Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Twenty-Three

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

by

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[This ongoing biography may be read online at www.VachelLindsayHome.org  Choose “Biography” and then “Uncle Boy: A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay.” The biography and the website are sponsored by the Vachel Lindsay Association. Please report any errors to VachelLindsay, our account name at Gmail.]
23. Springfield (1910)

“I need as much attention as a sick rabbit, and must have it . . .”

Although Vachel suspended his unilateral war with Springfield at Christmastime, 1909, the season brought him little peace. Cumnock School of Oratory student Nellie Vieira returned home, but she was unable to leave her academic struggles in Evanston and was far too busy to entertain her increasingly ardent suitor. In fact, there is ample evidence that Uncle Boy was rebuffed, and likely in a firm way. He had determined in early November, as we have seen, to suspend his particular “lessons,” that is, to suspend his avuncular pose. About the same time, he decided that this “girl child” was “the home of my heart—the cottage of a weary heart that prays to rest there a long long time.” To that end, he dashed off a poem, “the first that is your very own,” he advised Nellie: “My soul sleeps in a Castle Black— / The Castle of your unbound hair.” And, as he continued his verse, he revealed how much his pose was changing:

My soul sleeps softly like a child
Of Fairies in a Cloudland car
My soul sleeps softly caring not
Tomorrow looms the Torch of War.

Sorrow may come tomorrow dear—
My soul may never sleep again—
Oh wake me not—but whisper low
“I hold him dearest among men . . . .”

The self-assured uncle was slipping away, and the insecurities of the boy-child were coming to the fore (December 1, 1909, Fowler 311).

Several days after receiving her poem, the “girl child” opened a letter addressed to “My dearest Nellie.” Her admirer had attended an Anti-Saloon League rally in Chicago and was staying in the city a few extra days so that he could preach for the Monroe Street Christian Church (Disciples). “Meanwhile my dear,” he exuded, “I must write you a bit of a love letter, one that says you are the cottage of my heart, where I love and am happy, even though far away from you. There is not the blazing fire on the hearth that some day we will kindle, but there is a little fire, that is indeed comfortable for my lonely self, and rather than see it go out I will pile the wood high and make things roar.” That the suitor’s pose was wavering, though, is obvious from the next line: “But indeed my child, I am hesitating. For you are ripe to be wooed and won, and I am a laggard, only courting you a little, and you have a right to despise me for being slow and cold and cautious and your soul hungers for a whirlwind, whether you know it or not.” [Note 1]

Surely, as this letter drew to a close, Miss Nellie Vieira must have wondered at her lover’s ardor: “I want to woo you just enough to keep the other fellow out. Yet it may be
necessary to preempt your whole soul, and barricade your whole mind against invaders. I don’t
know, I don’t know you well enough. But I love you, you pleasant little mystery, enough to keep
me contented, if you are content, and no other love disquietes you. I kiss your hand, my lady.
Goodnight – Sweetheart, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay” (December 5, 1909, Fowler 313-314).

Perhaps fortunately, the romantic drama over the following two weeks has been lost in
time. What we do know is that the “girl child” returned to Springfield—and to an admirer more
determined than ever to woo and win the cottage of his heart. By December 20, though, the
cottage was closed; and although Nicholas Vachel Lindsay and Nellie Tracy Vieira now lived in
the same city, the postman once again became the sole means of communication. “There are
things one cannot telephone,” the rebuffed boyfriend lamented, “one cannot very well write, and
one cannot even whisper in your ear unless you are disposed to listen. Still, since I cannot see
you tonight, I will pretend you have a listening ear. ‘You are the cottage of my heart, and I am
fond indeed of my cottage, and hope to keep it forever’” (December 20, 1909, Fowler 315).

A short note followed on December 21 and two short notes on December 22, all three reflecting the
disconsolate imagination of a rejected lover (see Fowler 316-318). Then, no correspondence
exists until a short note mailed to Evanston some two weeks after Christmas: “My Dear Nellie:
Somehow—I feel that there will be a letter from you—tomorrow’s mail. There is no news
whatever. Along in June sometime I believe—we meet again. That will be an event.
Meanwhile—we write to each other a bit. . . . You are the cottage of my heart” (January 7, 1910,
Fowler 319).

The cottage remained closed, however, at least as regards Uncle Boy; and the desperate
wooer decided to try another tack, namely, outright flattery. He knew that this “girl child” was
dedicated to being successful, dedicated to performing her “duty.” On January 12, with little or
no response from Evanston, a brief note arrived in Nellie’s mailbox, this note having a
recognizable, avuncular tone: “Now may your earnest young mind grow every day, may every
hour of study bear fruit in soul-development; may you be happy—no matter how hard you work.
You are a brave little soldier, and you are going to win many a fight. You will see many a bright
day of triumph, and when you are defeated you will take it nobly, which is a victory in itself. I
am with you dear, in your hopes and fears. With love, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay” (Fowler 319-
320). The cottage, however, remained closed—until a few days later—and after one more
letter—this letter not entirely unselfish, not entirely flattering, and not entirely avuncular.

“This is Anti Saloon Field Day in Danville,” Uncle Boy informed his reluctant love: “It is
5 o’clock and I have had a fine time so far” (January 16, 1910). He then commented that “this
time next week” he would be on his way to Boston to begin his first professional speaking
junket: a three-week tour of the Northeastern United States sponsored by the Eastern Lyceum
Bureau of Boston. And, with some petulance, he added: “In all probability I will return to
Springfield by the middle of February, to take up this work [Anti-Saloon League lectures] again.
I suppose if I return to Springfield from Boston, you will take it as a sign that you can safely be
more cordial, and write oftener. This trip East, you think, may mean uncertainty to our
friendship. I do not feel that. If I only knew you would answer, I would write to you from
Central Africa—but how can one write to a person never heard from? Who has come between
us? What rumors have disturbed you? Has anyone lied about me? Have I hurt you, without
knowing? I have not for a moment forgotten last Summer, and I have been loyal to our hours
together, in word and deed.” [Note 2]
The emotional floodgates were now open, and the suffering suitor was not able to stem the flow: “I think that you do me a great wrong when you think your lessons more important than letters. It is wrong to think so, and you must whip your naughty conscience till it acts properly. You were certainly my best friend, and I permit no book, study, ambition or worldly interest to be my rival or yours. From the beginning I have given you my best and done my best for you, and you do not give me your best or choicest. I must ‘wait till you have time.’ That is not right. Letters first, lessons afterward. That should be the rule—unless my friendship is a burden. If I am not as valuable to you in your busy hours as your idle, I want to know it. I am good enough for the idle summer, but not for the busy winter!”

Finally, Uncle Boy conveyed exact instructions, revealing both sides of his nature and, somewhat to his dismay, opening the cottage door: “Well child—be bold. Speak out. If you want me to quit, say the word. For the Lords’ sake, do not be polite. I cannot take a hint. You must say it plain—say ‘quit writing,’ if you want me to quit. If you want me to stay with you, you must write early and often, for some woman must take care of me. That is the best way to express it. I have appointed you my custodian, and you refuse to take your job seriously. If you do not like it—resign. If you do like it, work. I need as much attention as a sick rabbit, and must have it. Now do not be cross. Write me a nice motherly [!] letter” (Fowler 320-321).

Unfortunately, for Uncle Boy, Nellie’s “Dear Vachel” response was dispatched the same day she opened the above letter—and from her lover’s perspective the response was not very “nice”—and certainly not “motherly”:

You ask me to be plain. I will. You ask who has come between us. I truthfully answer, no one. If there is any change it is from the inside and not from the outside. You say you have been true to last summer, so have I, as far as it concerns any one^ else.

But I will state my case plainly. You yourself know that you kept warning me of your inconstancy—kept telling me that you didn’t know how long this would last. Could you expect any woman to surrender fully to you under these circumstances? Yet I met you, I think, half way. Tho restraining myself somewhat, I allowed myself to believe that I really loved you. Not as ardently as I felt that my nature could love yet to that extent, that I allowed you more privileges than I ever allowed any friend. I am puzzling my brain yet to know whether you were actually serious or not. Perhaps I was mistaken. But I know one thing, other people were considering matters very serious between us. Perhaps it was this that made me “sit up and take notice.” If things could have gone on as they were I would have been content. But such was not the case it seemed. I knew I had to make a decision. Something, I don’t know what, brought upon me a realization of my duty.

Nellie continued to insist on her dedication to her work, even explaining that “a great deal” had been assigned to her over Christmas vacation, so that “every moment of my time was taken up at home.” She did, however, leave the cottage door ajar: “Now Vachel if you can be content with this sort of a friendship all right. Indeed, I don’t want to give it up. If you can reconcile the facts I have stated and help me at all, I would be even more grateful to you than I am now. Goodness knows I owe a great deal to you already. . . . I certainly wish you success and a safe journey in your trip to Boston. . . . If this explanation is sufficient I suppose I’ll hear from you soon. . . . But please don’t tempt me Vachel. I must keep to the path I’m in” (Fowler 323-324). [Note 3]
And Uncle Boy’s response? A letter with hand-drawn Greek crosses at the top and bottom of the page, with an explanation: “My Dear Little Lady – notice the marks at the top. Every one^ stands for a spiritual cooky – an angel confection – in short a kiss. Now you will be cross.” He included a copy of Kate Douglas Wiggin’s children’s book: Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1903), claiming that “the Wordsworth quotation” on the title page was “why” he sent the book (the quotation is from “She Was a Phantom of Delight,” and the entire edition is available online at Google Books). Perhaps more importantly, Nellie’s admirer likely had in mind chapter “XIV. Mr. Aladdin,” in which Rebecca’s kind and OLDER friend is “Mr. Aladdin,” the “jocose philanthropist,” whose real name is Adam Ladd. “Aladdin,” after all, was one of Vachel’s favorite literary figures. “I only had fifty cents and just had to send you something, and you hadn’t written and I was lost in the dark and you didn’t love me any more^, and were a million miles away and I wanted to show you I was still alive.”

Uncle Boy’s letter then takes a curious turn: “I am glad you are angry. I enjoy it in a beast fashion, just as I would pulling your hair a bit, just to show I loved you and was the boss of the cave; you know I am a cave-man in disguise, and it is one of the axioms of the Stone Age, that if Woman is not occasionally^ vexed, she cannot truly and passionately be smitten with desire. I shall certainly keep pulling your hair till you are willing to cry and be loved like a reasonable woman. My dear, you have frozen me out till I have spiritual rhumatism^ Do not expect to pet me all summer and then neglect me without a howl from the spoiled boy. . . . Tear up everybodys^ letters but mine. Do not write to your folks. I am your folks. Treat them as you have me and me as you have them. . . . The trouble with you miss, is that you think you are busy, when as a matter of fact you are a cold shoulder, you are an Ice house, you are the Arctic and Antarttic^ Circle, you are the Frigid Zone, you are the Polar Bear at the Zoo sitting on the Cake of Ice, you are the Snow-Drift in the Bird’s Nest that was, you are my sweetheart, and you do not care. . . . I tell you child, to be truly serious now, loneliness eats me like a disease, and you have forgot womans^ chief glory is that she is a Consoler. Now stretch out your hand and be kind. With love and Nicholas Vachel Lindsay” (January 18, 1910, Fowler 325-326). Not surprisingly, Uncle Boy’s continuing complaint over the next month will be the lack of letters from Evanston, Illinois. The cottage door seems to have closed again, this time likely with some force.

“Excuse intoxicated penmanship. Am in love. Besides, am writing on the train,” Nellie’s next surviving letter concludes. The author was on his way to Boston, on his way to begin a sponsored lecture tour, his first, arranged by Pitt Parker, Eastern Lyceum Bureau (101 Tremont Street, Boston). “Be brave, be a little soldier, trust the Good Lord. Do not cry. Whatever you do, have a straight look into the face of the world, and do not shrink.” Uncle Boy advised his love. He assured her that he had written to no one but her, and that her picture “travels in my dress suit case^.” He then closed with a curious new theme, one that would be repeated several times while he was writing from the East: “Do not write to me till you can write a proposal of marriage” (January 22, 1910, Fowler 328).

The following afternoon the lecture series opened in the greater Boston area with a presentation entitled “A Peddler of Dreams.” This lecture, along with the well-worn “Heroes of Time” and “Lecture Ten” from the 1908 YMCA series (see Chapter 21, pp. 20-24), comprised
the agenda for Vachel’s 1910 Eastern lectures. In the Macfarlane scrapbook (see “Works Cited”), the speaker pasted a newspaper clipping from a New Bedford, Massachusetts newspaper, with the date “2/5/10” written in his hand: WOMAN’S CLUB / Reading from the Poems of Nicholas V. Lindsey, “A Peddler of Dreams.” The unnamed author reports: “Nicholas Vachel Lindsey, a poet who styles himself ‘A Peddler of Dreams,’ entertained a good-sized gathering of Women’s club members by readings from his poems, at the first Baptist church last evening. . . . Mr. Lindsey said that the first dream he peddled was published in New York in 1905 [“Sweetbriars of the Stairways,” Poetry 28-29]. ‘No one bought it,’ he said, ‘but I had done my duty; I put it on sale’ [the reference to “duty” may make us wonder what or who Vachel may have had in mind at this time!]. Eventually, the lecturer continued, he found that he must choose between taking to the open road and [or] giving up his profession of artist and writer. He chose the former alternative, and in the spring of 1906, filling his pockets with his books, he walked from Jacksonville, Florida, to Frankfort, Kentucky, exchanging the poems for food and lodging on the way.”

