Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Eighteen

[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.]
18. TRAVELING [May-September 1906]

“I have found my God.”

Vachel entered Asheville, North Carolina, in high spirits, recording in a new notebook (the third and last for his 1906 tramp) that there were three stories he needed to write: “(1) The coming into Ashville^, the biography of the quack. (2) Climbing Mount [Mitchell]. (3) The Gardens of Biltmore. All three great experiences, worthy of letters of gold.” In fact, he had already jotted down observations concerning “the quack,” the man referred to as “the chicken-merchant” in A Handy Guide for Beggars (see “Man, in the City of Collars”): “The old chap who drove me into Ashville^ the last day of my journey toward that place had a wonderful story to tell of having spent two months in a wagon as an Indian doctor. His hair grew long. He had with him a wreck of a regular physician to furnish diploma, backing and advice and, lend the use of his name when occasion offered. This combination did wonders. The regular worked among the whites. But the Indian among the Negroes did wonders in the matter of purging away chills and fever.”

The “quack” told his hitchhiker “the whole story of his life, which had been a combination of peddling and labor-bossing, with the exception of doctoring.” Vachel did not comment, but one or two things the old man related must have struck a familiar cord: “He had never had ill luck he said, though he had lived from hand to mouth and was blest with nine healthy children, no harder to care for than two.” His “one trouble” was a son, his oldest boy, who had lost an arm and who had rebelled when his father tried to send him to school. “And he had to drive his son into the woods, and finally disown him.”

The story describing the ascent of Mount Mitchell seems not to have been written, although “The Gnome” story praises John Collier as a climbing companion (Handy Guide 47) and “Man, in the City of Collars” makes a vague reference to a “third man” who “was coming to climb Mount Mitchell with me” (Handy Guide 81). On May 2 (Wednesday), when he wrote to Alice Cleaver, Vachel announced that he was “watching out the window for a man who is going to make an expedition with me, straight north across the Blue Ridge” (Hiram). In his notebook, however, we read: “It was Thursday morning, May third, that John Collier of Atlanta and your servant started for the Ashville^ station.” In 1909, Vachel related to Nellie Vieira how Collier “made an appointment to meet me at Ashville^ and Climb^ Mt. Mitchell—the highest mountain east of the Mississippi, or the Rockies. We climbed for four days and became friends forever” (Fowler 191). (By road or by railroad, Mount Mitchell is more than twenty miles northeast of Asheville.)

Vachel’s notebook also discloses that the visit to the Biltmore Estate (constructed in 1895), the luxurious home and grounds of George W. Vanderbilt, occurred after the trip to Mount Mitchell. Indeed, the account of the civilized Biltmore gardens is sprinkled
with disparaging comparisons to the natural scenery of Mitchell. Vachel’s guide at Biltmore was superintendent of grounds, C.D. Beadle, whose name is duly recorded in the “Roll of Honor”; and the experience provided the visitor with an opportunity to practice his landscape journalism. The following excerpt is representative, as it demonstrates the would-be human-interest writer’s continuing use of contrasts:

The landscape gardening was plainly based on the native laurel and cedar. Another element was the winding road, which passed through high avenues of trees, when the prospect was unfavorable, and in fact, afforded only a few vistas, till the heights of the Gardens were reached. Away to the South (was it the South?) was one vista remarkably rich and well considered, a combination of massed cedars in lines, and ploughed field and bright green oak clumps that was superb. It was studied to maturity, there was nothing strained or artificial about it. One could not, however, escape the impression of a tortured landscape, through most of the affair, till the house was reached. It was like holding a book to the looking glass. After the wild joys of Mitchell, the only chance to charm lay in an extreme artifice, or else a redoubled wildness. A compromise was of no avail.

At some point, Vachel must have recognized that his English was nearly as tortured as the landscape: “These hasty impressions are put down at midnight,” he later confessed, “lest the flavor of this trip be lost. I hope to make a steadier account soon.” In several places, phrases and lines have been crossed through, indicating that the author planned some rewriting but later found neither the time nor the inclination.

Actually, in Asheville and immediately afterward, Vachel did very little writing. His new notebook, as he himself admitted, “surely begins in a fragmentary way. . . . I had three rich experiences in Ashville, but have hardly the nerve to write them down, or the time.” One of the rich experiences almost certainly is the basis for the story, “Man, in the City of Collars,” although there is no mention of the affair in the notebook; and the story was likely written a year or more after the incidents occurred. There is a simple reason for the dearth of notebook entries at this point in Vachel’s trek. He entered Asheville in high spirits, but he departed feeling more depressed than he had at any other time on his journey. He had intended to travel to Washington, via Richmond, Virginia; and his third notebook was originally entitled: “From Ashville, North Carolina to Richmond, Virginia.” The latter two words are crossed out, however, and “Frankfort, Kentucky” written in. Sometime in Asheville, a lonely Uncle Boy decided to head directly north, toward the Cumberland Gap. He was tired of penury, tired of tramping, even tired of strangers. He yearned for the restfulness of relatives and home; and his father’s family, living near Frankfort, Kentucky, beckoned as the nearest refuge. Uncle Boy needed comforting.

He left Asheville on May 10, walking north toward Weaverville. He had spent his last $2.50 for new trousers; and in the notebook entry marking the renewal of the tramp, he focused on the implications of his lack of funds. In fact, the entry offers an informative conclusion to the events recorded in “Man, in the City of Collars”: “I am now on my road from Ashville to Cumberland Gap. This is the morning of my second day out. I made twenty miles yesterday. (Hoddobie, say the people as they pass.) I am penniless, and payed for my night’s lodging with a shirt and two collars, much soiled, which I happened to have. And the man, whose price was only thirty cents in money, was not
cheerful about accepting the substitute. His name was J.F. White, Ray P.O., Madison County, North Carolina.” (Cheerful or not, “J.F. White,” with the above address, is duly inscribed on the “Roll of Honor.”)

White and his family took “considerable interest” in The Tree of Laughing Bells, according to their guest. And White (who was nearly deaf) “insisted on my trumpeting the whole thing into his ear. Yet he took my shirt and two collars in the morning.” White’s attitude only served to punctuate Vachel’s depressed mood, as his notebook reveals:

These are the sad days. Hospitality wanes, and I am far from home. I do not seem to have any fight in me today. Five dollars in my pocket would give me all the nerve in the world.

I must here note that my book must have a few dreadfully cynical poems about money, dedicated to the merchants of the world. I must say “Brothers—though I have rebelled, I must acknowledge sometimes that there are few things more honest than a trade. The soul is so seldom its high self in extremity, that it cannot emanate enough spiritual glory to give a fair exchange, even for a night’s lodging—and we must get back to a money basis.” A man realizes how much of spiritual credit goes into a dollar when he lacks it—what a dreadfully big symbol it is of big things. Once I set foot on Kentucky soil I think I will cry “Enough—the trip is done”—unless a merry heart comes from somewhere. I have books, but hardly care to sell them. . . . It is at least one hundred and fifty miles to the Gap—I face a week of pennilessness that seems to me almost dishonorable. I should have worn my old trousers and kept the two and a half these cost me. It would have lasted all the way to the Gap.

Spirit! Spirit! Courage. These are the things I need. Why the soul should be gone from me I do not know. As long as a man’s heart glows, he can face anything. I am in perfect health, and the sun is warm, and I have twenty books. Let me then go forward.

As an afterthought, he added: “A little pity is a beautiful gift. But perpetual pity—it is an abasement to take.”

Fortuitously, just when he required “a merry heart,” Vachel chanced on Lindy Hensler of Little Creek, North Carolina. The day was May 11, 1906; and Little Creek, according to the traveler’s description, was “a quarter of a mile from the ridge of Ball Mountain that divides North Carolina from Tennessee.” The joyful encounter, in contrast to the despair that preceded, had a powerful effect on Vachel; and he tried to immortalize Hensler as “Lady Iron-Heels,” the eponymous heroine of the ninth and climactic tale at the close of the first half of A Handy Guide for Beggars. “Lindy made me happy,” her admirer commented in his notebook: “She has the freedom and dash of Mrs. B[ryson—see previous chapter, p. 26]. She has a beauty all her own.” When he came to write Hensler’s story, though, the simple truth lacked drama, and he allowed his imagination to supersede his recollection. “Lady Iron-Heels is obviously a story,” Vachel explains to his readers, “but embodies my exact impression of that region in a more compressed form than a note-book^ record could have done” (Handy Guide 96). The notebook record survives, however, and provides us with an opportunity to compare Vachel’s imagination with his collateral factual account. In making the comparison, we will see that the story “Lady Iron-Heels” reveals more about the author’s character and values than he may have intended.
Notebook and story concur in several details. In both, Hensler’s grandmother is said to be reminiscent of “the tub-like peasants of the German funny paper Simplicissimus.” Moreover, when Vachel announces his name, grandmother asks if he is related to a lawyer in “Flagpond” [Flag Pond, Tennessee], a lawyer who unsuccessfully defended her son in a criminal trial. In the notebook, the name is “Lawyer Lindsay,” while in the story it is “Lawyer Nicholas”; but we have seen literary Vachel’s proclivity for disguising names and details. More significantly, the notebook suggests that the son was arrested for “moonshining,” while in the story the crime is murder. “He surely killed Florist [John] Kenton,” grandmother proclaims, adding the extenuating observation: “they were both drunk.” Kenton is not mentioned in the notebook, though sometime after the fact Vachel did include a marginal comment: “The picture of the man Hensler killed was on the wall.” This comment, of course, adds credence to the storyline but casts doubt on the notebook observation. [Note 1]

Both notebook and story report that, while Vachel was talking with her mother, Lindy Hensler (notebook) or Lady Iron-Heels (story) enters, carrying “a log as Diana might have done” (notebook) or “a fence-rail” (story), and wearing the “plough-shoes” (notebook) or “iron-heeled brogans” (story) that are alluded to in the story’s title. She also wore “thick red stockings, and a red-lined skirt,” as in the story, though the notebook adds that it was a “black skirt, and her dress-waist [was] half open at the throat. Her neck had a blue handkerchief tied around it in Western fashion, and her hair was done up any old way.” In the story, the mother announces: “That’s my daughter. She was going to marry John Kenton”; and the narrator hints that grandmother’s candor is in some way engendered by “the roses, just outside the door, leaping in the wind.” In his notebook, Vachel simply remarked that Hensler greeted him with “a dashing Howdy.” There is nothing about roses until several days later, when Vachel found himself near Greeneville, Tennessee, in an area where many homes boasted twenty or more rose bushes. But now we are ahead of the story.

