend Paul Wakefield that he finally had “quit” on Adaline Mugrage (July 14, 1900, Ward).

[Note 13] Many years after Vachel’s death, Olive advised their mutual friend, Willis Spaulding, that in early 1900, when she was in Boston and Vachel wanted to leave Hiram for art school, she wrote their parents, “saying I hoped they would consent to allow him to try along that line which he so much wished to follow. I was attending all the current art exhibitions in Boston as well as spending all the time I could get at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and had very definite opinions as to Vachel’s talent in that line. . . . Vachel and I were so close together in those days that we seemed almost like two parts of one person. What a privilege it was to have such a brother for my nearest friend!” (October 27, 1947, Ward).

[Note 14] Vachel’s interest in Japanese culture began before Hiram. On June 26, 1917, he wrote his friend Arthur Davison Ficke (who was visiting Japan): “I envy all your avenues of access to the Japanese mind and the glory of the Japanese doors that will open to you. For years I was a maniac on things Japanese. When we were very little Children^ my mother chanced to buy a history of Japan when we were all laid over from missing a train, at a railway station—Decatur [Illinois] it was. Well that Child’s^ history of Japan, in words of one syllable has stayed with me ever since, and I know who Jimmu Tenno was, and what Fujisan is. Also the long reign of the Ho Jo clan still rings in my memory, also the mirror the sword and the ball, the alleged Shinto Symbols, and the difference between the Mikado and the Shogun, and all that and all that. Also the story of Hideyashi and the story of Iyeyasau^” (Harvard). In his Hiram notebook, “The Typical Saxon versus The Ideal Saxon,” Vachel wrote: “The Jap is the great translator and interpreter. He will teach Asia all Asia will ever learn of the West. If Asia is to learn French Art—Japan will teach her—if Asia is to learn Saxonism—Japan will teach her. Japan must be studied as a translator—interpreter—the Japanese traits of this sort entitle them to a place in my trilogy.” The French “must expound art,” he added; the Saxons “teach everything else but art. . . . The Japanese are the mirrors of it all—and where they fail to mirror, they fail in the trilogy.” He added that he planned to spend three years in France and two years in Japan before January 1, 1911 (29-31).

[Note 15] On May 27, 1900, Vachel waxed sentimental and dashed off “Comrades of Hiram,” a 13-line song in which he attempted to capture the emotional end of his college career. The chorus is representative of the whole:

Never our song shall be sung,
Oh Comrades of Hiram,
Never our happy hours shall we renew—
But we shall know our hearts are young forever,
But we shall know that Hiram hearts are true! (Hiram)

[Note 16] In his letters home, on several occasions, Vachel referred to his course in Homiletics as “Herminutics^” or “Hermeneutics” (April 26, 1900).

[Note 17] As Eleanor Ruggles relates, the *Spider-Web*’s apt quotation for Vachel’s final year at Hiram was taken from Shakespeare’s *1 King Henry IV* (III, i): “I am not in the roll of common men” (70). For a detailed account of Vachel’s contributions to the 1901 *Spider-Web* (published June 1900), see Byrd, pp. 66-67.

Photograph for Chapter Eight



Olive C. Lindsay when she was a student at the New England Conservatory of Music (1899-1900). Picture is the property of the Vachel Lindsay Association.