As the reporter persisted, we can recognize the primary theme of Vachel’s lecture: “Mr. Lindsey eulogized the friendliness and hospitality of the people who live in the country, declaring that they had never failed him. ‘The normal, natural man who goes to the earth for bread is abundantly generous,’ he said. ‘The city is a perverted thing. It blunts generosity, turning it into suspicion. It keeps man from being independent.’ The speaker dwelt upon the shock experienced by the young artist, after having it dinned into him for four years of education that in art the one sin was to be commercial, at hearing from the houses of the great dealers or publishers, ‘This work is not commercial, so we can’t take it’ . . . Mr. Lindsey related several incidents of his tramping experiences in various sections. He remarked that in the country the only suspicious people he had encountered were old ladies [!].” [In 1916 and after, women’s clubs everywhere would be able to read about suspicious old ladies in “The Old Gentleman with the Lantern,” the closing chapter in A Handy Guide for Beggars: see Prose 75-76.]

The New Bedford speaker then offered “some of his poems, or dreams,” the newspaper article continues, listing “Star of My Heart,” “The Song of the Garden-Toad,” “Crickets on a
The articles from The Tramp’s Excuse were indeed of interest. "Strike," and “To the Sweet Singer of Israel,” all published in The Tramp’s Excuse. “A series of poems in humorous vein,” the reporter adds, “which the speaker called ‘Moon-pictures,’ followed”: “The Owl Moon,” “The Candle-Moon,” “The Rose of Midnight,” and several others. Finally, the concluding recitation seems to have been “The Potatoes’ Dance”: “Another fanciful bit of verse told of an Irish fairy who taught the potatoes to dance, but aroused the jealousy of the hardy Irish potatoes by starting a flirtation with an alien sweet potato.” There is no speculation as to the identity of the sweet potato; we know, however, that Aunt Fannie’s favorite nickname for her famous nephew was “tater head” (see “Hamilton, Frances Frazee” in “Works Cited”).

Pasted next to the New Bedford article in Macfarlane’s scrapbook is a second account of “A Peddler of Dreams,” this one from a Lynn, Massachusetts newspaper (in an era devoid of spell checking): “THE 1884 CLUB AS ENTERTAINERS.” This unnamed reporter advises that “Nicholas Vachee Lindsey was the speaker of the afternoon, his subject, ‘The Pedler of Dreams.’” Apparently, though, the speaker was forced to sit through club business prior to his presentation, because he rose to say “that he had been much interested in listening to the reports of the federation meeting, particularly in the address on forest conservation, because he himself had been so impressed by American wastefulness when, in tramping through Georgia, he had seen a forest fire start and remain unchecked until whole hillsides were in flames and hundreds of splendid pine trees were destroyed. The indifference of the country people to this calamity had been as astonishing to him as it was exasperating. It will take a long time to rear that forest again.”

We also learn that the lecturer posed as a tramp: “The object of the speaker’s address was to open his pack and exhibit his wares that were really brief poems written and recited by himself. . . . Mr. Lindsey has written for various publications; he smilingly said that after having knocked on the doors of many publishing houses, until his knuckles were bare, he had decided to take to the road with his poems, exchanging them for meals and lodging. All the way from Jacksonville in Florida to Covington, Kentucky, the cordial southern people received him with hospitality as, on another tramp, did the affluent Pennsylvania farmers whose Sunday dinners were described as wonderful. The following poems were then recited and descriptions were also given of the picture which Mr. Lindsey had drawn to illustrate the spirit of each one.” The newspaper list then echoes the selections from The Tramp’s Excuse delivered in New Bedford, with the added comment: “The poems were strung together with little talks on suggestions leading to their creation, incidents in them to be described more at length, or by further words along the same lines of thought, for which the speaker asked and received the spiritual hospitality of the group for whom he had paused to open his pack before continuing on his way.”

“Continuing on his way” is largely the story of Vachel’s first lecture series. Boston was the central location, but the speaker made two journeys back toward the West and a third along the Northeast coast. After the January 23 “Peddler of Dreams” lecture, he made an afternoon appearance in Groton (some forty miles to the northwest of Boston) on January 25. “Everything is lovely so far,” friend Nellie was advised: “I have just lectured at Groton—80 cents distance from Boston—the little old town where the Roosevelt kids went to school. [Franklin Roosevelt graduated from Endicott Peabody’s Groton School in 1900.] I gave them the Heroes of Time with posters and verses, and elucidations—an hour and thirty six minutes. Next time I will have my watch in front of me, and quit in an hour, you bet. I became too interested in my theme, and most wore out my welcome.”
Uncle Boy was writing from the railroad depot in nearby Ayer (four miles south of Groton). It was 10:30 at night, and he was waiting for a 12:47 express to Troy, New York (some 150 miles to the west). “There I start a series of train connections that may land me in Lawrenceville [on the Pennsylvania-New York border] in time for the lecture and maybe not. It will have all the excitement of a six day bicycle race. Most any of the trains may be late. I have had too much good fortune so far and its^ time for trouble. I will not have much sleep this next twenty four hours” (Fowler 331). For the record, he was on time to deliver his lecture on “The Heroes of Time” at 8:00 p.m. in Harrison Valley, Pennsylvania (thirty miles west of Lawrenceville). “It was certainly great to eat a good supper afterward and have a good bath and sleep,” the weary traveler admitted the next morning. He was again waiting in a railroad depot, this time headed for Ulysses, Pennsylvania, only seven miles to the southwest.

Travel plans, however, were not foremost in this lecturer’s mind: “I am hoping that when I return to Boston in a few days there will be a proposal of marriage waiting for me. Not to be outdone in generosity, I hereby propose that you and I throw all our souls and senses into a common cause, and for better and for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health we get married, and stay that way, till death do us part. I will add that if you accept this proposition, I expect you to carry it out at the first opportunity” (January 27, 1910, Fowler 336). On February 3, though, Uncle Boy’s Boston letter to Evanston begins: “Here I am, and no letter from Nellie.” Unfortunately for Vachel, this pattern would continue over the rest of his trip: the cottage remained closed, in spite of flattery, beseeching, and veiled threats. “I have two woman friends here in the East in mind—but do not believe I will call on either. In the first place—I always get sort of foolish about one of them, when I see her and I do not feel it quite right to be foolish over two ladies at once, tho the Lord knows I have in the past, thought it right. . . . I am still hoping to get a bit of a letter in Boston. I cannot last out forever. You were a sort of young mother to me—and I cannot be a lonely crying orphan forever. It is absolutely necessary for my peace of mind, morality and soberness of conduct to center my mind on some good and faithful guardian, and I do not like to see you resign.” The lonely orphan, as we may well imagine, was also growing weary with travel: “I am a bit tired of gadding about and catching slow trains at unearthly hours with my eyes half shut. But I feel that I have made a favorable impression on half my audiences, and have been reasonably received by all” (February 9, 1910, Fowler 347-348, emphasis added). [Note 4]

One young girl, though, was not impressed. Uncle Boy’s next surviving letter to Evanston is dated “February 24, 1910”; and it was mailed from Decatur, Illinois. The writer had returned home from the East, and he was again laboring for the Anti-Saloon League. “My Dear Nellie,” the letter begins, “Here in an office in Decatur I am waiting on local Option business. I am wondering all about you. I saw your folks last night in the drug store^. They looked rather guilty. They knew you were being mean to me . . . I suppose you never will write. If you had written, I would have called when I passed through Chicago. As it was, I scarcely had the heart. I suppose you would have been civil, but frigid . . . There is nothing to tell you except that I am having a picture made for your locket. Now tell me if you will receive it or not. I am sure I will feel better if you will. There your picture is on the beaureau^ (in Springfield) and I am glad the jewelry [the love locket] is part of the picture. I have started to write, dozens of times, and then wondered—what^ the use? At any rate I am writing to no one else, so if little Eve will repent, little Adam will forgive her. Please write to me, assuring me that you still say your prayers, wash your face, put your hair up in papers, and think of me with proper and constant affection. All will be forgiven, I assure you, and the wicked coldness you have shown will be forgotten.”
Little Adam does make a confession: “Yes—I did call on the girl down East, but honest—I did not even squeeze her fingers, or whisper in her ear. I just said to myself—Maybe Nellie will melt yet. Winters^ too cold. It freezes her heart. Wait till spring, and she will blossom like the meadow. She will write letters that will come thick as Dandelions. Is it not so? . . . Now—if you will do nothing else—quarrel. Write to me that you are mad and tell me why.


Two additional letters followed, the first on the same day (February 24) and the second the next day. Both are filled with avuncular advice and assurance: “Little child remember this—whatever else, I want you to climb high. . . . If you wanted me to forget you easily, you should not have been so young. I cannot yet forget how young you were, and how unformed. I feel myself responsible before your Maker for every mark I made on your soul. Goodnight child – With love, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay” (Fowler 352-356).

Several days later the cottage door opened briefly, and one short, conclusive letter found its way to Springfield: “Vachel: Please to not write me any more letters. It only makes it harder for me and if you really are a friend of mine you will want to make it as easy as possible for me. As for the package I received recently, I want to thank you, but I say again, I’ll not be bribed. It was very nice for you to do it but please don’t do it again. . . . As I see it now it is best to quit. If we continue as we were in the fall it will only bring about a repetition of what has happened and pain for both of us. I now see my mistake plainly. Though it will be hard it will be best for you to begin corresponding with your eastern friend or call on someone else at home. As to the picture for the locket I feel that now it would be wrong to accept it. (If you wish, I will return the locket.) Am very sorry it has come to this for I feel that I’ve been to blame. But please don’t ask me to depart from my decision. Sincerely, Nellie T. Vieira” (Fowler 358). [Note 5]

“Aunt” Nellie’s advice to Uncle Boy (the respective roles have been reversed), namely, “call on someone else at home,” reflects her understanding that Vachel required an inspiration girl in his life. In autumn, 1909, within weeks of Nellie’s departure for Evanston, her suitor was investigating the possibility of friendship with another woman. And, typically, he was not secretive about his behavior: “Miss Octavia Roberts who writes Servant-Girl Stories etc. for the American Magazine and has written for Colliers^ Weekly and Mc Clures^, is home here to write. She generally makes Chicago her headquarters, and teaches English for one of the Chicago elocution Schools. But she has quit this winter and retires to Springfield to write up some immigration material. I spent a fine evening with her last evening, and therefore a short letter to you, being used up in my conversation bump and my letters to you being mainly one-sided conversation. I shall cultivate^ Miss Roberts all she will let me I think. She is awfully good company, and a writer chuck full of ambition and pride.”

True to his nature, at least in his early years, Uncle Boy continued with a psychological profile of his new acquaintance (hinting at his own intellectual superiority): “She doesn’t know it but she has a tremendous amount of social pride, and it stands in the way of her dashing in to get acquainted with all sorts of people in the informal manner some newspaper women would. She thinks she is dreadfully radical and unconventional, merely because her people are of that opinion. She hasn’t learned to bury all her pride in her artists-pride^, as, maybe, I have done. At least I have centered a lot of it there, and it has saved me many a wound. Naturally all our people are more intellectually arrogant than socially arrogant I think; they bully with their brains rather than their manners. Well well, a bully is a bully, and except we be converted and become
as little children we shall not enter into the kingdom of God [cf. Matthew 18:3]. I wonder if I will ever enter?” (October 14, 1909, Fowler 161-162).

Biographer Eleanor Ruggles cites a manuscript memoir written by Octavia (see the appendix to this chapter) and dates the first meeting with Uncle Boy during “the summer of 1910,” perhaps because Octavia claimed that “one very hot night her telephone rang. ‘This is Nicholas Vachel Lindsay,’ said a man’s loud clear voice. ‘I desire to make your acquaintance’” (Ruggles 165-166). Springfield, however, can experience very hot nights during autumn months; and the meeting obviously happened many months prior to summer, 1910, perhaps on the night of October 14, 1909. Vachel was seldom secretive, and the short letter to Nellie quoted above would be a typical Lindsay response to an interesting evening encounter.

That Vachel was on Octavia’s front porch “fifteen minutes” after the phone call is entirely believable: he had only to walk one short block. The Roberts’ home was at 630 South 6th Street, whereas Dr. Lindsay, as we know, resided at 603 South 5th. Charles David Roberts, Octavia’s father, was a wealthy businessman, owner of “C. D. Roberts & Company,” located on East Adams, between 4th and 5th Streets, in downtown Springfield. “C. D. Roberts” was actually several businesses, as described in R. L. Polk & Company’s Springfield City Directory (1910): “Men’s Furnishing Goods, Hats, Caps, Ladies’ Cloaks, Furriers, Laundry, Shirt [Manufacturers] and Dye Works.” Yet another enterprise is listed as “C. D. Roberts Toilet Supply Company.” Octavia (Ridgely) Roberts, young Octavia’s mother, was from a wealthy Springfield banking family. Born August 26, 1875, Vachel’s new friend was more than four years his senior and the author of several publications, including “The Badge of Servitude,” published in The American Magazine (May 1907). [Note 6]

Ruggles’ continuing use of Octavia’s memoir reflects Uncle Boy’s courting technique in a manner anyone can believe. The two young people “sat talking for an hour in the pitch dark. ‘If we were to meet again, I shouldn’t know you,’ [Vachel] said as he rose to go. ‘Would you mind stepping into the house so I can see your face?’ . . . Octavia’s friends had been careful to warn her that Vachel was an ‘odd stick,’ but he seemed to her like any young man till they stood together in the lighted hall. Then she felt a difference. He laid one hand on her shoulder and with the other gently raised her chin. Studying his face, she was reminded both of a wild-eyed faun and of an itinerant evangelist, while the concentrated, blazing look he bent on her ‘might have sufficed Orpheus,’ she writes” (Ruggles 166; also see the appendix to this chapter).