After “a decent and filling meal—corn-bread, butter, milk and beans—Diana, that is to say, Lindy, took up her banjo with its faded ribbons and played a rattling tune while we bent about the hearth. . . . And after her banjo, she listened well to the story of the Indian girl, and she graciously received a copy of the Tree, duly inscribed to her and her Banjo” (notebook). At this point, notebook and story differ considerably. The latter exalts Lady Iron-Heels as “John Kenton’s chief rose.” She inspired him to plant rose bushes throughout the area; she serves as an example of how democracy “hides jewels in the ash-heap”; she is “a changeling whose real ancestors are aristocratic souls forgotten for centuries”; she is, for “an instant,” “Queen Thi, the masterful and beautiful potentate of immemorial Egypt”; and then she is “a Tennessee girl again, with the eyes of a weary doe.” Lady Iron-Heels’ metamorphoses, the storyteller intimates, are due to the brevity of his visit. The very absence of familiarity allows a visiting stranger to idealize both the circumstances and the characters of his experience: “I passed by quickly; therefore I had a glimpse of what she was intended to be. ‘He that loseth his life shall find it’ [Matthew 10:39]. I see her many a time when I am looking on scattered rose-leaves. She was a woman, God’s chief rose for man. She was scorned and downtrodden, but radiant still. I am only saying that she wore the face of Beauty when Beauty rises above circumstance.” The moral, in other words, serves to punctuate the author’s personal values. [Note 2]
Lindy Hensler’s life circumstances, however, are mainly the products of her visitor’s imagination. The roses in the story are mentally transplanted from twenty or more miles away; the lovely Tennessee girl lived in Little Creek, North Carolina; and the inspired florist, John Kenton, seems not to have lived at all. Indeed, his name suspiciously resembles the name of Vachel’s Hiram friend, John Kenyon; and we know the writer often claimed that he modeled literary characters after friends. The story “Lady Iron-Heels” is what Vachel announces in his footnote: it is an impressionistic tale. Like the Indian girl in The Tree of Laughing Bells, Hensler/Iron-Heels exemplifies the author’s belief (so reminiscent of Freud’s descriptions of male daydreams) that masculine creativity is dependent on feminine inspiration. Though known only in passing, Lindy Hensler, as the notebook reveals, was Vachel’s, not John Kenton’s, “inspiration girl”:

As far as the raw material of her womanhood is concerned, I could love her forever. The hills have done wonders for her, and no doubt she and her Spartan sister are planting corn this moment on the steep hillside, while I journey merrily onward with a vision of brown-eyed womanhood within to make me forget the perils of the way. Farewell to the fairest of all Carolina. Biltmore and all its glories is not arrayed like this tigress, who toils with the hoe, because her husband (?) is in the State’s prison—or it may be her brother. Let it be a mystery. (It was her brother.) [The parenthetical comment is Vachel’s significant afterthought.]

If he did not “journey merrily onward,” Vachel at least parted from Lindy Hensler in a more elevated mood than when he had arrived. He continued in his resolve to seek the comfort of his Kentucky relatives, but the desperation is not so evident. True, the high spirits that he carried in to Asheville had passed—and would not return until his tramp was over. But thanks to “the fairest of all Carolina,” Vachel’s post-Asheville depression abated somewhat at Little Creek, before he crossed the border into Tennessee.

On Saturday, May 12, Vachel hurried “from mountainous North Carolina into mountainous Tennessee,” followed by “the Seven Suspicions” (see the prefatory chapter of “Lady Iron-Heels”). He walked fast, as he found himself in moonshiner country, where a stranger could be admired—or shot. Reaching the relative safety of Flag Pond, he asked for and received a night’s lodging at the home of Joseph Ray. (He did not sleep in a “straw-stack,” as he claims in A Handy Guide.) According to their guest, the Ray family proved “fascinating,” largely because one member of the household was a young mother with three children but no husband. She reminded Vachel of a Japanese friend [one “Yao San”] who lived in New York City, and he remarked how “some photographs of Japanese on the wall heightened the mystery.” According to his now-established custom, he entertained the Rays with a reading of The Tree of Laughing Bells: “The audience was perfect around the fire,” he enthused, especially the young mother. She was inspiring: “I loved that woman, therefore I read well, and the poem took on new life.”

Sunday morning, Vachel walked to Laurel, Tennessee, where he “attended the latter end of a service at a hardshell Baptist church.” After the service, he took his noon meal with one of Laurel’s several Sheldon or Shelton families. When he tried to read his Tree of Laughing Bells as payment for dinner, however, he discovered that his audience
was less than intent: “. . . in the midst of it the young woman and the old left without a word. . . . Later on they returned. I persuaded them to listen to the finish. Then the old woman turned her snuff-stick, and sat on me, hard; she said she had no use for such lies—wanted something with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in it, the old book was enough, and she had no use for any other. I tried to draw some analogies from the snowball bush in the front yard, but she counted the bush a vanity for Christ’s sake. The lillies of the field had nothing to do with the case. . . . And no one else on the porch wanted my book left there, so I left in debt for one meal. Maybe the chance to air her religon^ was worth the cornbread she cooked for me.” Shaking the dust of Laurel off his feet, so to speak, Vachel headed toward Greeneville and the Cumberland Gap, walking for a time alongside “a Presbyterian female Missionary from Jacksonville, Illinois.” She too refused his book, although she offered an excuse that at least satisfied the author: “being on horseback,” she was “unable to store it away.”

Sunday night, May 13, Vachel reached Limestone Springs, Tennessee, on the outskirts of Greeneville. Here he spent the night at the house/store of H.D. Reaves, across from a “gypsy camp.” In fact, he first passed by, “thinking the man in the store had enough of hospitality” (catering to the gypsies). “I was so hungry.” Vachel explained, “I truly and fervently prayed to Heaven for the blessing of a meal, with something besides corn-bread, and passed by many interesting cabins, all because of my carnal man.” Mrs. Reaves, “a most charming woman, with the most sensitive sort of a face, a lady of fine blood,” proved to be the answer to his prayers: “How I enjoyed Mrs. Reaves’ cooking! It would have made the gods rejoice! There was a comely girl visiting her who may have had something to do with the outlay. One unique dish was fried cottage cheese. It was great, and there was honey, and good meat and good jelly, and preserves and a lot more.”

The wanderer had additional reason for good spirits, as the gypsies claimed he was “just entering the land of hospitality, that henceforth lavish tables and big hearts abound.” In turn, they asked “all sorts of questions”; and, Vachel affirmed, “I kept back nothing. The store-keeper^ liked them—said they were a good set. They wanted to know what I paid for my night’s lodging. That was the one question they meant—for some reason. I told them a book.” For once, though, he seems to have lost his nerve, perhaps fearing that the gypsies would look at his slim book and consider him a bunko artist, a profession he consistently detested. Anyway, he added in his notebook: “And I told my host afterward that they must not see the book.”

It was Monday, May 14, walking out of Greeneville, that Vachel first observed the roses he would later attribute to John Kenton’s love for Lady Iron-Heels. “I begin to find yards with twenty rose bushes in full bloom, while yesterday a yard with two roses was a^ event. The country widens and except for the broken horizon, rolls like that between Rushville and Connersville [Indiana]. Houses are painted. Back porches are in order. There are walks and they are swept, store houses and they are painted. It is a joy to the eye. I did not know there was so much pleasure in a white house with red trimmings.” The signs of prosperity continued, but Vachel’s forward journey did not. When he stopped to ask for lunch, a nameless host related that Andrew Johnson’s tomb could be seen in Greeneville. Curious, and no longer totally desperate for family comforting, the Springfield-Illinois adventurer “back-tracked” and spent the rest of his day sightseeing in the hometown of Abraham Lincoln’s successor:
Greenville—I am now in the cool shadow of the monument of the seventeenth president of the United States—Andrew Johnson. It is an atrocity—a low squat archway, supporting an obelisk. Upon the sides of the archway are flaming funeral urns. On the obelisk is the American Eagle, screaming. Andrew Johnson is duly punished. [Here Vachel includes a rough sketch of the monument.] A poem should be inscribed to the grave of the statesman who failed. It is on a high knob, with a scattering of arbor-vitae, overlooking Greenville. I spent the day trying to avoid the road to Greenville and keep the road to Midway. About two in the afternoon the noon’s host told me Greenville was Johnson’s old home, so I back-tracked. Andrew Johnson, you have used up my day. [Note 3]

The visitor did make a note of Johnson’s epigraph, largely because it expressed one of his favorite principles: “His faith in the people never wavered.” In regard to the troubled Johnson, though, Vachel judged the epigraph was, at best, “possibly appropriate.”

In A Handy Guide for Beggars, the visit to Johnson’s tomb is described in “Lady Iron-Heels” (”II. The Tailor and the Florist”). Purportedly, the Lindsay narrator was “glad” for the visit, because it was near Johnson’s tomb (Johnson had been a tailor in his youthful days) that he chanced upon “a wooden headstone, marked ‘John Kenton of Flagpond, Florist. 1870-1900.’” However, there is no mention of a Kenton grave (or any other grave near Johnson’s) in Vachel’s notebook; and it is curious that a local monument maker would misspell “Flag Pond.” On the other hand, the notebook contains several references to “Flagpond, Tennessee.” We may suspect that Kenton’s grave, like Kenton himself, is a product of the narrator’s imagination.

After a brief visit to Andrew Johnson’s home, compliments of A.J. Patterson, Johnson’s grandson and only surviving heir, Vachel spent Monday night, May 14, in Greeneville—at the home of Marvin Myers. “He was a fellow just married,” his guest commented: “he and his wife were tractable, and sweet and civilized.” The next morning, May 15, the northward journey began again, with the wanderer still in relatively high spirits. As usual, when he was hopeful, he found time to record his thoughts and aspirations in his notebook. Sometime later in the day on May 15, he speculated:

Introduction for book—“Every house, however busy, practical or disorderly, ought to have some symbol of Art aspiration—some treasure. If it can be no better thing, let it be this book.”

Let us be moderate in our demands. The busy American cannot reorganize his whole life for the artist. There are other forces at work in him.

And would it be well, even if he could, to live ever in the atmosphere created by triumphs of design? What is this heaven we are building? Will it not result in unctuous fatuity, if established?

Is Art not better as the occasional emerging grace of life? Is it not better as a salt, and a spice? Is it not better as an occasional pleasant surprise?

As for clothes, one of life’s little details that parents often ask about, the Lindsay son had his own opinion: “This is the solution of the dress and laundry question. Those who insist on a well-dressed artist, are the advocates of deadly uniformity, unctuous fatuity.”