Some two weeks after the October 14 meeting, Vachel mentions Octavia a second time in his letters to Evanston: “Tonight I took Miss Octavia Roberts to the big annual meeting of the Associated Charities. She is a delightful person for such an excursion. There is a touch of snippy frivolity about her that does not show up in a parlour^ discussion where she is grand and grave” (November 1, Fowler 242). That there were several parlor discussions between October 14 and November 1 is almost a certainty. As Eleanor Ruggles notes: “Octavia had asked [Vachel] to call again, with the result that he came much too often” (174). Indeed, Nellie would learn of one more parlor visit—on the night of Vachel’s auspicious thirtieth birthday. The afternoon (November 10, 1909) began with a decorative family dinner: “pink Carnations and fried chicken and candy and charlotte russe [pureed fruit and/or custard-filled cake].” Papa’s gift, as we noted at the end of the last chapter, was a new notebook; Mama gave pajamas; and sister Joy mailed one of her stories. “And of course,” a grumbling Uncle Boy comments, “I had to be good and say thank you for all this . . . I never celebrate anybody else’s Birthday and I
never give Christmas Presents but the Old World never gets discouraged or takes the Hint and insists I celebrate my own.”

After the charlotte dessert, Vachel proofread War Bulletin Number Five, explaining that “It has to be read three times, my printer is so childlike and irresponsible.” (This is obviously a new printer, as Ed Hartman, who had printed the previous Bulletins, received only praise for his work.) Then the birthday boy read in the public library for “awhile,” and went to see Nellie’s mother. He “laid on the bed after supper an hour just meditating and went to see Octavia Roberts eight till ten and loaned her Chesterton’s Sketch of Shaw, and the last copy of the Appeal to Reason, and we had a great confab till ten o’clock, and then I walked to the North Avenue and meditated and then to Coe’s Drug Store and Allie [the soda jerk] presented me with a soda water, and then I walked home, and that was my birthday” (in a letter misdated “October 10, 1909” [!]: see Fowler 275-278). [Note 7]

Thus, the uneasy relationship with the successor to Nellie Vieira began. Eleanor Ruggles outlines the ups and downs, as well as Octavia’s personal feelings, in the West-Going Heart biography. For now, we may note that the relationship continued off and on for four years, not ending until late 1913, when Octavia burned Vachel’s letters in her possession and married attorney [Joseph] Barton Corneau (December 27, 1913: Ruggles 174-176). Vachel, who had just begun courting Sara Teasdale, was in attendance: but now we are ahead of the story.

4

In early April 1910, Miss Nellie Vieira received one more envelope from Springfield, Illinois. This missive contained only a small blue pamphlet entitled The Spring Harbinger, with twenty pages of odd cartoons, several depicting a dominating woman:

The tiny print in the bottom left-hand corner reads: “Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, 1910.”

Youthful Nellie may or may not have remembered her suitor’s comments about older women, but Uncle Boy had described to her an important epiphany he experienced while lecturing in the
East. Self-confident, accomplished Eastern club women were much more outgoing than women he was accustomed to meeting, especially in the Midwest. Writing from York, Pennsylvania, on the night of January 27, Vachel counseled his young friend: “Let me tell you a secret. When a woman is past forty she thinks she has the privilege of boldly making eyes, especially if she is a literary lady. But you are not yet at that tender age – so when you make eyes – do it discreetly – from behind your fan or your tambourine, and be careful who it is. Let it be a nice boy, you are certain about” (Fowler 340).

The older women were not necessarily unattractive—just forward and bold—and likely provided the idea for the following cartoon from the *Harbinger*:

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Finally, to add a personal touch, the author of the *Harbinger* included a self-portrait, a caricature figure spilling ink from the little writing table that to this day (summer, 2011) may be seen in his room at 603 South 5th Street in Springfield.

Small pamphlets, however, were not the main focus for Uncle Boy’s spring efforts in 1910. He was at work on a full-sized magazine, something a little larger than 9 x 11 inches, something the size of *The Saturday Evening Post* or *The Ladies’ Home Journal*. He knew that the larger magazines were aimed at the national scene, what Theodore Roosevelt would soon tout as “The New Nationalism.” In contrast, and in keeping with his Anti-Saloon League lectures, Vachel intended to concentrate on the small town, to acclaim “The New Localism.” His work
would be entitled *The Village Magazine* and it would feature the artist/author’s best work to date. It would cost the creator everything; it would cost the reader nothing.

For a year or more, Vachel had contemplated “A possible paper—The Village Magazine—to build up small communities,” as he recorded in the inside front cover of his 1909 notebook (Virginia). It is the same notebook in which he kept detailed lists of dates, places, and expenses for his Anti-Saloon League engagements: “Jan 23: United States Hotel $1.00 Breakfast 25¢, Dinner 50¢ Supper 25¢ Carfare 24¢ & 5¢,” etc. Indeed, the first *Village Magazine* was closely connected to the author’s prohibitionist travels; but it was also connected to his successes in distributing *The Tramp’s Excuse* during the latter months of 1909. “I am happy today – happy through and through,” Uncle Boy boasted to Nellie Vieira on October 20, 1909, “and you ought to know it. I do not know why, maybe because I feel that my letter of yesterday has put us on a new footing, maybe because I have had several real letters about my book [*The Tramp’s Excuse*], anyhow I feel as though God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world” (Fowler 193). The very next day, Nellie was advised: “I received two good letters from utter strangers today who had received my book from Dr. E. S. Ames, professor of Philosophy in Chicago University, and pastor of the Hyde Park Church of the Disciples. The doctor and I have been allies since I was a student in Chicago. He is one of the few friends I made that three years” (October 21, Fowler 199-200). [Note 8]

In keeping with his advice to Nellie to cultivate the people who really count in this world, Vachel had sent copies of the *Excuse* to everyone he respected and remembered from his days in Hiram, Chicago, and New York. “It is only men like Ames, working in other centuries to liberalize and broaden and make Scientific, that has made possible the American Separation^ of Church and State. Religious^ tolerance was brought about by an age of Skepticism and Reason. The Quakers are the only sect that did not kill and persecute till the rise of Liberalism and Science forced a truce. It was the Voltaire’s and the Paine’s, the Rousseaus and the like that gave the world religious^ freedom, it was not the Luthers and the Calvins and the Knoxes. . . . But forever and forever the man who insists on a little more light causes a great squirming and a howl in places that seem almost up to his standard, even the suggestion of a little change is met with hate. Every religion^ is as intolerant and jealous hearted as a woman in love, and brooks not the shadow of a Rival. The soul that rises above this is of course the supreme example, but there are few” (Fowler 200). Such lofty souls were the ones Vachel targeted, and apparently with real success.

In less than a week, five additional requests for the *Excuse* arrived in the mail, and Dr. Ames forwarded “seven more names of smart people to send it to” (October 27, Fowler 225). On November 3, Alexander Aunan Adams, the British Vice-Consul in Chicago, wrote to ask for a copy (Fowler 252-254)—and one week after, Witter Bynner, “a literary man of some standing in the East” echoed the Vice-Consul’s request (November 10, Fowler 275). Harvard graduate Witter “Hal” Bynner (1881-1968) had resigned his editor’s job at *McClure’s Magazine*, left New York City, and was renting a room from his college friend, sculptor Homer Saint-Gaudens, in Cornish, New Hampshire. Bynner was pursuing his own poetry career, but he traveled extensively, giving literary lectures, not unlike his new acquaintance, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay. Bynner was also working as a publisher’s reader for the Boston firm of Small, Maynard and Company. He was, indeed, “a literary man of some standing in the East”; and, fortuitously, his request arrived in Springfield on Uncle Boy’s thirtieth birthday.
“I send you the printed matter [the War Bulletins, with The Tramp’s Excuse serving as Number Four] in duplicate,” the birthday boy advised, “hoping you will hand the extra copy to the smartest man you know.” He had a circle of friends in Chicago and New York, he boasted, so he set his sights further afield: “If you know any one of our sort in England, send it there. . . I want to walk through England some day and call on a poet or so. Think it over.” The focus in this initial letter to Bynner, however, was not poetry but the concept of a War Bulletin, especially the ideas behind War Bulletin Number Three:

The War Bulletin had two purposes—at least. First—I was tired of trying to peddle manuscripts. I wanted a place where I could print a thing as soon as I wrote it, and hand it to my growing circle of friends. Secondly I was so advertised and boosted by the Y.M.C.A. here that the whole town seemed to see those mystic syllables written on my forehead with all their sugary sanctity, conservatism and officialdom.

Everything I said was listened to and everything applauded and ignored.

So I started the War Bulletin and told them all to Go to Hell in so many words on the first page. Since then I have had the fixed wrathful attention of my betrayed community. The Creed of a Beggar caused more cases of Spiritual Indigestion and Sea Sickness than anything since the Whale swallowed Jonah by mistake.

Then Bynner’s correspondent revealed the plan behind his extensive private printings—and his extensive mailings to the literary elite, like the editors of the Chicago Evening Post Friday Literary Review (see the end of the last chapter): “Since the Chicago Papers have taken me up my neighbors have given up the really painful hypothesis that I have gone mad—(which hypothesis I can never laugh about—somehow), and have decided I am merely a cuss with a touch of intellect, and I am fairly happy watching them squirm under credentials brought in from out of town. I am solid with all four newspapers here, and everything in the way of a newspaper clipping gets re-printed locally. I’ll educate old Springfield yet.” He revealed, though, an element of self-doubt (and explained one of the more puzzling poems in the Tramp’s Excuse): “If the editor of the Chicago Evening Post had not written me a long, perfectly comprehending and sympathetic letter, I would have decided I had worms in my skull, for I have used that creed [“Creed of a Beggar”] a long time” (Chénetier 41-42). [Note 9]

Whatever the initial intent, Vachel’s private mailings in the final months of 1909 began to pay further dividends. With Edward Scribner Ames and Floyd Dell in Chicago, and with Witter Bynner in the East, the mailbox at 603 South 5th Street was soon filled with requests from interesting people. “I am
mailing a big bunch of bulletins today to all the people who have corresponded with me about the Tramp’s Excuse. It’s the beginning of an invisible Church—a Church-by-mail! I have sealed up forty eight^ packages, many of them personal letters and I have about fifteen more to send to people with whom I am in direct correspondence. Next I shall send five dollars to a press clipping bureau^, and send Bulletins with personal letters to all the Editors who have commented on my work. I wish I had the interest and loyalty of every really brainy editor in the country. I like men with heads, who use them for something besides chasing a dollar around the block” (November 13, 1909, Fowler 283-284). Three days later, he added: “As I came in the room the other day and looked at the twenty copies of the Tramp’s Excuse still remaining I had almost a Father’s satisfaction in it. I have keep my promise, sent copies to all comers who asked, gained some new territory, held all the old territory, and have twenty copies left for my very own, over and above my plans. It seems to me that with these twenty copies I can work wonders. It gives me a deal more pleasure to give them out slowly, just exactly where I please. People have heard of the work now, and set more store by it at once. And I feel so much is actually done, my thirteen years of verse-writing is accounted for, I have rounded out my years in a fashion” (November 16, 1909, Fowler 286).

In a matter of days, however, during Thanksgiving season (1909), Vachel ended War Bulletin Number Five with a retraction: “The last of August I announced that War Bulletin Number four—the Book of Poems entitled the Tramp’s Excuse, would be given to whoever asked. I received many applications from strangers both in the city and out and supplied all comers and still had enough left to crowd a copy or so onto my friends. Now the edition of three hundred is exhausted and the offer is withdrawn” (Prose 121). The author, however, returned from the East coast lecture tour with money in his pocket. It was time for another collection of poems and drawings, a larger format, something that could be left in restaurants and churches in small towns, the towns that hosted an Anti-Saloon League preacher who was also a poet-artist. It was time for a Village Magazine. The cottage door in Evanston remained tightly closed; but other doors, doors of people Uncle Boy described as “lofty souls,” people who really count—these doors were beginning to open across the United States. In time, important doors would open in Europe as well.  [Note 10]

Summer, 1910, Vachel was working on his Magazine but also traveling weekends for the Anti-Saloon League. He was beginning to feel more and more alone, especially as he learned of the marriages of his New York City friends. In June, it was George Mather Richards’ turn, and Vachel wrote to congratulate, and to complain: “Jack Jones married and disappeared, Bill Wheeler married and quit writing, and Bill used to be pretty strong on letters. And now that you are gone, I assume that the old order changeth, giving place to new. You are not strong on the write, but every letter was worth something, and besides there was a deal of wireless telegraphy, which I presume will cease. . . . I know now why old ladies blubber around at weddings and shake the cherries on their bonnets. Pray consider me the cadaverous W.C.T.U. looking person, with the appropriate floral emblem of a scythe under her arm, to signify you have been reaped, and that to me it is indeed a solemn occasion.”

Tongue-in-cheek, Vachel continued: “I have written to Achsa^ Barlow, since she is the only person of deep sympathy who would really care and really know the parties concerned. Then I found grace to put into the waste basket the wicked cussing I had already prepared to send to your well meaning, and I have no doubt, worthy spouse [fellow artist Gertrude Lundborg], and
the even stranger remarks I had prepared for you. Having attained to a chastened calm, I do now congratulate you both heartily, with all good wishes. The only remaining Bachelor in the U. S. bids you God speed into matrimony. . . . My wife at present is the Village Magazine. You shall see her about September, I presume” (June 27, Richards). The lonely bachelor’s presumption, though, proved premature, as the Magazine was delayed until October. Meanwhile, six original drawings for the Magazine were sent as wedding gifts for yet another New York City friend, Harold Mills Salisbury (see Vachel’s letter to the bride, Helen Bruce Van Derveer, “October 4, 1910,” in Chénetier 47-48; and see “Dartmouth College” in “Works Cited”).

One month after the above letter to George Richards, Vachel wrote to thank Witter Bynner for sending Young Harvard, and Other Poems (1907), Bynner’s first collection of poetry (online at Google Books). After naming several of Bynner’s poems with “the most adhesive properties,” Uncle Boy advised his new friend that “Your book travels in my suit-case when I go out to speak for the Anti-Saloon League, and affords me consolation on the long train rides. Thus sir, you indirectly enhance and make effective the work of the Church Militant. I shall see to it that Gabriel puts it down to your credit whenever his moving finger writes,” this last image (curiously) from one of the Anti-Saloon League preacher’s favorite poems: The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (see line 201, in the first edition of Edward FitzGerald’s translation). Indeed, “On Reading Omar Khayyam,” with the subtitle “(During an anti-saloon campaign, in central Illinois),” was written this summer and serves as the second poem in the 1910 edition of The Village Magazine (see Poetry 88-89).

“You ought to hear me roar on Sundays,” Vachel confessed to Bynner: “And I wear a black tailed coat. In fact I am completely disguised as a country preacher.” The reference to disguise is even more interesting when the surrogate preacher adds: “. . . Hypocrisy has always attracted me as a calling. Its^ just as the Bartender says—if I don’t sell the stuff, the other man will. So if I don’t put on the black coat and white tie—the other fellow will. There’s got to be a certain number of Hypocrites to guard the doors of respectability and see that everybody but Walt Whitman keeps his shirt on. I like the pious air. It becomes me. Now call me St. Nick all you please to do so.” Meanwhile, Bynner himself must have confessed to enough unsaintly behavior to cause further admission of hypocrisy: “By some slight hints you have dropped, you are in the condition of the man who has been saved without being sanctified. A man in that peculiarly romantic condition is always a good correspondent, especially for us fellows who can’t sin, and who have to depend upon men of the world to know what is really going on. Its^ like compounding a felony, isn’t it? We let the other fellows pull the chestnuts of experience out of the fire, while we supply the Philosophy and the Sermons” (July 6, 1910, Chénetier 44-45).

Bynner’s Young Harvard was not the only book in Vachel’s suitcase this summer. The endless waiting in railroad depots—followed by long, slow train rides (it took five hours to travel ninety miles between Springfield and Champaign, as we saw in Chapter Five)—offered ample time for reading and writing. And after “the Philosophy and the Sermons,” there was often an overnight stay in a village hotel. Writing to George Richards in August, Vachel praised the Scott Hotel in Chapin, Illinois (some fifty miles west of Springfield): “the best eating I have ever struck. Honest its^ fine. When you pass though Chapin, remember. . . . I have been on the road three days this week and had stacks of lovely adventures. Its^ one perpetual moving picture-show, this Anti-Saloon work. Something new happens every minute. You should have heard the Band last night that preceded me^ address in the public square at Clayton [forty miles northwest of Chapin]. People’s Symphony Concert by Jove. The band boys were sore on the Methodist
preacher, and refused to come out of their hole and play till your humble servant jollied them a bit. Twas^ a triumph. . . . And then the speech. Bryan wasn’t in it. Cicero groaned with envy, in the pits of Gehenna.”

As Vachel’s lengthy letter continues, we learn that he has just finished rereading volume one of James Bryce’s *The American Commonwealth*, likely the third edition published by Macmillan in 1907. (For Bryce’s possible influence on *The Village Magazine* editorials, see Chapter 18, pp. 21-22). Vachel also recommends John Spargo’s *Karl Marx: His Life and Work* (1910); Israel Zangwill’s *Children of the Ghetto* (1892); Jane Addams’ *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909); and Brand Whitlock’s *The 13th District: A Story of a Candidate* (1902) and *The Turn of the Balance* (1907). “All these works I have read on the train this summer,” Vachel relates to Richards, “and hereby pass my information to you.” Clearly, Uncle Boy was intent on social issues. “General theme – The relation of Art and Democracy in America,” Vachel summarized for Richards: “I am out amongst the cornfed, and I am learning” (August 12, 1910, Richards: all books mentioned above are online at Google Books).

*“The Turn of the Balance* is a great book,” Vachel affirmed to Witter Bynner; and then he provided what to this day is a good introduction to the first *Village Magazine*:

The *Village Magazine* which I am illustrating and writing at present is intended for two sorts of folks. (1) The preachers and farmers I encounter in the small towns in Illinois on my Anti-Saloon Expeditions. I meet wonderful people every Sunday, and find the loveliest kind of dry villages. My message in the book is in brief—that in these small towns there is the best raw material for a truly artistic and spontaneous life in our state, that will produce the Beauty-Making citizen. And I take it for granted that the true purpose of our Civilization is to make the Beauty Creator supreme in life. And we want as many of him as possible. The Illinois Village is now Beautiful, and should become ideal.

It is the discovery of my life, the Illinois Village. I had had so much of Broadway I had forgotten there were wheatfields still.

So the Preacher shall receive in each village, one copy of the Magazine, and be urged to peruse it. There will be only one number issued [!]...

(2) The other people who shall have the Magazine are my fellow Art Students in New York and Chicago, and a few Eminent Writers with whom I have the honor of a personal acquaintance. To these, and to my personal friends I have sent an announcement that the book is coming, and is for all who are truly worthy. Not many will cry for it. I am safe.

Safe at home, but not very happy. With friends getting married and with the rest of the family in summer camp in Colorado, Uncle Boy felt deserted: “Write to me sir,” he begged Bynner: “I am lonely as Hell and Brimstone” (July 6, 1910, Chénetier 45). [Note 11]

6

Feelings of aloneness may be alleviated in two ways: the lonesome one can seek the company of others or others can be encouraged to seek the company of the lonesome one. If we consider the broadside that introduces each chapter of *Uncle Boy*—the same broadside that was designed to introduce *The Village Magazine*—we have no doubt which method appealed to Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: “In the end I want you to join my gang. I do not want to join yours.” In the second edition of the *Magazine*, not published until 1920, the author-publisher stresses
what he believed to be the most important meaning of the word magazine: “A magazine is not necessarily a ‘periodical.’ The Standard Dictionary defines a magazine as: ‘A house, a room or a receptacle in which anything is stored, specifically a strong building for storing gunpowder and other military stores,’ etc. etc. . . . Let us go back to the original meaning of the word magazine.”

In brief, then, The Village Magazine is a de facto War Bulletin—War Bulletin Number Six, as it were. And this War Bulletin contains the necessary requisites for joining Vachel’s “gang.”

First, the would-be recruit must experience a dramatic conversion: like the weight of sin rolling off Christian’s back while genuflecting before the Cross (Pilgrim’s Progress, iii) or like the vision that confronted murderous Saul when he was groveling in the dust on the Damascus road (Acts 9). For Uncle Boy, the climactic epiphany transpired aboard the S.S. Haverford, about two in the morning, September 5, 1906 (see Chapter 18, pp. 28-29). Like Saul, the Haverford convert’s eyes were opened to a new understanding of Immanuel. For Uncle Boy, the revelation focused on a singing Immanuel, an artistic Immanuel living in a brave “New Heaven,” a garden environment where the church itself was insignificant—“a later half-waking thought.” “On Conversion” is the initial editorial of the first Village Magazine, and the work explains and outlines the requirements for joining Vachel’s gang: “In America the repentance the Christian most needs is least mentioned in his hour of prayer. If he would truly be reconciled to God he must be rid of his sins against loveliness.”

Second, would-be recruits must renounce the temptations of industrialized society and concentrate their perfected vision on sober villages and related rural settings, that is, on small societies where conversion is already taking place, albeit subconsciously. “Villages as a whole are thus converted, when they go dry. . . . The citizens would stare if you told them they had been converted to the God of Beauty, yet they have taken the first great step in His praise. . . . No man has read Shelley’s Hymn to Intellectual Beauty, no man has purchased a history of painting, a history of architecture, a textbook on landscape gardening or village improvement. Yet instinctively they build their altars to the unknown God [cf. Acts 17:23], the radiant One. He whom ignorantly they worship should be declared unto them in His fullness” (Prose 125). What sober rural people need is an evangelist to help them understand the true source of their esthetic efforts. What sober people everywhere need is The Village Magazine.

Third, the most useful recruits for Vachel’s “gang” are the village pastors, the local evangelists. The second prose work in the new Magazine is “An Editorial on the Holiness of Beauty for the Village Pastor,” with the subtitle (lettered inside an acorn drawing): “Where there is loveliness . . . there is God.” Pastors (and their parishioners) need to apprehend the esthetics of The Book: “The gospels begin with the heavenly hosts singing of glory, with the Magnificat of Mary, with the gold frankincense and myrrh of the wise, and end with a blaze of Resurrection light. There is hardly a parable but is passionate with that adoration of nature which is the beginning of art. ‘Behold a sower went forth to sow,’ ‘I am the vine and ye are the branches.’ Such phrases build cathedrals.” Original sin itself is a sin against beauty and nature: “Consider Adam, the park architect. Consider the tenderness, innocence and wildness of Eden in its first estate, which all Christian sweethearts dream they can restore. Consider man, made in the image of God, in the beginning a creator of star-worlds of his own, and the fall of man but a turning of the back upon loveliness, and a choosing to disobey the spirit that yet walks in quiet gardens in the cool of the day.” Vachel’s editorial sermon for pastors continues and suggests an esthetic perception of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Revelation, finally
admonishing: “Meanwhile, since your village is lovely, make it transcendentally so, for the glory of the Lord” (Prose 126-127).

Fourth, and finally, recruits to Vachel’s gang must understand “The Necessity of Reverence,” the sermon initially delivered in New York City and then repeated in Springfield, Illinois (see the close of Chapter 19). Most persons recognize the beauty of natural wonders, such as sunsets and waterfalls; and a decent number of people recognize the beauty of human creations, such as cathedrals, parks, and pictures. Members of Vachel’s gang, however, “find spectacles worth our looking, in the grimmest workingman, the most commonplace child, in giving the cup of cold water, in the widow giving her mite, in the sower going forth to sow, in the prayer of the publican, in the simple bread and wine of the memorial feast.” Members of Vachel’s gang realize that the ability to express beauty is a God-given talent, that all beauty is the expression of God, whether He chooses to express Himself through nature or through human beings. Immanuel is the consummate artist, and Immanuel dwells in all people.

Looking back, we can see that Vachel’s 1908 race-riot lectures focused on the perversion of human nature. All people are natural-born artists, albeit with talents for different areas of the arts. The Irish excel in literature, the Italians in painting, the African-Americans in music, the Jews in theology, the Polish in philosophy, etc. All persons could serve as well-springs for an ideal society; but most, like “Adam the park architect,” have abandoned their natural state and buried their talents in the banks and commerce of the material world. The one place the natural order of life is most evident is the prairie village, especially the Illinois prairie village: “Why is everything so lovely? There are no stores. The yards are deep, with no fences, roses poppies and hollyhocks come in season. Cement sidewalks, of which every village statesman boasts at this hour, add a touch of unifying grey, and provide against the rainy day with a sense of anticipated cosiness. They lead out to the nearest farm houses, that are always white, with barns always red, fences always in order, with immense, well mowed yards, having little pretense of flower beds, but stately and rich with evergreens. And there may be near by a really big park, that is a camping ground in summer, where the very lords of chautauqua appear” (Prose 138). In brief, the dry Illinois villages and adjacent rural areas suggest Eden before the fall.

“An Editorial for the Wise Man in the Metropolis Concerning the Humble Agricultural Village in Central Illinois” is an essay that reflects the sentiment (and the length) of its title. The essay is, according to the author in 1920, “the principal editorial of the first imprint of The Village Magazine.” The editorial includes three pages of quotations from village newspapers, most reflecting the fruitfulness, beauty, cleanliness, and religious concerns of rural life. From the perspective of 1920, Vachel felt that he had anticipated Edgar Lee Masters’ Spoon River Anthology (1914): “[The editorial] is perhaps interesting as not before, because it quotes from many newspapers of the Spoon River region, four years before the great Anthology appeared. They help to indicate what I have always maintained, that Edgar Lee Masters and myself see Central Illinois with much the same eyes, and those who think otherwise understand neither Mr. Masters nor myself. There is more uplift for me in Masters’ writing than in any sermons I have ever heard. The man who cannot be exhilarated by Spoon River Anthology is a mighty poor citizen, with his soul rotted out with bunk and molasses” (The Village Magazine, 1920, p. 126).