Never in his life a candidate for “deadly uniformity,” a rather bedraggled Vachel walked through Mosheim and spent Tuesday night, May 15, with W.F. Beckner in Bull’s
Gap, Tennessee. “The Beckner’s were great,” their overnight guest reflected: “He was the lean, atrociously ugly son of a German miller.” (Here Vachel includes a crude resemblance, not unlike the caricature of Albert Carver, his high school physics teacher—see Chapter 5, p. 18.) Ugly appearance or not, Beckner impressed his guest: “The little house and yard squirmed with disorderly enterprise. . . . The place reeked with energy and promise.” Exercising his supposed natal powers, Vachel prophesied that the Beckner family “will lord it over an atrociously ugly farm house some day, and a mighty big useful one. They will not stay long in this shack. They started on nothing and have just moved from the log house at the far corner of the field, God bless them.”

Mrs. Beckner had attended a nearby Baptist college, and she reminded Vachel of his dear Aunt Fannie: “had the same kind of spunk, but was stronger. She was full of the ambition given her by her small college, and it was all for her sons.” Her intention, she related to Vachel, was to teach her sons “at home till they are old enough for college.” All in all, the Beckners confirmed several of their house guest’s cherished beliefs; and his enthusiasm is very evident in his concluding observations: “If I could only hold in my heart the things I have seen in this family it would be worth my soul’s salvation. It seems to me I understand the Great American People for the first time in my life. I swear those boys will be heard from, and I swear that the small college is a mighty force when it puts the salt of ambition into such a small house-hold. The Beckners are my best beloveds.” In brief, the Beckners were just the kind of family who allowed Andrew Johnson and Vachel Lindsay to proclaim that their “faith in the people never wavered.”

On Wednesday, May 16, Vachel left Bull’s Gap, still enjoying the prosperity and roses of eastern Tennessee: “I have passed a neat house, of the sort that has arrived, and the old man that did it in the back yard, sunning himself. I could write an essay on the old men I met. And the front yard was full of roses. Oh what passionate hearts they have. I could write me such a song in praise of red roses as has never never been written. I have passed twenty such rose-bowered homes since the mountains. How the roses bloom!” Once enthused, Vachel seldom stopped with mere description, and his notebook continues with random thoughts on the significance of roses in history, art, and literature. These thoughts, of course, provide the basis for the conclusion of “Lady Iron-Heels,” where the rose, an emblem of Lady Iron-Heels herself, is credited with bringing strength: “In springtime her magic petals bring God to the weary and give Heaven’s strength to the wavering of heart.” As we have seen, however, Vachel encountered Lady Iron-Heels before he encountered the roses of Tennessee; the story of Lindy Hensler is a reflection of the artist’s creative mind. Appropriately, in his notebook, the artist himself associates imagination with roses: “every dreamer has eaten of [rose] petals.” He also associates the red rose with the ideal woman, although the latter is not as easy to discover. In this dreamer’s words: “I have searched for the immortal everlasting woman, and today I find not her but her blush reflected in these petals.” [Note 4]

Once he passed Tennessee’s rose country, Vachel’s account of his tramp becomes increasingly matter-of-fact. Late Wednesday morning, May 16, he crossed the Holston River at Crockett’s Ferry, compliments of Samuel Grigsby, a “peach” of a ferryman who accepted a Tree of Laughing Bells booklet in lieu of the five-cent fare. In Mooresburg,
Vachel recited his poem to the C.E. Pendergrass family, in exchange for lunch. By evening, he had “crossed Clinch mountain by the flat-gap road, and lodged just on the other side with a worthy, handsome deaf old man with a pig-like fat wife who was kind and a good cook.” A recitation of the Tree again paid for dinner, although afterward the author vowed that he had “shouted [his] poem for the last time to the deaf.”

Next morning, May 17, Vachel breakfasted with his nameless host family and was on the road at 5:00. That evening he reached Tazewell, having completed, in his own estimation, “a good deal of thinking,” as well as a good deal of miles. What he thought about was immoral behavior: about liquor and about man’s inhumanity to man, and to woman. These were subjects that generally concerned Uncle Boy, but they were subjects that had risen to the fore because of this day’s particular experiences. In the morning, he met “a young chap, just married, just heir to a $10,000 fortune in farmlands, who rode a mule beside me, and took me on the mule behind him for four miles. . . . He stopped at several villages, and grew each time more cordial as he overtook me. He had a big bottle but I refused to partake and he started in [and] roasted whiskey with the best of them. Yet when I caught him again about ten-thirty he was helping a red-faced man in the road, with a hold-over from last night, to get drunker. I was introduced and vouched for, and received a warm invitation for dinner which I was obliged to decline. The last scene, about eleven, the young heir overtook me just as I was unsuccessfully throwing rocks at a garter snake in the road. He dismounted and after five shots succeeded, by standing right over the snake, in shooting him. . . . After this masterpiece of sportsmanship, which illustrated the superiority of the weapons of civilized man over those of the caveman, we parted at sundering roads, with vows of eternal friendship.” Typically, and in keeping with his moral sensitivities, Vachel avoided an unconditional judgment of a fellow human being: “He was a good sweet-hearted boy, even then, in no sense roaring drunk, just cheerful. He was only twenty-two.”

Lunchtime provided additional food for thought, as well as food for body: “My noon hostess was barefooted, genial, fat, squalid, brunette, with a drunkard husband out on a tear and an old man boarder and his son moving out for fear of the drunkard’s return.” Indeed, the exposures to immoral behavior were beginning to mount up: “For the past two days the table conversation has been full of illegitimate lovers cutting, shooting, etc., either on the road ahead or the road behind.” The irony, Vachel mused, was that his “hosts always vouch for the respectability of their own neighborhoods.” For his part, as we shall see, the observer believed he was collecting stories and materials that would give his next YMCA lecture series an effective moral focus. Seldom, if ever, did he lose sight of what he felt was his God-given, missionary purpose for living.

In Tazewell, Tennessee, Vachel found himself approximately ten miles from the Cumberland Gap: “it is just one week since I started [from Asheville], and I have walked fully two hundred miles, and I will feel after my trip has been properly set down in about two letters, it will have been well rounded out, and I will be prepared to go home and cram for Europe in about two weeks. Wonders of study can be accomplished in that time.” He added that he had “yet a hope of attending to both expeditions [the present tramp and the European trip] with dignity.” Soon, however, Tazewell put his “dignity” to a vigorous test: “Last night [Thursday, May 17] I stayed at a beautiful place whose only drawback was the fleas. There were three teamsters harbored there by the gentlest of
hosts, and the three and I slept in two beds in one room. But happily the fat man did not sleep with me. He well said of himself that he was ‘just as big sitting down as standing up’. . . . I gave mine host the next to the last copy of the Bells, so this week’s bunch of twenty-one have gone at the rate of about three a day.”

Next morning, an uncomfortable Vachel rose with the teamsters at 4:00, ate an insufficient breakfast of “nothing but corn-bread and sorghum,” and walked toward the Cumberland Gap, trying to rid himself of fleas. At the Gap, he viewed “the old stone that marked the intersection of three states” and was informed that a new stone had been “set up a quarter of a mile away in the woods.” He was hungry, however, and decided that “the old time stone by the side of the road, with its blurred inscriptions was good enough for [him].” He reached Middlesboro, Kentucky, about 10:30 a.m., ravenous, almost devoid of booklets, and careless of his dignity: “I knocked at a side door and received at my own request some bread and butter. And jam was added without my suggesting it. It was my first tramp hand-out. I felt I was entering a new order of life, as distinctly as the first time I entered a Catholic Church door.” Fortunately, the general delivery mail at the Middlesboro post office included a few Tree booklets sent from New York City, but apparently only a few.

In some desperation, Vachel brought his Powlison letter to the Middlesboro YMCA, where a Mr. Keeney “provided . . . a new pair of old shoes,” which the visitor hoped would last to Richmond—to Kentucky’s Richmond, that is, not to Virginia’s—because of the change in plans made in Asheville. Aunt Eudora “Dora” Lindsay South, Dr. Lindsay’s younger sister, had sent a letter directing her nephew to follow the Daniel Boone trail to Richmond, some ninety miles north-northwest of Middlesboro. From Richmond, the trail would lead to Lexington and finally toward Frankfort. (Jett, Kentucky, his final destination, was located along the trail, approximately five miles south of Frankfort, five miles south, that is, in 1906.) Eudora’s nephew mailed his confirmation in one of three stamped envelopes that Keeney grudgingly parted with, the recipient observed, “in the usual frosty style.” He was thankful to Keeney, but he detested patronizing behavior. He also grumbled about the fact that his new, old shoes had “high heels, with danger of turning the ankles.”

Friday afternoon, May 18, probably in the local YMCA reading room, Vachel rested for a time and mulled over how he could use his recent thinking to shape his New York City, winter lecture series:

Let us call it a course in “How things ought to look.” It ought to be Art, not poetry, in the announcements, and all pains taken with the cover. The course ought to be November, December and January, we will say. It ought to end Feb. 1, that is certain. I ought to go at the matter with all earnestness, to build up a permanent work there. There ought to be two classes a week, at three dollars and a half a class. I cannot live on less than seven dollars a week. I ought to digest this spring’s and summer’s notebooks [so] that there will be really something to say to the men, in the way of philosophic generalizations from memories. My classes ought to be free, and my raw material the checker-players of the social rooms. I ought to insist upon being in the inner councils of the association enough to consider their general policy, and not flounder in the dark.
I ought to consider this class my experiment station, expecting in three or four years to beat out something that can be trumpeted to a crowd. Meanwhile I and my raw material can fight it out.

With his enthusiasm renewed, he tramped out of Middlesboro, planning to find lodging in about an hour—with no luck. “The railroad has spoiled most of the people in the hospitality line,” he concluded: “I have not had such a time hunting fare since I have been South. It’s ‘go to the next neighbor’ on any excuse hereabouts.”

After two hours (and more than seven miles), he reached Ferndale, Kentucky, where Andrew C. Henderson, according to a notebook entry, “was my excellent host”:

It was as good and clean a family as ever lived in a cabin. The wife was mother of five already, and in an extremely delicate condition, still beautiful. They were essentially refined—no snuff, or tobacco, no spitting.

I left my winter underwear, the shirt being good, and worth a dollar all right. The mother was churning in the dark when I persuaded her to keep me. I did not at the time note her condition. But she took no extra steps that I noticed in the matter of cooking. In the matter of the bed I was delinquent, and allowed her to spread it on the floor before I noticed. I was talking to Henderson...

When I had retired, the lamp went out as the lantern had, sometime before. Mrs. Henderson said “If we don’t get more oil, we had better quit house-keeping.” But she was in general a gentle woman, and Henderson gentle also. They were as Christ-like a family as I have seen.

And it was sweet to hear them crooning and feeding their youngest by the fire on bread and milk, in perfect content. The youngster had slept through supper.

(On April 3, 1907, Vachel jotted in the margin next to this entry: “I have written to the Hendersons twice asking of their welfare, but have never been answered.”)

Saturday morning, May 19, Vachel recorded that he “stopped . . . in the woods to knock one inch of extra heel from each heel, with pieces of railroad iron, so they would not turn my ankles.” The original wearer of the shoes, he guessed, “was vain as Duffey,” his New York actor-friend. Able to move now with his normally long stride, he reached Fourmile in the early afternoon and ate lunch, compliments of Mrs. Sallie Goodin: “A woman who made me think of [H.G.] Wells by her manner. She was quite sarcastic about my book, yet I could see she was pleased.” Having traded one of his few remaining booklets for his meal, Vachel “dreamed of a land where rhyme was coin of the realm, and the richest in rhyme was feasted the most of all. I have feasted on cornbread and milk—a feast to him who will have it so, who has walked twenty miles.” (Actually, Fourmile is about ten miles northwest of Ferndale.)

The grudging hospitality of the area finally caused the wanderer to speculate on the decline of that ancient virtue: “Hospitality is as sacred an obligation to the guest as to the host. Man is naturally hospitable. Guests along the railroad have not considered this sacredness. Therefore hospitality has waned. It is the travellers’ grievous fault. Oh my wandering brothers—you have done a wrong.” Sometime that afternoon, with his “heart full of happiness,” he rewarded a nameless hospitable citizen with his last *Tree* booklet. By this point in his tramp, however, he had discovered that good fortune seemed to arrive at the very moment he stripped himself of any medium of exchange, especially money.
Rather than despairing, then, he was expectant: “Yet everything is lovely. It must be the sun that has come right after a rain—or maybe because I have quit waiting under a cliff for a freight train. Or maybe something is going to happen.”

The “something” this time was a Saturday-night welcome from Fielding Gibson, owner of a general store at Artemus, Knox County, Kentucky. Next door was “Gibson house, a crude hotel with a substantial though disorderly table,” and Vachel’s bed and board for the night: “In return for my entertainment I gave a lecture after supper to the store loafers, and Mr. Gibson—all of us sitting about on cracker-boxes. Just before I told fairy tales to the children on the porch. This story telling has promise in it. The boys listened with zest. I tried it last night on the Hendersons for the first time. I might introduce a few stories in my lectures next winter, stories old and new, personal adventures and fairy tales of the oldest sort, Grimm and Schoolcraft and some of my old favorites.” [Note 5]

He was writing on Sunday, May 20, updating his notebook and using the opportunity to rest and to meditate:

There are some things I have done well, and must continue—Book covers, wall posters, leather designs and lectures and poems.

I ought to arrange my lectures so they would be a sure go to February the first. By that time I ought to have enough books and pictures to start on another tramp. The Tree of Laughing Bells has proved a good medium of exchange in the country. It is possible to get up something more artistic and yet more attractive to the farmer.

In preparing for Europe I ought to fill a notebook on the most important sights of each place, before going. But my notebook there ought not to be facts, but principles, new impressions and generalizations for my fall classes, so that by fall my artistic self and critical self will be completely rehabilitated and I can truly say I have begun to think.

Thinking, indeed, is this notebook’s major focus. As Vachel tramped from Asheville to Frankfort, he pondered the fact that he was more than twenty-six years old. He had proclaimed the years prior to thirty, in imitation of Jesus, as the time for preparation and thought. Now this time was more than half gone. He still retained one unwavering aim: like Jesus, he intended to be a saving missionary to humankind. The YMCA classes, therefore, must be considered as the means, not the end, in his life:

Those classes should be my thinking headquarters, next year. I wish it were possible to have a free class with a decent salary, one night a week. I must carry that work forward, yet I must pick up writing and designing which I have left behind for a year. Yet the Y.M.C.A. will not pay over three dollars and a half for one lecture by your servant. The only way to make a living is by lecturing twice a week. That requires an ocean of preparation, if anything is really said. I must get as much ready this summer as possible. There are plenty of principles to be deduced from these spring note-books and the summer’s outing. I do not want to talk about the South too much or Europe too much. I want rather to keep them in the background of some constructive thinking. The time has really come when I can afford to begin to think, and I must build my system slowly and patiently, that I may not have to tear down too often.
And after he recorded his thoughts on his thoughts, he set out again for Richmond, feeling better in mind than in body.

Sunday night, May 20, he arrived in the vicinity of Boreing, having walked some fifteen or more miles from Artemus. Here he stayed with farmer E.C. McGee and his wife. “McGee was a peach,” Vachel observed: “He said he couldn’t afford to turn anybody away. He had travelled too much.” The guest wanderer entertained the McGees with the story of his adventures and happily reported his reward: “two square meals . . . supper and breakfast.” He was hungry, having eaten little the preceding day: “I had been curiously dizzy and without appetite for twenty-four hours. There is an epidemic of mysterious dizziness going through this part of the State.” And although he was very tired, his educational experiences this day did not end with nightfall. Once in bed, he discovered firsthand the danger of meddling in moonshiner/farming country: “McGee shot at someone fooling around his corn-crib just after I had gone to sleep. Then he and his spouse came to my door in their night-shirts ‘just to explain the noise’—so I would not be alarmed.”

He was up early the next day and, by 9:00 a.m., he had walked some nine miles to London. From here he rode five and one-half miles behind a mule with a boy who was returning home after delivering his father to jury duty. In fact, this Monday, May 21, proved to be one of those days when riding clearly seemed “better,” and Vachel managed three more lifts, covering ten miles, reaching Victory in the early afternoon and eating lunch compliments of J.M. Andes. By Monday night, he was on top of Kentucky’s Big Hill, lodging with G. Philbeck of Cooksburg: “a simple teamster in a two-room house with a wife and two babies. A kind man.” Philbeck reported that “there was a great deal of moonshine all about the hill, that he could get some in two miles—and that there was a deal of shooting also.” But his guest, of course, knew about the shooting.

Tuesday, May 22, Vachel walked to the town of Big Hill, and ate lunch with Mrs. Nancy Robinson. Afterward, he met H.P. Barclay, whose interest in The Tree of Laughing Bells led to the longest non-train ride on the tramp. Barclay drove Vachel thirteen and one-half miles, from Big Hill into Richmond; and the grateful passenger carefully recorded in his notebook that he owed one booklet to “H.P. Barclay, Red House, Madison Co., Ky.” Once in Richmond, Vachel again enjoyed the pleasures of “CIVILIZATION,” staying Tuesday night in the home of Christian preacher, Hugh McClellan, “by advice of Aunt Dora.” He was impatient to reach Jett, and his notebook entries after Richmond are brief and to the point. On Wednesday, May 23, Joe Phelps of Cleveland provided a “buttermilk dinner”; James B. Harp drove him thirteen miles into Lexington; and “Rev. George W. Kemper” of Midway put him up in the Midway Hotel for $1.00. The next entry records the arrival in Jett and is dated “Thursday, May 24 (?)” the question mark indicating the author’s uncertainty as to the date: “Arrived at Aunt Dora’s, Jett, Franklin County Kentucky, afoot, and glad to get there; next day. There I remained, stupid, happy and recuperating for a week or so, enjoying them all very much.” [Note 6]

Since their home was located along the old Boone trail, the Souths experienced, in Aunt Dora’s daughter’s words, an “intermittent procession of transients,” none of whom were turned away: “Through the years this vagrant train came and went, accepted without question in the rite of entertaining the stranger within the gates.” Still, Aunt Dora’s
greeting for this particular “tramp” became a favorite family story: “Dicie, our colored cook of some years’ standing, had become accustomed to these visitations. She therefore experienced more annoyance than surprise on this late afternoon in May when the staccato barking of the dog—unsuspecting herald of the approach of genius—brought her to the kitchen window. What she saw was to her ‘just ‘nother one o’ them tramps to feed.’” But here the ordinary procedure was broken for my mother, who also had discovered the approach of the stranger, had come out upon the porch and before Dicie’s horrified eyes was greeting him affectionately. ‘Fore God,’ cried Dicie, throwing up her hands, ‘Ef Miss Dora ain’t a-kissing a tramp!’” (Cousin Vachel 52-53). In his notebook, the “tramp” estimated he had reached the end of a journey that measured over 900 miles, 702 of which he had covered afoot. [Note 7]

In 1876, Vachel’s affectionate welcomer, née Eudora Gray Lindsay (1852-1918), married the Reverend Mr. James K[nox] “Polk” South (1844-1921), pastor of the tiny Disciples church at Grassy Springs—and pastor of several other country churches as well. One year after the wedding, according to their daughter Eudora Lindsay South, her father “purchased a roomy, old-fashioned residence well-suited to [his wife’s] two-fold mission in life—to rear a family and to establish a school. . . .” In 1880, after two years’ preparation, Excelsior Male and Female Collegiate Institute was duly chartered by the Kentucky legislature. The location was Jett, daughter Eudora affirms, “five miles from Frankfort, in the same section of Kentucky that [Eudora Gray Lindsay South’s] pioneer ancestors, Anthony and Rachel Lindsay, had formerly settled. It was twenty-two miles northwest of Lexington, the hub of the Bluegrass wheel from which radiated spokes of white limestone pikes in all directions. The one that went past my mother’s school was the Wilderness Road which had been the trail made by Daniel Boone in his trek through the Great Meadow” (Cousin Vachel 49). “Excelsior” (which in Latin means “ever higher”) reflects Mrs. South’s admiration for Longfellow, whose short poem “Excelsior” had been force-fed to American students almost from the time it was first published (1841). [Note 8]

In his notebook, Vachel commented that he stayed at Jett “for a week or so,” but in later years his memory stretched the time to “about a month.” In 1927, for example, writing to Aunt Eudora’s daughter, Ethelind South Coblin, cousin Vachel claimed: “I know I timed it so that it was up to the last day of my start for Europe with my father and mother from Springfield, Illinois. . . . Aunt Dora took care of me for a month and peppered the folks at home with letters, and hence the trip to Europe. It was certainly not my idea. I did not want to go home and if they asked me home it was probably through her plain speaking” (Chénetier 386). Aunt Eudora did help to assuage her brother’s hurt and angry feelings concerning what he believed to be his son’s embarrassing behavior, but Dr. Lindsay and his family, including his vagabond son, had planned their European trip since the preceding February. The tickets were in hand; the June 23 departure date was confirmed. Moreover, when Vachel left Kentucky, he did not return home to Springfield, at least not immediately. Sometime in early June, he bought a railroad ticket to Rushville, Indiana, where he remained with his maternal grandmother and beloved Aunt Fannie and family, until it was time to join his parents and sister. The money for the
railroad ticket must have come from someone in the family, likely from Grandmother Frazee, perhaps from Aunt Eudora, likely not from Dr. Lindsay.