The “Wise Man” editorial continually stresses rural beauty and rural reverence, and attributes these qualities to the absence of alcoholic beverages. Traveling and preaching for the Anti-Saloon League, Vachel grew increasingly more respectful: “These villages are the fortunate islands in the wild sea of commerce. In one or two rare moments they have brought to
me the elusive charm of dead and immortal Hellas. With such a different root and stalk, the perfume was the same. Once or twice as I have spoken, as is my custom, in their pulpits, looking down into the Sabbath-stilled faces of the young, the whole place was turned to a nowhere [the word utopia means nowhere] of ivory and gold: that bright army of perfectly carved countenances became Greek before my yes, though mine was a mighty Puritan cause. The church became a wonderland pervaded by the trance of classic, not Hebraic immortality. While quoting with all my heart the invectives of the prophets, there ran through my fancy Swinburne’s mesmeric lines:

The bountiful infinite west, [from] the happy memorial places
Full of the stately repose and the lordly delight of the dead,
Where the fortunate islands are lit with the light of ineffable faces
And the sound of a sea without wind is about them, and sunset is red.
[“Hesperia,” ll. 33-36]

You say ‘overdone.’ You object. You insist the church is an everyday place. Yes, but there is something in her everydayness that makes higher vision possible” (Prose 143).

Indeed, “higher vision”—that is, imaginative vision—is the primary requirement for becoming a member of Vachel’s gang and for understanding The Village Magazine. Higher vision reveals not only beauty but the Divine Source of beauty, and thus leads to the necessity for reverence. To those groveling in the steel and cement sarcophagi of large cities, Uncle Boy has a suggestion: “Oh, wise man of the noise-world, you know industrial civilization has bitter war immediately ahead, but do you know that in the village is being conserved already that loveliness which may heal the wounded and bind up the broken-hearted?” (Prose 144). The village itself is a magazine, a storehouse for the weaponry needed to restore God’s Garden of Eden, the nowhere [utopian] environment that is close to being somewhere in Vachel’s higher vision: “Simplicity and space, and shade and soft grass, and cozy houses and clean walks and serene steeples may make no lasting impression if we visit only one [village] square. But after invading several score, they form a sort of landscape gardening system in the memory, a panorama of civilized democracy from villages near Danville across the state [Illinois] to villages near Quincy. Only in coal mining townlets is the charm broken” (Prose 138).

After the initial section, highlighted by the editorials discussed above, The Village Magazine (1910) offers an “Irrelevant Section,” with the explanation: “Many people will dislike the general theme of this magazine. For such this irrelevant section is made.” The section includes moon poems and drawings, most published in The Tramp’s Excuse (1909), but also includes the poems “Genesis” (a garden idyl) and “The Wizard in the Street” (an elegy for the great Edgar Allan Poe). The third section, entitled “Quizzical Section,” also offers an interlude for tired readers: “There are many people who will dislike the soberness of the first irrelevant section. For them this quizzical section is made.” This third section features poems such as “The Potatoes’ Dance,” “Crickets on a Strike,” and “Quiz, or the Beetle’s Dream,” as well as drawings such as “The Snail King and Queen Visit Mab” and two cartoons from The Spring Harbinger: the author’s self-portrait and [“Vague Mrs. Brown”]. Finally, we have the Magazine’s “Closing Section: In Which the Special Business of the Magazine is Resumed.” The section is subtitled: “Seek ye first the kingdom of beauty” (hand-lettered inside another acorn drawing).
With the author’s guidance, then, we know the “general theme” or “special business” of *The Village Magazine* (1910) is presented in the first and fourth sections; and it should be no surprise that the art work which structures these sections is “The Village Improvement Parade” (see *Poetry* 258-264). Indeed, the first plate of the “Parade,” with its lead banner touting
“GREEN PARKS,” serves as the initial page for the entire Magazine. The second banner on this same page, the banner equating good public taste and democracy, is the only banner motto that is repeated, occurring on the end plate as well as on the beginning plate and giving the “Parade” Greek form: the ouroboros (the snake with the tail in its mouth, the circular symbol suggesting wholeness and infinity). “Note the circle of the sun, drawn with the same compass as the circle of the moon, in the moon-plates,” Vachel advises in “Adventures While Preaching Hieroglyphic Sermons,” adding: “Note how it is really the central decorative theme of ‘The Village Improvement Parade’” (Poetry 973). The democracy versus mob law banner also punctuates the political nature of the Magazine, and soon we will have more to learn about Vachel, his Village Magazine, and Springfield politics.

One thing should now be most evident: the author of The Village Magazine envisioned a future utopia, a future ideal that would reflect a past ideal. That past ideal was the garden of Eden, a utopia that did not arise through happenstance. Eden was graced by natural beauty, such as Yellowstone or Yosemite, but Eden was a garden, and gardens are the products of art. Adam was not the first “park architect”: God and Immanuel preceded him, and Uncle Boy intended to follow. With the example of The Book before us, members of Vachel’s gang recognize that society needs park architects and fellow artists—individuals who are in tune with the creative God within. And where will these architects come from? Most will come from the youngest generation, and likely from the youngest generation in a prairie village: “Some one of these villages, apparently no more sensitive than the rest, is going to be gradually aware of herself, is going to take special pains with her talented children. Teaching them, no matter how far they explore the world for special training, to concentrate the finest product of their matured life to their birthplace. Some village pastor is going to have a vision of his responsibility as the custodian of a ripening civilization, and the developer of the special personality of a town, as well as the watchdog of its morals. He will search for the divine fires of artistic impulse as well as the tears of social repentance in the eyes of the wilder children of the place” (Prose 144).

Patience is also required, as Vachel warns in “On Conversion,” the first editorial in the Magazine: “The pilgrimage to complete civilization is a long one” (Prose 125). The artistic child may have to struggle in Hiram and Chicago and New York City, may have to take tramping trips across the country, may even have to return to New York City, but: “Not always will the talented prodigal remain in the big city in the forlorn hope to conquer it with sculpture and song. Amid the clangors of Babel, amid the husks of commerce, he will be perishing with beauty-hunger, and return at length to his own people. He and his comrades will bring with them crafts, song, landscape gardening, painting, drama, architecture. The town certainly will tolerate these and adopt them in time, and consecrate each as a means of grace as she has the electric light and the cement sidewalk” (Prose 144: emphasis added). But the transition will not be easy.

“An Editorial for the Art Student Who Has Returned to the Village” is the significant prose work in the final section of The Village Magazine (1910). The essay is highlighted by a special request from the author, a call for letters to discuss underlined passages. The first of these passages concerns “the man in the street,” the everyday American, who “seems, from the standpoint of culture, to be a mechanical toy, amused by clockwork.” This is the audience the returning art student must face, especially the art-student-democrat who wants to interact with everyday people: “What a task then has the conscientious art-democrat, to find the individual, delicate, immortal soul of this creature, dressed in a Hart, Schaffner and Marx suit and trying to look like a Hart, Schaffner and Marx advertisement. For the most part, the really trained man
[the art-democrat] can find little common ground.” He pours forth his artistic efforts with joy, and the efforts may be immortal by European standards, but in a Hart-Schaffner-Marx society “they are as valueless as the dollar bills of the Southern Confederacy.”

The prairie villages, though, offer some hope: “We who want to be democrats . . . have an opportunity in the cross-roads that gave us birth. There we can be true to grandfather’s log cabin and at the same time remember the Erectheum and the Temple of Nikko. There we meet the real citizen, three generations before he is ironed out into a mechanical toy. His crudity is plain, his delicacy is apparent also. His sound culture-tendencies and false tendencies can be sorted out. At home we encounter institutions just beginning to bloom, absolutely democratic, yet silken and rich; no two villages quite alike, all with chances of developing intense uniqueness, while all the rest of America speaks one iron speech.”

Uncle Boy has strong advice for the art-democrat who returns to the village: YOU WILL BE AT WAR. “You lose some chances of recognition from the growing art circles of the metropolis. But your life is now thoroughly dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal in taste. You are engaged in a jovous Civil War testing whether your work, or any work so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. Just as much real civilization hangs upon your success as hung upon the fighting of the private soldier at Gettysburg . . . If you have any cherished beauty-enterprise, undertake it where you are. You will find no better place in all America” (Prose 149-151). Indeed, Vachel avows in the second editorial in the final section of his Magazine, “I have often been thrilled and comforted by hearing natives describe our Springfield, for instance, as ‘a little, overgrown country town.’ As long as such is the case, she is still at the parting of the ways, and can turn from the broad road that leadeth to Chicago, and take the narrow one that leadeth to green fields, and mystery, and eternal life.” Even Chicago may have a chance: “Let her controlling citizens visit the villages whence they came, and surprise themselves with the growing spiritual treasuries there. Then let them consider how such grace can abound in Chicago” (“An Editorial for the Local Statesman, When the Cross-Roads Becomes a Big City,” Prose 148). The Village Magazine, then, is another salvo in Uncle Boy’s war against America’s tasteless materialism. Or, in the words of War Bulletin Number One: “In each new Bulletin the war shall go faster and further. War! War! War!”

On the political front—in Springfield, Illinois—the new “war” involved city government. Springfield’s 1908 race riot revealed far more than racial prejudice: the corrupt practices of ward politics—and the consequences—were exposed for all to see. In 1901, Galveston, Texas, had introduced a new form of city government, something called “the Commission idea”; and other Texas cities, along with cities in Oklahoma and Iowa, were quick to follow. Responding to pressure from citizens of Springfield, Peoria, and Decatur, the Illinois General Assembly sent a legislative committee to various Texas and Iowa towns, in order to study the new idea. And, liking what they learned, Illinois legislators approved the “Commission idea” in March 1910—but only for municipalities numbering fewer than 200,000 citizens. Eligible cities were required to hold a referendum on the subject, and Springfield scheduled its vote for January 2, 1911. Uncle Boy and his liberal friends were excited; and in the latter months of 1910, they seized every opportunity to try to insure the referendum’s success.
The perceived positives of the new government are outlined in Ernest S. Bradford’s “The Spread of the Commission Idea,” an essay published in Municipal Journal and Engineer (June 1909):

There comes forward a plan with which every business man is familiar; every stockholder in a corporation is accustomed to voting for a Board of Directors; why not vote for a Board of Municipal Directors? The solid citizen grasps the idea instantly; it is a familiar one; he knows its workings in business: he understands it thoroughly. He waits only to ascertain the results in cities which have tried it. Much simpler than the Mayor and Council system, it appeals to him from the first; and the verdict of success, pronounced even by conservatives wherever the plan has been tried, stamps the seal of successful experience upon it. The old feeling that municipal government is a hopeless mess and not capable of improvement or reform yields, in the flash of his sure instinct, to the knowledge that here is the chance to change the whole plan; to locate responsibility with certainty; to tell when he is getting a good administration; to know where his money goes. And the steady rate at which Commission government is being adopted means a prompt comprehension of the vast improvement in the proposed governmental machinery over the old way of doing things, rather than undue speed in taking up a new idea.

For the Commission idea in essence, means: (1) All the municipal power in the hands of a few men (usually five), who are, individually, heads of departments, and, collectively, the legislative as well as the final administrative authority for the city. (2) These men are elected by the voters and are responsible to them. In the first place, there are only five men to choose, instead of a score, so the voter can know whom he is voting for; then, when elected, he knows whom to hold responsible, and with the addition of the recall (a powerful check on the Commissioners) and the referendum (which enables the people to exercise legislative functions directly on important matters), he feels that the wires are no longer crossed; he knows to whom to speak and the Commissioner, at the other end, hears. The clutch no longer slips—all the machinery is connected up. (3) Some method of abolishing partisan politics helps to make plain the local issues. In Galveston, a strong Civic Club, composed of public-spirited business men, backs for re-election the Commissioners who have given satisfaction, and thus obviates the necessity of their making their own fight for office. In Des Moines a non-partisan primary and election works toward the same end; it is not possible to vote a party ticket straight, but each name must be marked separately. (4) Finally, a City Civil Service insures freedom from the worst form of politics in administration. (5) The publication of all proceedings of the Council or of the Commissioner of Finance still further aids the voter to decide as to the efficiency of his government; and because he pays his representatives, he is still more likely to hold them strictly responsible for the performance of their duties.

The real, underlying reason for the superiority of the new plan over the old way is found in the close connection of the voter with the government. The average voter really chooses his representatives, for he is not confused by the multitude of offices to fill, and can intelligently pick a small number. After they are chosen, they may be recalled; their ordinances may be subjected to the voter’s will by a referendum; and published proceedings and statements, plainer and more full than formerly was the custom, enable the average citizen to determine what sort of return he is getting for his taxes.

At least one Springfield citizen, however, was not interested in the business model and the return he would get for his taxes. Uncle Boy did not pay any taxes. Uncle Boy was intent on electing a
mayor and five commissioners who understood that **A CRUDE ADMINISTRATION IS DAMNED ALREADY** (the third banner in “The Village Improvement Parade,” *Poetry* 260).

Occasionally, human life enjoys favorable circumstances, and the fates presented Vachel with one such instance in November-December, 1910—the months preceding Springfield’s historic January election. The First Christian Church (Disciples), the Lindsay family church (then located at the northwest corner of 5th and Jackson), was soliciting funds to construct a new church building at the present-day location (700 South 6th Street). Uncle Boy determined to use the occasion to educate Springfield as regards the values and principles delineated in *The Village Magazine*. An unnamed Springfield newspaper announced the effort as follows:

**WILL HOLD A JOHN RUSKIN REVIVAL**

**Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Will Give Five Lectures on Ruskin for Benefit of First Christian Church.**

A John Ruskin revival, for the benefit of the First Christian church, will be started by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, the fifteenth of November, in Ferguson Hall [YMCA], being specifically five Tuesday night lectures, all using the Ruskin standpoint to size up things in Springfield. The lectures are: Nov. 15, Child Life in Our Town; Nov. 22, Landscape Near Springfield; Nov. 29, Springfield Architecture, To-day and To-morrow; Dec. 6, Our^ [On] “Getting Things” for Springfield; Dec. 13, The Local Bearing of the New Nationalism. Course tickets, $1. The whole dollar goes to the new church building fund. People who want tickets please call up telephone No. 167, old and new.