Meanwhile, the young girls of Excelsior Male and Female Collegiate Institute, to the tired and lonely vagabond, seemed nothing less than the fabled houri. He arrived a few days before commencement, on the day that Excelsior held an open house for the surrounding community; and he soon attracted the attention of his aunt’s daughter and namesake, Eudora Lindsay South. Her memories (and adulation) were recorded many years later in a manuscript first entitled *Vachel Lindsay and the Bluegrass*, finally published privately with the title *Cousin Vachel* (1978). “Indeed it was easy to believe that Vachel was a true member of the band of the itching foot,” cousin South declares: “His large irregular features were burned brick-red, his blond hair, eye lashes and jutting brows, were bleached lighter still. His shirt was faded, rumpled and streaked with sweat. His bandanna-wrapped bundle was tied to a stout walking stick. None would have noticed beneath the battered hat his prophet’s eyes or guessed that his worn pockets held lines that would forever set him apart from the vagabond brotherhood” (52).

Understandably, Aunt Eudora “spirited” her nephew “off for a bath and fresh linen” (53), making him admissible to what he himself referred to as SOCIETY. “But,” daughter Eudora contends, “conventional dress in no way concealed the fact that this cousin was different from any we had ever known”:

The first clear image that my mind records is of him seated on the couch in the library—probably later that first day—with his head thrown back, his blue eyes gazing at me from under his “hummocky” brow through lashes so startlingly light as to seem almost white. It probably was that first evening also that he looked around quizzically at each cousin in turn—there were eight of us. Then he burst forth as if he had just solved the answer to a vexing puzzle:
“I’m a Frazee. That’s why my father would never bring me to Kentucky but always brought my sister Ollie. She’s a Lindsay, she has Aunt Dora’s eyes, and you are all Lindsays, too.” (Cousin Vachel 53)

During the bustle of pre-commencement activities, cousin Eudora continues, “Vachel moved quietly absorbing much and giving out more in the moments that were his. He read the diary of his tramping trip and recited his poems to any and all free to listen—for an audience Vachel must have.” Aunt Eudora’s girls, predictably, were his favorite audience; and South’s memories offer an early, informative illustration of her cousin’s courtly manner: “... three graduates particularly caught his fancy. One of them was a petite brunette. Vachel was intrigued with her name and brilliant coloring and slightly slanting black eyes. At times he grew more personal and demonstrative than merely treating her as if she were a figurine on an oriental vase. Though pleased by his attentions, she was somewhat disconcerted by his candid admiration, having never experienced the poetic approach to love making. Her name was Golden Ruby. The Hearn sisters were the other two graduates. Lizzie Belle was tall and slender and quiet. She had a quantity of curly red-gold hair. Vachel thought her beautiful like a Pre-Raphaelite model. When he went to call on her he said little but sat gazing at her with his head thrown back and his eyes half-closed as if he were contemplating the Blessed Damozel herself... Lula, the other sister, he admired in a different way. He liked her frank, comradely manner and her intelligent, responsive conversation. He dubbed the three the Girl with the Golden Name, the Girl with the Golden Hair and the Girl with the Golden Heart” (53-54).

Cousin South also quotes a corresponding reminiscences of another Excelsior graduate, Ermina Jett Darnell: “He [Vachel] was the fulfillment of all our dreams—a real, live poet! We followed him around and hung on his words. From the shelf he selected the poems of Sidney Lanier and I shall always remember how he read the lines to a mockingbird—‘yon trim Shakespeare on the tree.’ Many years later I read an interview in which he said that poetry should be read aloud—and well I knew why. But we were not always in the clouds. Throughout the golden hours, whenever he would be sitting on a couch with the girls surrounding him, he had a funny, delightful way of suddenly grasping the hand of one of the envied girls beside him, giving it a quick squeeze, then flinging it away exclaiming indignantly, ‘Let go my hand!’” (53-54). After traveling well over a thousand miles, from New York City to Florida and then on to Kentucky, Uncle Boy had arrived in paradise, where he was entertained by the blessed houri, just as legends promise.

Impressed with his success in private audiences, Aunt Eudora invited her nephew to give a public performance of The Tree of Laughing Bells at the Excelsior commencement. “After the sweet girl graduates had essayed their views of life in carefully worded phrase and paragraph,” cousin Eudora South recalls, “Vachel recited his poem to the assemblage... How vividly the scene comes back—the young poet on the platform, his head thrown back, his eyes half-closed, chanting the mystic lines of one in search of beauty who flew to the uttermost parts of the earth on the wings of the morning. Near him sat my mother her eyes glowing with delight; before him the friendly audience listened intently, for the moment forgetful of the work-a-day world; while in at the windows gazed Dicie and her dusky brood carried away by the rhythmic tide of his
verse” (56). The “young poet” read, “not in his beggar’s outfit, but in borrowed clothes, . . . a good brown suit” donated by yet another cousin, Nicholas Lindsay South. And, cousin Eudora avers, he wore “his borrowed plumage with as little self-consciousness as he had his beggar’s garb” (63). Her sentimental conclusion, however, echoes the exaggerated pity that is evident in documents from Vachel’s later years (such as the 1927 letter to Coblin cited above): “So it was that Vachel found his first appreciative public audience in the land of his fathers, Kentucky” (56). Perhaps one of the first, but obviously not the first.

“On the last morning of his visit,” according to cousin Eudora, Vachel “presented each member of the family with a copy of The Tree of Laughing Bells, inscribed with an appropriate farewell.” Most were personal comments, but “inside of the back cover of [her] booklet was a little poem of six verses, called ‘The Flower of Mending.’ It was illustrated with a pen-and-ink sketch of a fanciful blossom which obviously came out of the ink-pot first in true Lindsay fashion as the opening verse indicates” (see Poetry 315-316). With understandable pride, Eudora also quotes a portion of a 1918 letter addressed to her from her troubadour cousin: “Do you know that everywhere I go I am asked to recite ‘The Flower of Mending,’ though I do not do it, because it is too gentle for large audiences. You were surely a flower of healing to me and I know you have helped many a soul since” (58-59).

On or before June 4, 1906, Vachel had moved on to his Grandmother Frazee’s farm, near Orange, Indiana, about nine miles east of Rushville (twelve miles west of Connersville). In his “January 19, 1903” notebook, the wanderer continued to speculate on the nature of art and poetry, justifying the technique used in the drawings of the “Soul of a Spider” and the “Soul of a Butterfly” (see Poetry 838). “Let me make a specialty of this type of illustrating, since the figure is beyond me,” he admitted: “I will never have time to acquire it so well.” Accordingly, he decided once again to try the gowned or heavily draped figure, in the manner of earlier works that he had referred to as his “Fairy Fashionplates.” This time he would compose verses to “draw attention to the garment” in each plate. He included several crude examples, all mercifully discarded: “I am the fairy
of Whimsical magic—the gown I wear is spun / From the sighs of love-worn dragon flies,” etc. [Note 8]

On June 17, still in Indiana, he recorded more thoughts on his “Soul” pictures: “Why not evolve the final pictures of the abstract and invisible things? Not by obscure symbolism, but by methods as direct and obvious as the soul of the Spider [Poetry 49], and the soul of the Butterfly [Poetry 48]. Let them set the pace for many more. . . . Let us, for discipline’s sake, avoid the meaningless in decoration. Now that we have begun to think, let every thought be as well carved as a rose petal, and as able to be pictured. Let us evolve a spiritual Hieroglyphics, a heavenly sign language, let the fibre^ of every dreaming picture be thought, thought, thought, till meaningless beauty be driven from the earth. Every heavenly thought has an earthly association or analogy; it should refer by suggestion, back to something seen before—Greed should have a clutch to it, generosity should be lavish as a blowing rose, let it not be greed—but the soul of the greedy cut-worm, it should not be generosity, but the soul of the generous rose. It should be as close to pictures as pure decoration desires to get. The Soul of the Proud Bumblebee could come only after a considerable study of that animal, yet it should be free from all pictorial restraints. . . . I have sufficient resources as a designer to carry out these. And the luxury of experiment needs a curb, it must not be an eternal habit going no further. I must put more order into the designs, more Greek order, and I must reject even the borders, that do not carry some weight of significance. It is well enough for other men’s designs to be meaningless, but mine must be the servants of thought, of the thinking imagination. If the verses have borders, they should signify the verse-meaning” (“January 19, 1903”).

He had been on the road for more than three months, adventuring, begging for board and bread, pondering essays and poetry, reciting The Tree of Laughing Bells, battling rednecks and fleas. Now, once again, he was an artist, preparing to visit the great art museums of Europe. Not an art for art’s sake artist, however: no “meaningless beauty” for this artist. The fiber of any and all dreaming pictures in this artist’s repertoire must be “thought, thought, thought.”

Saturday morning at 10:00, June 23, Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay, with son Vachel and daughter Joy, sailed from Philadelphia for Liverpool on the S.S. Merion, arriving July 5. (See the end of this chapter for the “List of Passengers.”) From Liverpool, they traveled by rail southeast across England to Harwich, with stops at Lincoln, Ely, and Cambridge. On July 8, they departed Harwich for mainland Europe, visiting the Hague (July 8-10), Amsterdam (11-13), Hannover (14-16), Dresden (17-19), Nürnberg (20-22), Würzburg (23-24), Frankfurt am Main (25-26), Mainz (27-28), Cologne (29-30), Aix-la-Chapelle [Aachen] (31), Brussels (August 1-3), Antwerp (4-6), and Paris (7-13). On August 14, they returned to England, staying the 15th through the 26th in London and the 27th and part of the 28th at Oxford. On August 29, the party left Liverpool on the S.S. Haverford (American Line), returning to Philadelphia on September 9. Five years after the fact, Vachel summarized his whirlwind trip for biographer Peter Clark Macfarlane in one succinct sentence: “I examined 20 museums of art thoroughly” (Macfarlane). [Note 9]

He was not exaggerating. Two notebooks, filled with reflections, testify both to the number of museums visited and to the thoroughness of examination. The rest of the
family may have been on vacation, but the Lindsay son was on a business trip, reviewing past art study and preparing future art lectures. In Amsterdam he authored a detailed treatise on Rembrandt, focusing, in particular, on traits that had personal appeal: “He [Rembrandt] has reestablished the word magician, an honorable title, a worthy title, a glorious crown. Consider the Presentation in the Temple. There is more mystery in that little frame than in all of Macbeth or the Tempest. There is gentleness, and nothing sinister, neither gorgon nor hydra, such as Poe would have used, for he could make no mystery without terror.” In Dresden Vachel added a long essay on the internationality of art, in Nürnberg he commented on wood carving, and so on. Interspersed throughout both notebooks are comments on tramping, on art classes, and on interacting with parents, especially on interacting with parents who treat a grown son as if he were still a little boy.

The overwhelming theme in Vachel’s European notebooks, though, is the value of art, and the relation of art to visions and other religious experiences. We have observed how he advised Susan Wilcox that he had had “a great struggle” with himself on “the question of which one had the best right to [his] heart of hearts^ devotion—Art or letters” (Lindsay Home—cf. Chénetier 11). We have also observed how the tramping notebook recounting experiences from Asheville to Frankfort emphasizes the author’s desire to sharpen his thinking. In Europe, however, Vachel was intent on artistic vision, not on “letters.” In his words: “There is more life than Truth in this book—my eyes have seen so many clean cut pictures in the air—how have I had time to think?”

He also wrote extensively on the relation of vision to religion, but he separated himself from militant extremists, on the one hand, and creators of cerebral systems, on the other. The following is representative, although the author seems a little confused as to nationalities: “If I had been born among Mohammedans, who are unscientific, I would have believed myself called to shed blood for my visions and to have died fighting. One more forgotten fanatic would have stained the burning sands . . . if born among German philosophers, and endowed with power of thought rather than vision, I might have made a scholar’s religon^ like Comte [!] or Nietzsche. But I scarcely think one thought a year, and visions come in cataracts. . . . With these visions burning heart and conscience away, I might, in some ignorant stratum of Society have built a better city than Salt Lake or Zion City. . . . But I am fortunately free . . . having no genius of leadership.”

Typically, Vachel’s conclusion is not a conclusion. A few days after asserting that he had “no genius of leadership,” he restated his desire to be the father of a new religion:

But whether I had been born in Islam or China, I would have made some new religon^ . It is inevitable with me.

By knowing artists I have learned how the making of a religon^ or of a picture have much in common, though they are not the same.

Otherwise I would have the conceit to imagine that mine is the only true religon^ just as some artists have fancied theirs was the only true art. But there are many races, there are many languages, there are many architectures . . . , yet born under the creating hands of man, inspired and divine. There are many pictures—and many religons^. 
“Every artist sees pictures in the air,” he added in Paris (August 1): “The only differences are—mine seem to be on a religious^, a ritualistic, a prophetic import—and the sense of their religious^ life is as clear as the sense of their pictorial life.”

The notebooks also manifest the author’s pride in his recent walking trip, what he referred to as his “search” for Aladdin’s lamp, “which is to say Supreme Beauty, and Supreme Wisdom, and the essence of all magic.” In early 1905, as we have seen, he returned to New York with the manuscript copy of Aladdin’s Lamp, thinking that the time of preparation was over. The great art of Europe, however, brought home renewed realization of inadequacy; and an inspired (rather than an intimidated) Lindsay son proclaimed his new determination: “I can never draw well, but some of my walking tours should be devoted to drawing that I may have full command of my resources in 1919, if I desire to do so more than the souls of butterflies.” On another day, he entered an addendum: “a picture drawing expedition . . . to put my experience as directly into pictures as the time before in words, and to give the farmers all the pictures but my best.”

Although in Europe Vachel emphasized the need to improve his artistic skills, he did not entirely forget the desire to sharpen his thinking abilities: “The improvement in my style is considerable, since I took my walk south. One more three months of that sort would give me a working grip on prose.” He had no illusion that the task would be easy: “Brevity and sharp edges, and powers of insight are still beyond. But they are nearer than real powers of thought. Real power to think will be the longest coming.” Meanwhile, he expressed awareness of potential pitfalls in his enterprise: “The first danger of the new art is chaos from struggling too hard for freedom . . . the second danger is weariness from too much surprise.” As usual, he refused to abandon hopefulness: “Let us be prophets of Beauty, in this our Nation, half begun, and still to grow. We see by comparison with Europe that nothing yet is fixed in America, all, all is yet possible for our land. Let us take heart with great courage.”

With optimism and with courage, the would-be prophet of beauty began more and more to look forward to his imminent fall lecture series. The YMCA classes would offer an exciting opportunity to formulate and communicate his evolving insights. In addition, he was confident that he “ought to be a higher class lecturer this year than last.” And he even went so far as to consider that he “possibly should dress for the part.” A few days later, he added: “I must wear out my dress-suit this winter making speeches. . . . I must make my classes great events.” From a practical and personal perspective, he also guessed that one course at the YMCA and a second at the Metropolitan Museum would enable him to get by on “a little dribble of money from home, say two dollars a week.”

From a less practical perspective, he resolved: “Let me consult Professor Hamlin (?) [Vachel was uncertain of the name] on getting myself in training for a permanent professorship or in some way connected with the Columbia Art Department, if Powlison fails. Let me be really chesty with the Professor, and if he fails me, let me lay siege to the largest educational institutions in New York, whatever they may be. Let me set up for a John C. Van Dyke at least. This U.S. needs to be taught Beauty, and from no small rostrum. I have something for the men of learning, for the men holding fellowships.”

In accord with his intent to teach “Beauty” to the United States, Vachel carried with him James Bryce’s The American Commonwealth (1888 edition—two volumes). He was an avid reader, as his parents before him; and it was natural to turn to books during
long ocean voyages. Bryce’s well-known work, though, was meant to serve as something more than intellectual diversion. Would-be Professor Lindsay wanted to learn as much as possible about his chosen student body, namely, the American people. Indeed, the Commonwealth soon captivated its reader, and several notebook reflections illustrate how time spent with Bryce led to insights that would play important roles in Vachel’s plans and thoughts over the next few years, especially in the essays that he penned for the first Village Magazine (1910). America must be taught “Beauty” because the knowledge of art and the appreciation of art history are indices to true greatness:

America must be magnificent, she has no other chance. She will be magnificent, as a merely ostentatious gaudy failure, according to the sort of interest her people take in the matter. She cannot remain indifferent. She must choose between gold and gilt. . . .

When shall the American eagle scream, on the Fourth, on the day after election, on the triumph of an honest man? But when a great art man does a great work does she scream? She hesitates, she fears she will scream in the wrong place. The people do not care, and the critics are not heard. . . .

We do the same things from New York to San Francisco, and wait to do them all at once. A man that does not move us all moves no one. It is the result of the mechanical unity of the nation: the railroad, telegraph, newspaper, public school, and political uniformity. The same set of magazines on every Carnegie library table. Hearst papers, from San Francisco to Boston. The same six best selling books read by the gum chewing typewriter girls from the Philippines to the offices of Philadelphia. The two or three political parties writing platforms which shall induce the follower to vote the straight ticket, and make the mugwump impossible. Every advertiser in the land plays upon this principle that the American people do not move unless they move all at once. And indeed by a thousand interwoven and all embracing systems is the American citizen being involved. But what are the chances for the still small voice of art, among the megaphones and the automobiles? Here is a chance to plead for the voice of the minority, for the voice of the masters.

The battle line had been drawn, but further preparation was needed if the war were to be won. On July 26, 1906, in Frankfurt am Main, Vachel offered yet another resolution-prophecy concerning his future: “Five years from this date I should be on my way. From now till then I should be gathering information on the right points of view, and doing all the preliminary study. . . . My tours in the spring and summer should be gathering the right standpoints for foreign observations, and maturing my eye as a traveler. I should be able to carry on all the functions of life and travel at the same time. I should be able to write verses, draw, and record progress. With my decorative poems I should be able to make pictures of architecture. But whatever the next five years makes me that I should be able to go all around the world. And I should choose such a trip that I should be able to be fully myself, every inch of it.”

Curiously, then, Vachel’s European notebooks are a mixture of his felt need for further preparation, on the one hand, and his insistence on a wealth of past experience, on the other. At times, he viewed his spring tramping adventure as the highlight of his life to date: “That was living for the first time. It seems the beginning of wisdom to me, the first time I have really revered and followed the divine.” At other times, he readily admitted the need for improvement: “In taking my trip South I lived up to portions of Aladdin’s
lamp. I should live up to all of it before I write at all.” And, contrary to his proclamation of vast experience, he confessed, at least in his notebook, that he must seek additional knowledge: “I should know Mormons and Zionites, and Mohammedans and Buddhists. I should know missionaries in every land.”

It is one thing for a young man to admit to himself that he lacks experience; it is quite another thing for him to hear the same thoughts expressed by his parents. “There in the galleries of western Europe—England, Holland, Belgium, and France,” biographer Trombly remarks, Vachel “added to his art-lore and astonished his family with all that American Museums had taught him” (30). Trombly’s statement is based on his subject’s own, _ex post facto_ appraisal, and Vachel’s notebooks indeed support the statement. These same books, however, also echo Trombly’s claim that there was a disquieting discrepancy between the Lindsay son’s perception of himself as a mature teacher/artist and his parents’ perception of him as a mere boy. “In Europe, as in his own land,” Eleanor Ruggles affirms, “there were two Vachel Lindsays. By day there was the son on leading strings, member of a family quartet. But after night fell there was the dreamer and it was he who asked, then answered in the privacy of his hotel room and the secrecy of his diary-kingdom: ‘What do you poor little people mean when you say “Go get experience”? I tell you I was Solomon, the son of David, king in Jerusalem, and the Queen of Sheba came walking to me upon the crystal floor’” (120). Avuncular Vachel was alive and well: he was Solomon on this journey, at least in his notebooks. But, as we have seen, boy Vachel surfaced in Asheville, North Carolina; and boy Vachel made a dash for the comforts of relatives and home. Just as Ruggles states, “there were two Vachel Lindsays.” He was, in Europe and in America, uncle and boy.

That there is a difference between one’s public and one’s private person is hardly an earth-shaking revelation, except that the difference seems especially intense anytime an offspring who has enjoyed self-sufficiency is forced once again to interact with strong-willed parents. In Europe, there was Vachel the dutiful son, attempting to obey the fourth commandment to honor father and mother. However, there was also Vachel the 26-year-old missionary-artist, a man with a new belief in his maturity and in his ability to create a new God and a new art Millennium, a man who had asserted his independence and his beliefs in a daring, angelic tramp, to use his metaphor, out among the Southern stars. Predictably, awareness of maturity increased while awareness of duty decreased, both in proportion to the length of time the family was together. After six long weeks, Vachel the man was exasperated by parental insinuations about his youthfulness and inexperience. From past encounters, though, he knew his parents would not change, and so he vented his frustrations in his notebooks rather than risk kindling another family feud. The passage that Ruggles cites is indicative of Vachel’s growing irritation, but she quotes only the opening lines. Here is the entire entry:

What do you poor little people mean when you say, “Go get experience”? I tell you I was Solomon, the son of David, king in Jerusalem; and the Queen of Sheba came walking to me upon the crystal floor. What do you lovers mean by saying, “Go gather kisses”? I have written the Song of Songs, read it and be instructed children. What do you traders mean when you say, “Learn to buy and sell, and get gain”? I tell you it
was I who burned the bonds of Charles V. What do you mean when you say, “Put on your goodly apparel”? I tell you I was Sir Launcelot, and wore the stateliest plumes of all; I tell you I was Louis XIV, and I was the king of France, and the tailor was my prime minister. Do you say, “Go forth and do battle”—I tell you I was Tamerlane, I have been Attila. If you say make a religion, preach the dreams and visions, I say I was Mahomet, and other dreams and visions beset me, and I drew the sword, and what did it profit: A little civilization, a little architecture; but the Sahara is still the Sahara. Do you say, “Foolish boy, live while your blood is young, get children, and let them do you honor”; I say I was Confucius, and set in order the precepts of Obedience, and the thousandth generation of my sons burn incense at my tomb, and what doth it profit?