Purchasers of course tickets will be given a pamphlet called the Village Magazine, which will be a sort of introduction to the course. It contains twenty-one full-page illustrations and cartoons, five editorials and twenty-five short poems, Mr. Lindsay’s most recent work. It is a book of eighty pages. It is a summary of the editor’s experiences and observations for the past year as a field worker for the Anti-Saloon League, in the small towns in the central section of Illinois. It says in substance: **A dry town is not complete ’til it is beautiful, and on the other hand, a town cannot easily start to be beautiful ’til it is dry.** The main feature of the book is the village improvement parade, in six sections, in which a long line of good humored people in grotesque or ornamental costumes, march by carrying banners which are embroidered with mottoes. These mottoes Mr. Lindsay intends to apply to Springfield, in his lectures, just as he has applied them to the villages in his book. They are as follows:

Note 2

Not surprisingly, the Ruskin Revival began with the talk “Child Life in Our Town.” The long road to a future “Springfield Magical,” Uncle Boy believed, must begin with the tiny steps of the youngest generation. The day of the opening lecture another unnamed Springfield newspaper announced what the audience could expect:

**Lecture by N. V. Lindsay.**

The first of the series of evening lectures for the benefit of the new Christian church, to be held in Ferguson Hall, will be given this evening. The subject of the lecture
will be “Local Child Life” and N. Vachal^ Lindsay will be the speaker. The meetings entire have been called the “Ruskin Revival” and the theme of all the addresses will be “Springfield Beautiful.”

The final argument in the session this evening on Springfield child life will be an artists^ adaptation of Lincoln’s Gettysburg speech, to the problems of the American arts. This is something absolutely new, though most Springfield citizens know that address by heart.

**The speaker will offer some special remarks on commission government.**

Leading up to this the speaker, Mr. Lindsay, will speak on various kinds of utopias: tin utopias, mule utopias, business utopias and then the utopia of the family life of the young John Ruskin. He will compare Ruskin’s preparation for his first great book [*Modern Painters*], with the average Springfield child’s preparation for citizenship.

He will show finally how the city should conserve its talented children to make it more musical, literary, artistic, architectural and beautiful, so that the next generation will find something very special to have in the town, and a solid basis for city patriotism.

The above newspaper articles are carefully pasted in a Lindsay notebook prepared for “The Ruskin Revival” (Virginia), along with desultory notes to assist the lecturer’s memory and organization. He opened the initial lecture by contrasting the relative affluence of Ruskin’s boyhood life in London with the average Springfield child’s limited resources. Even beauty learned in the Springfield schoolroom is lost once the child exits school and walks into “street ugliness,” thus allowing the speaker the chance to stress the need for “green parks” and beautiful architecture. The qualities of Ruskin’s young life that Vachel most emphasized, though, were “the intensity of [his] preparation in writing, drawing, etc.” and “His tremendous force for good in society.” These qualities led to the key question: “Why cannot every city school in America turn out a few such?” Other themes followed, scribbled on a page juxtaposed to sections of the Gettysburg Address:

*The Private Soldier at Gettysburg: Lincoln’s Utopia*

Why the art student must not depend on the rich.

Why he must not depend on the commercial world.

The city of his birth should make him and then use him.

**He should be trained to please the whole city—**

In its most joyous hour.

In its most refined hour.

In its most religious^ hour.

Thus will the Democratic Artist be made.

Thus will the True American City be made.

Patience, then, was the speaker’s final focus; and he recited two relevant poems: “On the Building of Springfield” (“A city is not builded in a day”) and “The Springfield of the Far Future” (“Some day our town will grow old / Filled with the fullness of time” (see *Poetry* 168-169, 75-76). The good news was saved for the very close: “These matters can be accomplished Unofficially.” What “We need most of all [is] the Holy Spirit of Art.”   [Note 13]
Springfield’s Illinois State Register—on Wednesday, December 14, 1910—summarized not only Vachel’s fifth and final lecture but also the preceding four efforts:

The first lecture in the course was on the talented children of Springfield, and the making of Springfield into such a place that their artistic ability be used for the glory of the whole city.

The second lecture quoted much of Ruskin on landscape, and showed the proper influence of landscape on Springfield architecture, as well as on Springfield’s soul.

The third lecture, based on Ruskin’s chapter on the nature of Gothic, discussed Springfield’s present buildings, and in detail her possible future buildings. Then using Ruskin’s principles, the lecture showed how every seemingly commonplace workman had some original and creative turn, if we only had a system of industry and city building that would bring it out. The speaker showed the beginnings of the doctrine of democratic art in Ruskin’s teaching.

The fourth lecture, “On Getting Things for Springfield” was based on Ruskin’s three declarations: (1) Life without industry is guilt, industry without art is brutality. (2) all great art is praise. (3) There is no wealth but LIFE.

The last lecture, on the “New Nationalism,” put the “New Localism” in contrast with the “New Materialism” and pleaded for the same interest in the Springfield city hall as in the capitol at Washington. The speaker outlined the work of the American Civic Association just now in session, and prophesied that many of its recommendations would be carried out a little while after the commission government is established in Springfield. He spoke of the Ruskin revival as a sort of preliminary step towards creating the sentiment for a better and more beautiful Springfield, the actual details to be taken up by more practical citizens. But he asserted that without this public sentiment, vague and footless as it may seem sometimes, no great practical work can be undertaken by the most practical reformer in the world.

In the detailed discussion of lecture five, the Register reporter used Vachel’s own words to show how Roosevelt’s “new nationalism” is the taproot of the “new localism”:

“Take, for instance, Roosevelt’s most popular doctrine, and the one which required the most initiative to introduce: conservation of natural resources. The word conservation has gone like wild fire all over the country, and is applied to all sorts of things.

“Let us apply it to Springfield. It could obviously be applied to the landscape, and the parks, but our greatest natural resources are the churches, schools and city patriots. They are not conserved for the city. Somehow their force is lost, and Springfield is not famous for these. Let us conserve them henceforth—our religion, education and patriotism. And let us also conserve every inch of natural beauty to build up the public heart.

To conclude, the Register writer announces: “Mr. Lindsay promises for his part to keep agitating, to teach the Y.M.C.A. boys to love drawing, and asks his friends to distribute the Village Magazine as a Christmas present to friends in small towns, when they are through with it. He hopes to follow it up with Ruskin revivals in the small places, in the spirit of the new localism, which was one half the theme of last night’s speech.” In obvious approval of this conclusion, Vachel underlined the first sentence in the paragraph. He also pasted a short clipping from another unnamed Springfield paper, a clipping that reminds the “Ruskin Revival”
audience where and when the concept of the “New Nationalism” entered American politics: “Theodore Roosevelt’s New Nationalism” will be the subject of the lecture at Ferguson Hall tonight by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, which will be given for the benefit of the new Christian church. This will be the first public discussion in Springfield of this question since Roosevelt proclaimed the new nationalism at Osawatomie, Kansas, in memory of John Brown [August 31, 1910].”

Nicholas Vachel Lindsay would, indeed, continue agitating in 1911; but he would first celebrate with his liberal friends. On January 2, 1911, the citizens of Springfield approved the commission form of city government, although fewer than half the electorate cast a ballot and the final majority was a mere 670 votes. Election for the mayor and the five commissioners was set for April 4, and one candidate was Vachel’s friend, Willis J. Spaulding. Appointed in 1909 as superintendent of the water works, Spaulding soon proved to be one of the more visionary politicians in the history of Springfield. Evidence of his prowess will have to wait for future chapters, but he seems to have been a student in the “Ruskin Revival” course (see the poster below). If so, Willis Spaulding’s final grade would have been A+. Meanwhile, the new nationalism took on entirely new meaning in the life of Uncle Boy. Nellie Tracy Vieira may have slammed shut the cottage door in Evanston, but the year 1911 saw doors opening to Nicholas Vachel Lindsay across the United States. With his focus on the “The New Localism,” he was on the threshold of becoming a new national figure.

Notes for Chapter 23

[Note 1] The Thirteenth National Convention of the Anti-Saloon League was held in Chicago, December 6-9, 1909. Dr. Charles Clayton Morrison (1874-1966), Disciples of Christ minister and Christian socialist, purchased The Christian Century magazine at a sheriff’s sale in September 1908. He paid $1,500 cash and was the only bidder for the bankrupt publication (600 subscribers: yearly subscription - $2). In order to concentrate on his new enterprise, Morrison resigned as pastor of Chicago’s Monroe Street Christian Church. For more on Charles Clayton Morrison and the Chicago Disciples, see Chapter 10, pp. 13-14.

[Note 2] The Anti-Saloon League heralded itself as a Protestant movement and promoted “Saloon Field Days” at participating churches. A League speaker, like Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, would take over a regular Sunday service, preach a temperance sermon, and then appeal for donations and subscriptions to the Anti-Saloon cause and publications, especially The American Issue periodical. In the words of Ernest H. Cherrington (1877-1950), editor-manager of the League’s publishing house (American Issue Publishing Company), the Anti-Saloon League was “the united Church Militant engaged in the overthrow of the liquor traffic.” Indeed, Uncle Boy
was not the only reformer “at war” with America at the beginning of twentieth-century. For a valuable history of the League (1893-1933), see: http://www.wpl.lib.oh.us/AntiSaloon/

[Note 3] Nellie’s insistence on her responsibilities and her “duty” led to Vachel’s sour-grapes poem: “Why I Fled from Duty” (Poetry 110). Conscientious Nellie drafted her important letters in pencil, keeping a record of what she sent to her correspondents. These drafts were shared with friend and editor, Elizabeth Thomas Fowler, and thus we have a good idea what Uncle Boy received. See Fowler 322-324.

[Note 4] The two girls in the East were likely Marjorie Hood (see Chapter 19, p. 18) and Rachel Hiller (Chapter 21, pp. 15-16). Since we know that Vachel had strong feelings for the latter, Hiller may have been the one who made him feel “sort of foolish.” Along with trying to rouse jealousy and along with outright flattery, Uncle Boy attempted to use guilt as a means of holding Nellie’s affections: “I wish I could tell you all I want to tell tonight, but it is a task utterly beyond me. Sometimes I think you are the beautiful tragedy of my life, my destiny of infinite sorrow. I feel as though I will some day^ go through the very valley of the shadow for you, yet somehow I cannot quite turn away. It is not right that we should turn away from each other, we have clasped hands in deep consecration^ and hands so held must not be lightly dropped.

“I am not the least bit sure that any happiness waits us except the happiness of devotion. That it may be, has a chance. Some day^ I may be happy in being utterly unselfish for your sake—our only happiness in the dreadful shadow being that hands clasp hands.

“Child, child, my sense of honor eats me to the bone. I cannot leave a stone unturned till I have won your heart. I tell you it is not right I should play with your curls and then turn away, even if it left you happier.

“I tell you there is a sort of consecration even in trifling with your curls. No man has the right, unless he is willing and ready to go through the shadow of death for their sake. To touch one curl is a consecration, I say.

“Write to me a proposal of marriage.” (January 23, 1910, Fowler 329-330)

[Note 5] Apparently Vachel made an abortive attempt to renew his relationship with Nellie Vieira during the summer, 1910. An undated draft of a letter from Nellie to “Dear Mr. Lindsay” survives in the Fowler edition, a draft written sometime between May 19 and August 10, 1910:

I suppose by this time you have lost all faith in me or my word. I won’t offer any excuse for not writing sooner—in fact there are too many to enumerate.

This summer has been one of surprises and disappointments, yet I can’t regret what I said to you that evening [unidentified].

This must be the end. There is no use going over the ground again. I must say I am sorry if I have caused you pain yet—no one knows what it all has cost me.

Sincerely

Nellie T. Vieira

I think it will be the best for both of us if we each follow our separate paths. I am seeing my duty more and more clearly as the months pass and realize I have decided aright. (Fowler 358-359)

[Note 6] Octavia Roberts (born August 26, 1875), the daughter of Charles David Roberts (a wealthy Springfield merchant) and Octavia Ridgely (the daughter of a wealthy Springfield banking family), was a graduate of Springfield High School (with honors). She had accepted a
teaching position at the prestigious Loring School, a school described in *The Outlook* 54 (July 25, 1896) as follows: “One of Chicago's leading schools for girls is the Loring School, on Prairie Avenue, founded in 1876 by Mrs. Stella D. Loring and Miss Howells, a sister of W. D. Howells. This school is now under the principalship of Mrs. Loring, a most cultured, scholarly woman, who, besides her large number of day pupils, receives into her family twelve young ladies as boarding pupils. The Loring School gives especial attention to college preparatory work, and its certificates admit to the leading colleges for women and co-educational universities without entrance examinations. At Mrs. Loring's home the pupils meet the literati of the city, as Mrs. Loring gives frequent evenings when distinguished people read papers or give musical recitals or meet with members of her family socially” (p. 173: available online at Google Books).

In summer-fall, 1909, Octavia was home in Springfield, ostensibly researching a book. She was already a published author, with several essays and stories to her credit: “The Badge of Servitude,” *American Magazine* 64 (May 1907), 19-28; “In a Far Country,” *American Magazine* 65 (December 1907), 175-184; “The Native Born,” *American Magazine* 66 (Aug 1908), 321-330; “A Minor Chord,” *American Magazine* 67 (December 1908), 156-163; “Our Townsman: Pictures of Lincoln as a Friend and Neighbor,” *Collier’s Weekly* 42 (February 12, 1909), 17; and “Yamazaki,” *American Magazine* 67 (March 1909), 491-498. The Roberts’ home was one short block east of Dr. Lindsay’s home. Financially, though, Octavia Roberts lived very distant from Nicholas Vachel Lindsay and Nellie Tracy Vieira. Octavia’s *American Magazine* publications listed above are available online at Google Books.