With dry humor, Vachel went so far as to scorn his parents’ supposed experience, denying that their feelings were unique and indicating, at the same time, that he was wiser than they: “Also I knew the bitterness of ungrateful children, and their gratitude or their ingratitude have become shadows of the past.”

In the same context, the Lindsay son pointed to his vagabond journey as a manifestation of maturity and asserted that, mentally at least, he had made many such journeys. Ironically, he then undercut his own argument, suggesting to himself that he must make additional tramps, that he must, in his words, “Go get experience”:

Nay, nay, the dust of the road shall make clay on my sweating face, and the eternal road shall lead me on, till I have traveled every foot of my ancient dwelling places, and gathered such wisdom as is there distilled from a thousand memories. Let me gather the last beauty and the highest this whole earth can give. I have the blood of youth, but I shall spend it in accordance with my heart, which beat with temperate age when Homer sang in our village the song of Troy. And I wandered with him. And I met Dante in his wanderings, and young Milton came to me; and I was the aged Galileo, and we spoke of the stars together. Many times I have journeyed—this last journey I made in search of Aladdin’s lamp, which is to say Supreme Beauty, and Supreme Wisdom, and the essence of all magic.

In past years, he had learned a great deal, enough so that he believed he was ready to publish and teach. Understandably, then, he resented any implications, especially from his parents, that he was an inexperienced boy. Nonetheless, the message that Vachel learned in Europe this summer was finally undeniable, even in private, even to himself: his years of preparation had not yet ended.

Dr. Lindsay’s son also remained sensitive to the fact that he had felt compelled to “borrow” money, and at first he sternly resolved against any relapse: “Pride requires that my next trip be absolutely independent, financially.” As an afterthought, he did soften his stance and downplayed any importance that money may claim: “It is not a virtue to do without money, but it is commendable to carry through one’s plans, though penniless. Lack of funds should not stop men a day. It is after all those who do things, and not those who might have done, who count. We cannot afford to wait for money.” As the European journey continued, Vachel’s afterthoughts also continued. Vagabondage meant independence from parental bondage, and in spite of (or because of) the fact that his parents disapproved, he resolved to prepare himself mentally as well as physically for
future tramps: “The next time I should write verses, even if they are not polished. They should be as raw material to be polished at leisure. I fear me I will not be able to turn the last note-books into verse—the moods are gone.”

By the time the family had reached Paris, Vachel had experienced enough togetherness. Whatever else the “moods” of the road were, they were the key, he felt, to artistic creativity—and they were possible only in private. Several weeks of family interaction had transformed the pains of loneliness into the virtues of solitude: “It is worth while to be alone. It is worth while to mix with one’s fellows. It is worth while to be one’s self on the road, and to study to be that. In a little chapel in the Louvre this morning these things come to me: One cannot be completely one’s self unless alone. There are a thousand gracious nerve filaments that only expand themselves and unroll in solitude; in the garden of the soul there are whole anemones of sensitive plants that contact with another personality, however delicate, will cause to fade out. The life that is lived in this solitude, this beautiful life is reached in our best pictures and verses, and this in the end shared with others who take the book and the picture to their solitude, and live it over again. No matter how we strive, no matter how we struggle, we cannot be sweet spirited, nor mightily minded, nor high dreaming among our kind, as alone. Only orators, or actors, or great singers have this privilege. It’s not given to the artists and the poets.”

Balance is what he sought. He had no intention of turning himself into a Shelleyan “sensitive plant . . . there is a great seasoning of the soul that comes by mixing with men; and these things—solitude and society—are contrasted abruptly and splendidly in travel, in meditating along the lonely road, or from the mountain top, and in mingling with the family by the hearth at the close of the day.” Mingling with a family was fine, as long as it did not mean six weeks of mingling with one’s own family. Six weeks with an impatient father may incline anyone to prefer solitude to society:

The moods of poetry are for the most part the moods of solitude. Let us not rebel because we cannot carry them into every day, we cannot afford to be mooning, brooding creatures in the presence of our fellow men. I cannot resist thinking how inevitably different this European trip would have been had I gone it alone, on funds of my own sweating, or alone at any rate. How many more of the ghosts of history would have risen, how many past nations would have stirred in their graves. As it is when I reflect hereafter in solitude upon these scenes it may be the ghosts will come then. And I almost saw one at the tomb of Napoleon, though my father was there, and an impatient commandant ordering us out, and a restless group of sightseers. But to have done it right I should have come to Europe alone; I should have spent all day in solitude before I entered, and there should have been no one else there. And the rest of the day I should have been alone, only remembering. Why, I gathered more dreams and visions from the log cabin of Andrew Johnson, tailor at Greenville, than from this thundering conqueror. But I feel sure that some day alone with the tomb of Grant or Lincoln, as in the East, the grave of some Tamerlane, this tomb of the emperor will come to me with grace and power. In some quiet corner of a Colorado desert, as a procession of the world passes before me in the air of the desert shall I not then think the keystone thought of my youth, and write the ripe soul word that shall be sown for the second harvest of my middle age?
Years later, Vachel characterized his father as, “A man with a most restless energy, great self denial—absolutely preoccupied with his family and his work, and believing in hard work, both in theory and practice—though he goes at his hard work with a great deal of fidget and slambang—and has not much patience with a job that requires any kind of delicate pains taking. ‘Get it through with’ is his one thought—be it visiting Nuremberg—or driving out at midnight to the sick, over a frozen road” (Chénetier 117). In Paris, anyway, in August 1906, Dr. Lindsay’s son had reached his saturation point as regards paternal “fidget and slambang.”

The beauty of the Louvre and its art accentuated Vachel’s emotions. He was in no mood to be hurried: “In the presence of Venus of Milo I have gleaned eternal beauty, the highest sort, much beyond what we usually feel even with our favorite poem or picture. And I have felt this eternal beauty in the pathway of bronzes alternating with golden sarcophagi, marble, yellow with time; I have felt it in this avenue that leads up stairs to the Winged Victory; and I have felt it from Titan’s Entombment in the great Rubens’ room. This has been the highest point of Europe to me, and the room of the Italian Primitives has had a deal to do with the result.” Venus and the Louvre, in fact, inspired several essays and, apparently, renewed Vachel’s desire to create a new religion, a new world: “The world I know will not be the real world but from the dust of all the pathways I have trod shall be shaped beside me a basket of clay, and from that clay I shall make a little earth, my earth, as I have seen it; and then it shall be my Eve, for she shall bear my great thoughts, my Cain and Abel.”

Once created, the new religion would have to be delivered to others: “Let me gird myself for my roadside priesthood, the teacher of the mysteries of beauty in the church of Beauty. He who in his heart of hearts reveres his functions as a teacher needs little other life. Let him attain to cleanness of mind and patience, and let him live the dignity of his mind, and there will be no dignity lacking. The life of a teacher need never turn humilities into humiliations—all things necessary to his office are of inherent dignity. I have lived so many lives let me spend all this body on this one, and dissipate my energy on nothing that is meaningless, and whether I eat or refrain from eating, let it be in the glory of the God of Beauty.” To preach, though, he observed in the privacy of his notebook, he would need additional experience. What he knew at the present time was little more than what a child might know: “As to the history of art I am determined to know so much that what I know now is a child’s knowledge.” He just did not want to hear any references to “child’s knowledge” from his parents.

London offered the YMCA lecturer an important opportunity to expand his knowledge of art history. Since his days at the Chicago Art Institute, he confessed to Nellie Vieira in 1909, he had been enthralled with “the Papyrus of Ani, Book of the Dead. It is perfectly wonderful. . . . It is all in colors . . . it is a Revelation of Egypt.” To his astonishment and great joy, he found that the “principal scenes” of the book had been enlarged “to about twelve feet high and make an immense frieze all around the walls of the Splendid Egyptian Rooms of the British Museum. . . . I will never forget the day I entered that room,” Vachel enthused to Vieira: “It was one of the glories of my life” (Fowler 129). Indeed, several late entries in the European notebooks confirm Vachel’s enthusiasm for Egypt and things Egyptian, an enthusiasm that would continue to influence his work but that was especially significant during the early 1920s.
Looking upon the Egyptian remains it comes to me with the force of an avalanche that Egypt every hour of her life was one vast ritual. Was not her priesthood dominant for thousands of years, were they not magicians ruling mystery? What must have been every day and every hour in this land, when every appointment of a life was ordered and formulated with the things that make mystery, from the giant pylons at the temple gates to the pyramids, from the pyramids to worship of the gods of every day? The perpendiculars and horizontals of mystery are with them all, the flat gold surfaces, the solemn head-dresses. And consider what the processions must have been, the ceremonies every hour of the day, the teaching of the ritual after death was so enthralling! What must have been the experience of life? If the soul had to struggle so far amid terrors to meet Osiris, how must it have yearned pale with bitter ecstasy, or been mesmerized with fear before the impenetrable mysteries of the priestly establishment. When the priest walked abroad, how much more he must have carried of terror and power than that Belgian priest I saw pass in Antwerp with all the people kneeling because he bore the Host to the dying. What intricate reactions must have been between god and god, fear and fear, shame and shame, grandeur and grandeur in a civilization all magnificent superstition! What little room for the things of Greece and Rome.

“The trappings” of Catholicism, Vachel mused, were “simple compared to the vast array of trappings Egypt has left, the vast range of the material of superstition. How overpowering then must have been the thing based upon these sphynxes, these mummied cattle, these canopic jars, these multitudes of impassive, mummified kings.”

The British Museum’s Egyptian rooms provided the grand finale for Vachel’s European tour, as well as the grand finale for his desire to be the father of a new God and a new religion. In his notebook, he penned his own summation: “Into the Egyptian drawings one can put all the plea for magic and the soul of Poe. Into the Greek and Roman the whole spirit of Keats and Swinburne. Into the medieval there is to be gathered in the Paulist Fathers Church. Into the Renaissance the souls of angels—into the East the soul of Buddha—into the Saracenic the sharp sword of Mahomet, then of Omar. And into modern art I must choose one man and paint the whole period his color, that these things may be massed.” That “one man,” finally, became Vachel’s new God: “Immanuel,” the singing “Christ-Apollo.