[Note 7] *The Appeal to Reason*, published in Girard, Kansas, was the socialist paper of Julius Augustus Wayland. Beginning August 31, 1895, the paper appeared under various titles until 1951. Wayland committed suicide in 1912, but the paper continued under his assistant, Fred D. Warren. G. K. Chesterton’s “sketch of Shaw” was likely *Heretics* (1905), one of the books on Nellie Vieira’s reading list (see Chapter 22, p. 18). Although Shaw and Chesterton were friends, they seldom agreed on religious and political issues, Shaw reflecting liberal-modernist views and Chesterton’s focus increasingly on the Catholic Church. [The second Chesterton book Uncle Boy recommended to Nellie is *Orthodoxy* (1908).] Vachel’s reference to “the North Avenue” and meditation likely describes St. John’s Mission, the Catholic Church located on the northeast corner of 5th Street and North Grand Avenue in Springfield. From his New York City days, Vachel relished any opportunity to meditate in a Roman Catholic venue. See especially “In the Immaculate Conception Church,” *Poetry* 273. Needless to say, Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay were not thrilled with this aspect of their son’s religious perspective.

[Note 8] In late September 1909, Vachel sent *The Tramp’s Excuse* and *War Bulletin Number Three* to Chicago Disciples cleric Edward Scribner Ames (1870-1958). “My best and most interested friends say that the War Bulletin number three is wild, illogical, inconsistent, anarchistic and obscure. It must be all there, for they all say so. Nevertheless, though it be a poor thing, it is my naked soul, an honest and tolerably well proportioned confession, a photograph of the ideas to which I hold most tenaciously. It does me this service at least. People cannot overestimate me or mistake me any more^. They know where I stand, though it be on most dubious ground. . . . One difficulty with the creed is its extreme condensation. I could write a whole Bulletin on each phrase. Some phrases, such as ‘Christ the singing Immanuel’ condense years of search and discovery. . . .” One month later (October 21, 1909), Dr. Ames received a second letter: “I am just beginning to hear [about] the book [*The Tramp’s Excuse*] from strangers not yet in my circle, and it braces me up wonderfully. There was such a consuming silence about War Bulletin Number Three that I was about to lose my nerve. . . . Every line in War Bulletin
Number Three records deep grooves in my soul, wrought by time and inveterate habit, and hardly a point in it but has been a matter of daily speculation and conversation sometime within the last few years. . . . People who absolutely reject it are absolutely rejecting me, and it is plain such people want me to be utterly and entirely different from myself” (Chénetier 37–41). Ames responded encouragingly just a day or so after receiving the second letter: “Your work interests me very much and I believe thoroughly in your sincerity. Besides you get home to the inner places. Your pen jabs clear through and lets in warmth and human feeling. . . . Do not get discouraged—folks cannot help reading your lines and looking at your pictures” (October 25, 1909, Virginia). Dr. Ames’s liberal views (he stressed the humanity of Jesus, questioned an afterlife, diminished the role of baptism, and opened church membership) endeared him to Vachel and other liberals, but placed him in conflict with conservative members of the Disciples’ faith, members such as Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay. For more on Ames, see Chapter 11 (Note 4), p. 23; and the website: http://www.pragmatism.org/research/ames.htm

[Note 9] The poem “The Moon-Worms,” later entitled “What the Hyena Said,” was first published in The Tramp’s Excuse (1909) without the drawing, which is dated “1910” (see Poetry 40-41). However, in the third and fourth editions of The Village Magazine (both issued in 1925), the author adds a note under the drawing: “A large colored cut-paper replica of the design I made for the Walls of the ‘Pig and the Goose Restaurant’ [1908],” thus supporting his insistence that his pictures generally preceded his poems.

[Note 10] The February 12, 1909, centennial celebration of Abraham Lincoln’s birth, the gala banquet held in Springfield’s Armory building, excluded African-Americans and brought another wave of damning publicity. After all, the banquet was held in the same venue that many African-Americans used as a refuge during the 1908 riot, and Abraham Lincoln’s son Robert was among the invited guests. In an effort to stem the negative tide of public opinion, organizers invited Booker T. Washington to address the 1910 banquet. Introduced by Illinois Governor Charles S. Deneen, Washington spoke on “Some Results of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.” Meanwhile, the banquet program reprinted Vachel’s lengthy poem “The Heroes of Time”; and this inclusion prompted an unnamed local newspaper to pontificate on the budding success of a Springfield native son. Entitled “SPRINGFIELD THE LITERARY CENTER,” the editorial was published on “Monday Evening, February 14, 1910,” and reads, in part:

Although Springfield comes pretty near being the center of the United States, and that means the center of the world; although as a progressive, lusty, growing city it has few if any rivals; although its sons have become immortal in the field of battle and in the equally important field of statesmanship; although its splendid daughters have distinguished themselves in nearly every line of achievement; although in material development it has set a pace to evoke the applause of the nations; it must be conceded that, heretofore, it has been singularly and deplorably lacking as a great literary center. . .

But now a shining star—or shall we say a comet?—begins to shoot across the local literary firmament, or, rather, let us say, the literary firmament of the nation.

Some of the Eastern critics appear to be disposed to take our Nicholas Vachel Lindsay at what, we hope, is his true worth and to regard him as a literary genius.

Your true genius ever is hard to analyze and so we of the local editorial tripods may be excused for having hesitated to place Mr. Lindsay in a class with Milton, Kipling, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and other recognized immortals, until he tendered further evidence.
But the more recent work of this prolific writer is of a character to force a somewhat belated approval, even from the critics of his own city, and, concededly, it ever is a hard thing for a poet, as for a prophet, to obtain honor in his own burg.

* * *

Mr. Lindsay’s somewhat elongated poem entitled “The Heroes of Time,” which illumined the otherwise prosy pages of the menu of the Lincoln banquet, contains lines that would not be unworthy of Edwin Markham or even Tennyson himself.

Certainly they are better than anything that England’s poet laureate, Alfred Austin, ever produced. Listen to this:

“Would that in body and spirit Shakespeare came
Visible emperor of the deeds of Time,
With Justice still the genius of his rhyme,
Giving each man his due, each passion grace,
Impartial as the rain from Heaven’s face.”

Surely there is genuine genius in that!

The editorial writer objects to Vachel’s description of the Sangamon River as “a weedy stream” and to the image of “the ghosts of the buffaloes” trampling Lincoln’s grave, but the valuation ends on a positive note:

But a truce to such quibbling! Let us rather judge the poem by its lofty aims than by its minor flaws. Nicholas Vachel Lindsay may give to our city that which it long has lacked, standing as a great literary center. So let all of us aid him to the best of our ability.”

[Note 11] Although seven hundred copies of The Village Magazine (1910) were printed, the publication continues to be quite rare. A complete copy is now online at:

www.VachelLindsayHome.org

Choose “Biography” and, on the next page, “Essays & Stories.”

[Note 12] It is likely that a small reprinting of The Village Magazine (1910) occurred for the “Ruskin Revival.” There are copies that omit the plate published inside the front cover (see the sample pages below), but instead include the following “Ruskin Revival” announcement:

Note 13] Vachel’s Ruskin Revival notebook (Virginia) contains more than eighty pages of notes and clippings pertaining to his subject and his course. He himself, though, provided the necessary Occam’s razor, cutting through the detail by claiming that his years in Springfield (1908-1911), following New York City and Chicago, focused simply on “The New Localism.”
Photograph of the “Revival” poster listing Vachel’s “students”: note the name Willis Spaulding.
Sample Pages from *The Village Magazine* (1910)

[The entire *Magazine* is online: see Note 11 above.]

This is the plate printed on the back of the front cover. This plate is omitted from *The Village Magazine* (1910) copies that have the “Ruskin Revival” agenda pasted on the opening page (see Note 12 above).
ON CONVERSION.

In protracted meeting the burden of a certain kind of sin rolls off the shoulders as it did in Pilgrim’s progress. When Christian knelt at the Cross, Priceless elasticity often comes down from the clouds. I have gone through this convulsion, as have many of my friends, and it counts as a milestone on the journey. But there are other conversions, and other kinds of sin to be rid of. The pilgrimage to complete civilization is a long one. In America the repentance the Christian most needs is least mentioned in his hour of prayer. If he would truly be reconciled to God He must be rid of his sins against loneliness. The villages as a whole are thus converted, when they go dry, church bells are rung, the children march, the women pray. The boozers are black with wrath, but the place is inevitably converted from the stupidity and ugliness of the saloon. The citizens would stare if you told them they had been converted to the God of beauty, yet they have taken the first great step in his praise. The parsonages are repainted, more children’s shoes are sold by the store around the corner; the Fourth of July procession is nearer to a pageant. There is increasing of laughter in the fields, less heartbreak in the dark. The village belles become sacred vestals. More good hats and dresses are seen, more flower gardens are planted. No man has read Shelley’s hymn to intellectual beauty, no man has purchased a history of painting, a history of architecture, a text book on landscape gardening or village improvement yet instinctively they build their altars to the unknown God, the radiant one, He whom ignorantly they worship should be declared unto them in his fullness.


[Also see below.]
“The Shield of Lucifer” offers protection for the artist when ignorant townspeople call him derogatory names and scoff because he is still living at home with his parent—and without a job. The drawing is in the second section of *The Village Magazine* (1910).
AN EDITORIAL FOR THE ART STUDENT WHO HAS
RETURNED TO THE VILLAGE.

No matter what your study, if you pursue it to the bitter end, you found yourself lured from Chicago
To New York. Thence you were led on to London, Paris, Berlin or Munich. The only thing that could hold
you back was lack of funds. Assuming you went this path, as so many of my acquaintances have done,
you finally found yourself in culture, a citizen of Europe. The first two sentences of the Gettysburg
Address are engraved on every native soul. So you have come back all the way to the old home. Many
good patriots, not knowing the treasures accumulating at the crossroads since they left, have
compromised on New York or Chicago. They are an example to you in your hours of defeat. For
they are happy in the cities. Many sensitive fellows keep laughing, though they use all their strength
to produce delicate, highly wrought work. To be true to democracy is also their task, as they
know. They fail, but smile. It is indeed difficult to discover the taste of the man in the street.
He seems, from the standpoint of culture, to be a mechanical toy, amused by clockwork. He is
clipped to a terrible uniformity by the sharp edges of life. He knows who won the last base ball
game and who may be the next president. He knows the names of the grand opera singers he has
heard on the phonograph. He turns over luxuriously in his subconscious soul the tunes he has heard
on the self-playing piano in front of the vaudeville theatre. He will read a poem if it is telegraphed
across the country, with a good newspaper story to start it. All of his thinking is done by tele-
graph and fancies that are too delicate to be expressed by the comic supplement seldom read
him. Dominated by a switchboard civilization, he moves in grooves from one clockwork splendor
to another. He reads the same set of magazines from New York to San Francisco. The magazines
are great. Yet they make for uniformity. What a task then has the conscientious art-democ-
crat, to find the individual, delicate, immortal soul of this creature, dressed in a hat, Schaffner-
and Max suit and trying to look just like a hat, Schaffner-and Max advertisement! For the most
part the really trained man can find little common ground. When Poe's poems went the rounds
of the newspapers, when the world's fair stirred the land for a season, when the servant in the
house had his triumph, when Markham for a moment was heard, democracy and art seemed to meet.
But think of the thousands of enterprises just as fine, but lacking advertising value, or mere
size, that have been scornfully ignored by Mister Hart, Schaffner-Max! They were poured forth
with joy; by the European standard they would have been immortal. By our relentless standard,
which we can never escape, they are valueless as the dollar bills of the Southern Confederacy.

The city craftsmen who have really embodied the problem of the mob, determined to be masters
whether they are orthodox or not, are to be commended. They are on the whole as well placed
as the village designer, but no more so. It is a noble thing to build a successful skyscraper. But
there will be the same art laughter in your heart if you give some grace to the freight elevator
at the wire-station. Once in a while an O. Henry becomes a story writer, still remaining a journalist,
exquisitely combining the two. But it is just as exquisite and meritorious a thing to edit the

[Continued on the next page.]
The significant editorial in the fourth and final section of *The Village Magazine* (1910): see “A Call for Letters” below.
This is the request for letters commenting on the underlined passages in “An Editorial for the Art Student Who Has Returned to the Village.” The entire Village Magazine (1910), but especially this editorial, would soon open the doors of The Cliff Dwellers (the Chicago literary club founded in 1907) and the Poetry Society of America (the New York City literary society founded in 1910) to the likes of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay. See the next chapter. Despite Vachel’s assumption that his “gratuitous tract” would be his “farewell appearance as an Ishmaelite,” it was, in reality, the beginning of his career as a national and then international artist. The Magazine would also enjoy three expanded editions: one in 1920 and two in 1925.
CONCERNING THE ACORNS
ON THE COVER, AND THROUGH THE BOOK.

"GREAT OAKS FROM LITTLE ACORNS GROW,"
EACH ACORN IS A MAGAZINE
OF LEAVES AND TWIGS IN EMBRYO;
THE STORMIEST FOREST EVER SEEN
WAS ONCE A HICKORY NUT OR SO,
A MAPLE SEED SOME BIRD LET GO,
A BITTER ACORN, BROWN AND GREEN.

MAYBE THIS VILLAGE MAGAZINE
WILL SOME VAST TREE OF FANCY BRING
WHEN YOU AND I ON CRUTCHES LEAN,
GROWN GRAY AND LOST TO EVERYTHING.

DOWN DROPS THE ACORN, HARD AND MEAN.
LET GOOD KINE EAT IT IF THEY WILL,
LET SWINE AND SWINEHERDS DEEM IT SWEET,
LET FAIRIES Nibble IT, UNSEEN,
LET SQUIRRELS FIND FATNESS IN ITS MEAT,
BUT IF ALL LIFE SHALL GIVE IT SCORN
AND ALL THINGS TREAD IT UNDERFEET,
A TITAN OAK SHALL RISE COMPLETE
SHELTERING BIRDS THAT GREET THE MORN.

This is the final poem in The Village Magazine (1910), and the explanation of why acorn drawings are sprinkled throughout this online edition of Uncle Boy.
This is the final page of *The Village Magazine* (1910) and of “The Village Improvement Parade.” In early 1913, outlining his life story for Peter Clark Macfarlane (see “Works Cited”), Vachel claimed: “I can be said to have studied pen and ink since 1897—and to have quit when the Village Magazine was done in the fall of 1910. The Village Improvement Parade—poor as it is—is the climax of this 13 years of endeavor, and most of what I can do artistically has gone into it.”
The editorial from an unnamed Springfield newspaper is published below (see Note 10 above). The original is pasted in Frances Frazee Hamilton’s scrapbook (see “Works Cited”):

Interestingly, the writer’s description of Vachel as a comet echoes the same image used during his Hiram days: see Chapter 7 (p. 13) and Chapter 8 (p. 16).

Appendix

[Since writing this chapter, I have received permission from Ms. Cheryl Schnirring, Manuscript Manager at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, to publish a typescript copy of Chapter XIX, “Springfield Has a Poet,” from Octavia Roberts Corneau’s undated and unpublished memoir: The Road of Remembrance (collected in the Octavia Roberts Corneau, Container List, Box Two, Folder One at the library). This manuscript (184 pp.) was obviously available to biographer Eleanor Ruggles, and the entire work includes a wealth of material that is relevant to Uncle Boy only in a peripheral way. Chapter XIX (pp. 141-149), however, focuses on Octavia’s relationship with Vachel. It begins with a few details we have already covered and provides important information for the next chapter of Uncle Boy.]

Chapter XIX: “Springfield Has a Poet”

In the days when I went to the little school kept by old Mr. Brooks, old Mrs. Brooks, and Miss Minnie Brooks [see Uncle Boy, Chapter 3, p. 4], I was aware of a frame house at the other end of the block, opposite of the Governor’s mansion. Springfield had so many frame houses,
comfortably large, and in constant need of paint owing to the plumes of smoke floating over the town, that I should never have marked it except for one strange feature. On the front lawn stood an old kitchen stove and out of each stove-hole red geraniums sprang in a riot of bloom. I knew vaguely that a doctor and his family lived there, and young as I was, I dimly realized that someone in the household was a person of marked individuality, not to say eccentricity, to ornament the lawn in such an unusual manner. Not until years later when the “gay nineties” were over and the new century was young, did that house take on more meaning for me.

I had been away from Springfield for some years, and in that time I had published a few short stories in magazines. As fewer people tried to write in those days than at the present this modest accomplishment was sufficient to cause me to be spoken of as an “author” – in a town where the majority of the citizens were far more interested in getting the coal out of the earth, or the corn to grow on its surface, than in doing what a little girl once called “sitting and just supposing.”

Hitherto I had “supposed” alone, but soon after I came back to Springfield I was greeted by the news that another “author” had arrived; that he had had a short story and a poem published in The Outlook! His name was Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, the son of Dr. Thomas Vachel Lindsay; and that he lived in the house where the red geraniums used to sprout from the range in the lawn. He, too, it seemed, had been long away from Springfield, first at college, then in the Art Schools of New York and Chicago, but in his boyhood he had gone to the public schools with the boys with whom I had grown up.

He had, I was told, expressed an interest in meeting me, the lone other “author,” but no one had offered to introduce him for he was such an “odd stick” they were sure that I should not be able to make anything out of him. I expressed a willingness to try, but that willingness met with no encouragement from the friends we had in common, and so, time passed, the author of two short stories sitting on the piazza of her red brick house on one corner, the author of a short story and a poem, sitting in a frame house scarcely two blocks away.

Then one hot summer’s night I was called to the telephone and a man’s voice began rather sententiously, “This is Nicolas Vachel Lindsay. I desire to make your acquaintance.”

I told him that was very easy to do and in a few moments he was sitting beside me in the porch swing in the inky blackness of an exceedingly hot Illinois night. In a mutual love of life and letters we found conversation easy and agreeable. I discovered nothing especially “odd” about him, except that when he was amused he burst into Gargantuan laughter. After an hour or so in the blistering heat he arose to depart. Then he said earnestly and impulsively “If we were to meet again I should not know you. Would you mind stepping into the house so that I may see your face?”

Fortunately I was never self conscious and although my face would not have “launched a thousand ships,” nor for that matter as much as a skiff, I obligingly went into the hall and stood under the light. He put one hand on my shoulder and turned my face upward, running his eyes over every plane as a sculptor might have done – such a look might have sufficed Orpheus. It was so impersonal, however, that it was not offensive, and gave me the opportunity at the same time to see what manner of man he was.

He was, I discovered, of medium height, with a most arresting face. The bony structure was not unlike an Indian’s but the coloring belied the hawk-like profile, for his eyes were of the
palest blue, fringed with lashes even lighter than his hair. Above his eyes sprang two bony projections, not unlike the mythical horns of Moses. His mouth was large with a humorous twist.

He might have been a faun or satyr or some other strange figure of mythology as he stood there peering at me in the half light of the hall, or, putting fancy aside, I was conscious of some quality that reminded me of itinerant evangelists. As my friends warned me it was an “odd stick” who stood there beside me, but, odd as he was, he had been far from dull company and I asked him to come again.

After that we saw each other frequently. He liked to drop in at queer hours, at nine in the morning, or late at night when all the world was making ready for bed. Although we had both been born in Springfield our backgrounds had been so dissimilar that at times our respective points of view needed interpreting. He had been reared in the faith of the Campbellites, or Church of the Disciples. I was an Episcopalian. Everything I and my cousins had done he had been taught to think of as “worldly” and so under suspicion. His distrust of what he called “society” was almost amusing. He had never danced, nor played golf nor tennis, nor belonged to a country club, nor gone about with young people in what I thought of as a normal way. He had been bred as a lone wolf and if he was not the center of every group he was unhappy and apt to speak slightingly of its members. He was at this time a paid speaker for the Anti-Saloon League. I had been accustomed to seeing wine served freely, and could not believe it led to perdition. If it had not been for a mutual interest in literature we should have had slight grounds for intimacy.

I not only enjoyed hearing him read the poems he was writing and sending forth with so little success, I liked even better listening to those strange stories of his long walks across the country when he had subsisted by trading his poems for bread. Sometimes his adventures, as he related them, struck me as so strange and grotesque that I could scarcely believe that he was in earnest, though his serious manner convinced me that he was not jesting.

Sometimes I found the stories amusing and when I could persuade him to take a humorous angle his strange cackling laugh burst forth in recognition of the fact that there was something odd in an able bodied young man attempting to trade a thin pamphlet of verse for a clean collar, or a lift over a river.

He always left me with innumerable pictures of those amazing experiences – his appearance in mountain villages in the south where he could hardly convince the inhabitants that he was not a revenue officer; the day he bathed stark naked in seven waterfalls; the night he had recited Swinburne to the farm hands gathered about him in the hay. His adventures were so naive and extraordinary that if the young man by my side had suddenly shown me the ears and hoofs of a faun I should not have been surprised. After such an evening someone was sure to say to me the next day “I saw you out walking with Vachel Lindsay. Can you make anything out of him?”

I was not sure that I could, and I have to acknowledge that at this period I had no great faith in his genius. His mind, although fertile and original seemed wild and undisciplined. Then, too, he seemed younger than he was with his childish love of candy, soda water and the moving-pictures, which were in their crude infancy.

All this time he was earning small sums of money through his lecturing for the Anti-Saloon League, and this money he immediately spent in having his poems printed with his own illustrations, which he distributed to the right and the left. He liked to take a theme and “worry” it. For a long period the Moon was his subject. In poem after poem he played with the idea that
it had a different aspect for diverse creatures. The rattle snake took it for a little prairie dog. The carpenter thought it was a cottage with a door. The gray-winged fairy was convinced it was a gong.

Those of us who saw him often grew so weary of the moon poems which he was always pulling out of his pocket to read on every opportunity, that, one night, waxing merry, we composed poems (far from brilliant efforts) on what everything in creation thought of one Vachel Lindsay. He good naturedly led the laughter that followed, but the moon poems flowed on.

We used to visit some delightful people who lived on a large farm near Springfield. He was never happier than when he was in the open country and he exulted here in rare hospitality, stimulating conversation and the sight of the acres of waving corn and wheat. One of his short poems Life Transcendent was born of this visit. [See Poetry 273.]

One day we watched with our hostess the men loading the hay wagons. I said impulsively that I’d always longed to pitch hay. He was so utterly indifferent to convention or ridicule that he immediately ran and brought two pitchforks, giving me the smaller one. The farm hands were grinning in derision of such folly but we pitched with the best of them, then climbing up on the toppling load we rode back to the farm house. I never see a load of hay to this day without thinking, “I wanted to pitch hay and I’ve done so; I wanted to ride on a hay wagon, and I have” – only nobody had told me that hay was always full of the many insects of the fields disturbed so rudely by the mowing, and that they would sting and bite the romantic passengers at every vulnerable and exposed spot. Alas, for romance!

He had often spoken of the summers his family had spent camping out in the Rocky Mountains, and when I said that such vacations sounded delightful, to my surprise his mother called on me and asked me to join the camp. I joyfully accepted and it was arranged that I should go in August. Long before that time the poet left Springfield for one of his tramps with the usual plan of trading poems for bread. If he carried out his intention he expected to walk in upon us on some August day.

He came to say good-bye before he started on his long trek, neatly attired, with a small pack on his back, which contained not only the few pieces of clothing he carried but the pamphlets of poems that were to be his substitute for specie. “Take this and keep it for me” he said dramatically, handing me a worn little purse. “I shall have nothing to do with money until my return” and with a wave of his hand he strode down the street toward the west. When he had gone I opened the worn little purse, and found that it contained a solitary dime—which was literally all his worldly wealth.

August found me in the Lindsay camp in Colorado, some forty-five miles from Denver. After our cottage in northern Michigan with every modern convenience, it seemed strange indeed to live in tents, sleep on straw, and break the slight film of ice on our water pitchers every morning before bathing, but I had only to raise my eyes to the surrounding mountains in that lovely valley to be compensated.

The Lindsays were experienced campers and I was amazed to find how comfortable we were on our crude beds, with a hot rock at our feet on cold nights and we fared well also at our dining table under the trees, adorned with great bouquets of wild flowers, with brook trout and wild strawberry short-cakes on gala days.
On one bright day the poet walked in upon us as calmly as if it were an everyday occurrence to stroll from Illinois to Colorado. He was brimming over with his experiences and with new ideas for poems. Here in this simple background, living a primitive life, he no longer seemed the odd figure of the town. All that he did seemed natural and right, but sometimes, even on the lonely mountain trails he caused the miners to stare, for in response to the usual country greeting of a short nod, he used to remove his broad felt hat in a sweeping gesture, bending his body in a deep obeisance and calling out in a ringing voice “I wish you well” to their manifest astonishment.

When night fell our neighbors at the nearest ranch would stroll over to see us, and we’d sit about the stove in the main tent and exchange stories, and listen to Vachel recite his poems that, so far, it was so difficult to get published. I shall always remember one night when the rain lashed our frail shelter, and our ranch friends plowed through a quagmire to get to us, of his reciting a poem he had written to commemorate the opening of the Panama Canal when “at last flags of the Pacific and Atlantic meet” in which he had symbolized the orient as the lotus, and the occident as the rose. The lines sounded very musical as he chanted them, in his peculiar fashion, against that accompaniment of the lashing rain:

“The lotus speaks of slumber
The rose is as a dart,
The lotus is Nirvana
The rose is Mary’s heart.

“Hail to their loves, ye peoples
Behold a world-wind blows,
That aids the ivory lotus,
To wed the red, red rose.”

On another day when we sat together half way up a mountain, he told me of his plan to use the rhythm of some old gospel hymns as patterns for some poems, believing that tunes that had so profoundly moved great masses of men were trustworthy models. He spoke of the hymn “Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?” as an instance, and was amazed that it was unknown to me. It was hard for him to realize how different our religious backgrounds were, for the hymns I knew were decorous tunes, sung by choir boys in surplices to scant congregations whose only contribution to the music was a sibilant murmuring. I had no experience of great revivals where congregations sang themselves into frenzies of enthusiasm.

From this idea of his for using the rhythm of gospel hymns General Booth Enters Heaven was born a few months later, and after that it was comparatively easy for him to win recognition as a poet. I like to think that the splendid lines with the recurring refrain “Are you washed in the Blood of the Lamb?” was born that day when we climbed higher and higher, leaving the valley far below.