Actually, when he was in Paris, Vachel speculated on how he could unite the two cultural backgrounds that seemed to dominate his life: the Hebrew and the Greek. “There is much to be enjoyed in Greek sculpture,” he wrote in his notebook, “set by Immanuel Apollo with hair and harp strings of gold which outshone the pale Galilean in comeliness; and when we shall see him there is no beauty that we should desire. Yet the new Immanuel shall not be outshone by him. Immanuel shall inherit that glory and transcend it. I shall carve me an idol called Immanuel, of ivory and gold, and it shall be as much an idol as the face of eternity; yet it shall outshine any idol yet made, a graven image of my holiest dream. Yet it is a simple idea, and will not take many words to infuse it into the whole book. And it is such a grand, constant, oversweeping idea, that it will keep my soul burning like an eternal lamp.”
The search for Aladdin’s lamp had nearly ended: the long sought-after had finally been found. Aladdin’s lamp burned within Aladdin’s soul. But before he could carve his “idol . . . of ivory and gold” or even try to express his “simple idea” in a few words, Vachel’s soul-lamp awakened him one night with a vision of his new God, fully formed, a divine genie sprung from a divine source. All he had to do was to dramatize what he envisioned. Ironically, in spite of claims concerning solitude and art, the vision occurred in a tiny stateroom onboard the S.S. *Haverford*, in the company of his father. The time was approximately 2:00 a.m., on the night of September 4-5, 1906, shortly before the Haverford docked in Philadelphia. The story was told many times, but here is the version Vachel recorded in his notebook the very next morning:

Last night I saw Immanuel singing in the New Heaven, with the church, his bride, beside him, and his friends gathered round, in a bright grassy place. And now I remember that at first Immanuel was singing almost alone, and the bride was a later half-waking thought. The real dream was Immanuel singing wonderfully, as became a son of David. He was almost as simple a shepherd as David, and his robe was Angelico red.

But it was the strain of his song that was happiness—how can I write the grey memory of that song? His lips scarcely sang at all, it was his harp that sang. And some one listening behind me said—“it is Immanuel.” That was the word that came with the dream.

As to the half-waking thought that came after—I said “This must happen from within the doorless walls of the New Heaven, in a place so far within the bright walls will not overcome. Let me write the song of Immanuel—his happiness when all things have passed away, and all things are become new, and he can breathe with a child’s heart the new native songs of Heaven—not the grand new song, but the tender memory of the grand new song.

“For in the singing he was thinking over all things that had come to pass. His head was bowed over his harp, with thought as he sang, and a part of the song was thought.”

Vachel did, of course, “write the song of Immanuel,” first entitling the poem, “The Day after the Millenium^,” finally changing it to “I Heard Immanuel Singing” or simply “Immanuel” (*Poetry* 66-68). For years he referred to both the vision and the resulting poem as “in many ways the most intense and personal experience of my writing life” (Chénetier 85). When he finally published the work as the climactic closing poem of *The Tramp’s Excuse* (1909), he included the details of its inception: “In September, nineteen hundred and six, on the boat returning from Europe, about two o’clock in the morning I was awakened by the overwhelming vision of Christ as a Shepherd, singing on a hill. The first three stanzas of the poem, ‘I Heard Immanuel Singing,’ were half-formed in my mind before I awoke, and I said aloud, ‘I have found my God.’ I felt at the time that this experience had more right to authority over me than any previous picture in the air. It came with terrible power. It came after years of struggle between the Hebraism and Hellenism in my universe, and set that struggle forever at rest. It shows how after Christ sets up the Moral Order he sings a requiem for all the beauty destroyed by the Judgment Day. Then he begins to live the pure Art Life” (*Poetry* 927).
The “Virgin” seemingly had answered Vachel’s prayer. The man who would be the father of gods gave spiritual birth to what he called “the most treasured metaphor of my life,” the “faith . . . that the day after the Millennium, Immanuel will sing” (Poetry 929). Interestingly, the singing Christ-Apollo is a reflection of his creator’s own image or at least the reflection of an image to which his creator aspired. Like many other gods and many other religions, the divine being and the human worshipper manifest very similar traits and characteristics. The ancient Hebrews had a simple explanation: God created man in His own image. In an ocean-liner stateroom, Uncle Boy thrilled with a second possibility: he fathered a God in his own image, inadvertently exposing the ultimate conundrum, the divine chicken-and-egg riddle, not likely ever to be answered to everyone’s satisfaction. Who created whom? Coincidentally, to close on an earthly note, when Vachel fathered his God, he was not alone. He was sharing a tiny stateroom with another being, another father, a biological father, a father skilled in obstetrics.

Notes for Chapter Eighteen

[Note 1] German magazine Simplicissimus began publishing in April 1896, Albert Langen publisher. It is named after the protagonist in Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen’s picaresque novel Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch (1668), translated as The Adventures of a Simpleton. A satirical magazine, Simplicissimus did depict “tub-like peasants,” stiff Prussian officers, etc., but also published serious authors such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Thomas Mann. The cover of many issues was the artwork of German cartoonist Thomas Theodor Heine, one of Vachel’s many studies when he was planning to be a Christian cartoonist.

[Note 2] Vachel was well aware of the literary and artistic relationships associated with women, roses, religion, and western culture. See, for example, “The History of the Rose and Lotus Rhyme,” published in A Letter about My Four Programmes for Committees in Correspondence (Poetry 932) and “Adventures While Preaching Hieroglyphic Sermons” (Poetry 971-972). In the latter citation, Vachel emphasizes that he has thought about roses “from the beginning of time . . . . My first song about them is ‘The Canticle of the Rose of Tennessee,’ written after my first begging trip. See the story, ‘Lady Iron-Heels’ in A Handy Guide for Beggars” (Poetry 972). The “Canticle of the Rose” comprises the final pages of “Lady-Iron Heels” and thus the final pages of the first half of A Handy Guide (see pp. 109-110). Some five years after his 1906 tramp, Vachel wrote his poem “With a Rose, to Brunhilde” (Poetry 270-271) and inserted the poem as an afterthought prologue to “Lady Iron-Heels.”

[Note 3] For pictures of President Andrew Johnson’s home and grave site, see the National Park Service website at: http://www.nps.gov/anjo/ One of biographer Edgar Lee Masters’ more egregious errors is his claim that Vachel visited the grave of Andrew Jackson in Greeneville. Masters then proffers a pejorative comment based on his error: “Lindsay had been educated on the calumnious histories written to degrade and erase from favorable memory all the men who had striven against the capitalism which the Civil War and its justifications created” (159). Finally, in later years, Vachel claimed to have learned about Governor Bob Taylor somewhere near Greeneville: see Poetry 505.

[Note 4] In Masters’ biography, nearly every quotation of any length contains errors, some more misleading than others. In this passage concerning Vachel’s search for “the
immortal everlasting woman.” Masters changes the word “blush” to the word “flesh,” thus making Vachel’s insight next to meaningless.

[Note 5] While most people associate fairy tales with old world authors, such as the brothers Grimm (Grimm’s Fairy Tales, 1812), Vachel is not content merely with stories from old Europe. H[enry] R[owe] Schoolcraft (1793-1864) was an American geologist, Indian agent, and Indian ethnologist. Vachel was familiar with Schoolcraft’s The Myth of Hiawatha, and Other Oral Legends, Mythologic and Allegoric, of the North American Indians (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott & Co., 1856, a book dedicated to “Prof. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.” The book is digitized and may be read at Google Books: http://books.google.com

[Note 6] Vachel’s uncertainty as to his day of arrival may explain a comment he made years later in a personal letter to his cousin Ethelind [Cave South] Coblin. After recapping the last legs of his journey along the Daniel Boone trail, he reveals that he spent his last night on the road with Professor J.W. McGarvey, his mother’s “old Bible teacher” and then “walking on next day toward Frankfort” (Chénetier 385). There is no mention of McGarvey in the notebook, and the day of arrival may well have been May 25, not 24.

[Note 7] In the Hiram College Library’s “Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Collection (1897-present),” there are Rand-McNally Atlas maps of Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky, on which Vachel traces his walking tour for John S. Kenyon (“Gifts to Lindsay Collection,” “Professor John S. Kenyon”), likely sometime in 1907. See:

http://library.hiram.edu/Archives/Nicholas%20Vachel%20Lindsay%20Finding%20Aid.htm

[Note 8] The 1898-99 “Catalogue” for the Excelsior Male and Female Collegiate Institute may be viewed on line at the Kentucky Historical Society Digital Collections web page (type Excelsior in the “Search” box):


The Excelsior Institute was a family affair. Mrs. Eudora Lindsay South (1852-1918) served not only as “Principal” but also as teacher, “Especially of Mathematics and Languages.” Her spouse, the Reverend Mr. James Knox “Polk” South (1847-1921) was the “Proprietor,” as well as a Disciples of Christ minister and a retired Confederate cavalry officer. One of Mrs. South’s sisters, Floretta M. South, taught the “Primary Department,” while a second sister, Spicie Belle South, taught “Piano and Voice.” Nicholas Lindsay South, son of Eudora and James and the same age as Vachel, taught “Mandolin and Elocution.” His sister, Eudora Lindsay South, was a student. It is this younger Eudora who is the author of the private publication Cousin Vachel.

From 1880 to 1898, the Institute averaged 3 to 4 graduates per year, some years graduating only 1 or 2. The 1898-99 “Catalogue” lists 35 students, 6 of whom are named “South.” Writing to his cousin Ethelind South Coblin, another daughter of Principal Eudora, Vachel brags about “Aunt Dora”: “Whoever she taught, she taught by hand, one at a time, not by any machine or wholesale process. She kept her hand on them forever, and they knew it. No thundering herds ever poured through her school. The children were instructed one at a time and each had his claim forever” (Chénetier 388). A brief history of the Institute is published in the “Catalogue” (pp. 7-8).
[Note 9] For the truly curious, Kate Lindsay kept highly detailed travel diaries, some of which are housed in Springfield’s Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and others in Harvard’s Schlesinger Library. The 1906 travel notes are in Springfield, as part of the Vachel Lindsay Association collection: “Series I: The Research Material, 1881-1969”; and the “Catharine Blair Collection,” Box 2, Folders 1 and 2.

**Photographs for Chapter 18**

**Excelsior Male and Female Collegiate Institute, Jett, Kentucky**
(Photo from South, *Cousin Vachel.*)

Vachel as a tramp (1906): photo from South, *Cousin Vachel.*
Aunt Eudora Gray Lindsay South (1852-1918)
Principal, Excelsior Collegiate Institute
(photo from South, *Cousin Vachel*)
The passenger list for the steamship “Merion” (June 23, 1906), with notes by Catharine Lindsay, Vachel’s mother. The original is property of the Vachel Lindsay Association.