SOME ASPECTS OF VACHEL LINDSAY'S AMERICANISM

AS REFLECTED IN HIS WRITINGS

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THESIS

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CHAPTER I

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Unlike many American and English poets, who worked in an atmosphere of plenty and of leisure, Vachel Lindsay wrote in poverty and in the fatigue of a round of constant lecturing. He labored through hours pervaded with restlessness and with a mind of mixed perspectives and strange visions. Some understanding of these things is expressed by Mrs. Lindsay in the following paragraph:

> Much of Vachel's suffering was conditioned by his own personal endowment and special problems. To me it is a miracle that out of it, and it was always pain and darkness at the root and unhealed wounds that grew deeper with the years, came not only the magnificent songs, the noble and valiant statement of truth and beauty, the mystic's vision, but until time and physical weakness pulled him down with a sense of ultimate impending defeat, a gallantry and high spirits, a deep communion with ultimate primal joys, such as laughter, rhythm, the play spirit, the roots of the country in which he lived, its legend and meaning, the color and significance of the many streams which have gone into the making of it; and always the ability to pierce below the shoddy and the temporal into the underlying reality, and to make clear to thousands of people, who are for that stronger and more aware, who could understand his idiom, his dramatizing of it for them, and be lifted a step beyond their own dull plane, without realizing what had happened to them. It was a deeply sacrificial

> life, and a glorious one, and it did not end in defeat. It will never end.[1]

Into a community steeped in American tradition and replete with legends immortalized in song and story, Vachel Lindsay was born on November 10, 1879. The house in which he was born and in which he died was only four blocks from the home of Abraham Lincoln. It had been owned previously by a sister and brother-in-law of Mary Todd Lincoln -- Mr. and Mrs. C. M. Smith. The poet's father was Dr. Vachel Thomas Lindsay, a Kentuckian by birth, whose father was an important landowner in Kentucky before the Civil War. That civil conflict, through the devastation of land and the confiscation of livestock, brought poverty to the Lindsay family, an injustice to which the old grandfather of the poet never became reconciled. Implacable and wrathful to the end, he lived in blindness in an old log cabin in Kentucky.

> To the last he carried a gold-headed cane, he wore a long-tailed coat and an old-fashioned plug hat. A strange spectacle he presented, tapping ahead with his gold-headed cane to find the way, and venting his indignation at the captains and politicians, and their principles of Constitutional construction which had brought him to this pass in his declining years.[2]

He often encouraged his son, the father of the poet, to forge ahead to a successful life against the odds of war

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[1] Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, p. viii.

[2] Ibid., p. 5.

and its drawbacks. Such an indomitable spirit characterized the pioneers who crossed the Alleghenies and the hardy men and women who wrested a place to live from the prairies of Illinois; and in no generation of Americans is it more noticeable, perhaps, than in the poet himself. He was reared in an atmosphere that made him a spokesman well informed to sing of his own locality and to tell of an Americanism that is distinctive.

Doctor Lindsay, Vachel's father, was a child during the Civil War and bore its marks to the end of his life. He received a common school education in Kentucky, after which he taught school and worked on the farm, studying medicine at night. At the age of twenty-six, he was graduated from Miami Medical College at Cincinnati and took up practice at Cotton Hill, near Springfield, Illinois. In 1875, he married a Miss Couch who died the same year. Sometime afterward he went to Vienna to study in the hospitals and universities there. On the boat over, a romance was begun which led, upon his return to America, to his marriage with Esther Catharine Frazee.

Ephraim Samuel Frazee, the maternal grandfather of the poet, was quite different in every way from blind Grandfather Lindsay. By 1860, he had an elaborate farm home on the 640 acres in Rush County, Indiana, inherited from his father. When the Civil War broke out, he was thirty-seven years old and the father of seven children.

He never went into the army, but his heart was with the North. When Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Ephraim Frazee stood for three hours ringing the bell which was used for calling the farm hands to dinner.[3] This grandfather of the poet soon became a leader in his county. He was the first farmer in the neighborhood to have a buggy, a reaper, a wheat binder, screens for windows, a washing machine, and other labor-saving devices. He was a devoted preacher of the gospel and a member of the church of which Alexander Campbell was the founder. To this towering figure of staunch character and unwavering integrity, Vachel Lindsay later paid tribute in his poem "The Proud Farmer." This poem was one of three which more than any others Lindsay recited on his walking tour through the West. Taken as a triad the three poems hold in solution his theory of American civilization.

> Into the acres of the newborn state
> He poured his strength, and plowed his ancient name,
> And when the traders followed him, he stood
> Towering above their furtive souls and tame.
>
> That brow without a stain, that fearless eye
> Oft left the passing stranger wondering
> To find such knighthood in the sprawling land,
> To see a democrat well-nigh a king.
> . . . . . .
>
> His plowmen-neighbors were as lords to him.
> His was an ironside, democratic pride.
> He served a rigid Christ, but served him well --
> And, for a lifetime, saved the countryside.[4]
> . . . . . .

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[3] Ibid., p. 14.

[4] Vachel Lindsay, "The Proud Farmer," Collected Poems, pp. 71-72.

Esther Catharine Frazee, the poet's mother, was the first-born child of this dynamic Ephraim Frazee. She had qualities of character very much like her father. After attending preparatory school, she entered Glendale Female College, from which she was graduated in 1869 as valedictorian with highest honors. She became instructor of mathematics at Glendale, where she took up the study of painting. Later, as a teacher of art at Hocker College in Kentucky, she was associated with Eudora Lindsay, sister of Dr. Lindsay. When Eudora and Esther decided on a trip to Europe, and it was learned in the Frazee household that Dr. Lindsay, Eudora's brother, would accompany them for study in Vienna, grave concern for the proprieties was felt. Consequently Dr. Lindsay was invited to the Frazee home, where he received an inspection from the Reverend Mr. Frazee. Approval having been granted, the three set off for the European trip which ended in marriage for Esther and Dr. Lindsay. After a ceremonious wedding in the Frazee home, Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay went to Springfield, where they settled in the house which was their home until their death. Dr. Lindsay was a robust, vigorous man, the typical country physician. He never received large fees and sometimes he received no fees at all, but he maintained a comfortable home and gave his children a college education. He never adjusted himself, however, to a changing world

following the Civil War, apparently being of the opinion that if he ignored the changes they would not effect him. He drove a horse and buggy to the last, even after automobiles had become quite common. In Springfield, which had grown to be a city of 60,000 in 1914, it was no unusual sight to see old Dr. Lindsay driving a horse through the streets, the country physician to the end. In the poem "Dr. Mohawk," the poet left his picture of his father, who died in 1918. Although in some ways a very indulgent parent in view of the fact that he contributed to Vachel's support long after the average parent expects his sons to be self-supporting, Dr. Lindsay was a stern and imtimidating father to one of the temperament of his only son. Instead of bridging the gap between father and son, Mrs. Lindsay apparently coddled and dominated Vachel all her years with him. To the petted curly-haired mother's boy, Dr. Lindsay was a towering figure of a man, swashbuckling and breathing fire. He was a "Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, an old son of the sun-fire, doctor and mid-wife."[5] But Dr. Lindsay was also, as his son remembered him, a good provider, a stern reprover and a wise friend. He was a man with a strong sense of duty, and a study of his qualities and characteristics will convince one that in his labors and struggles he did his best without ceasing and without

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[5]Masters, Vachel Lindsay, p. 10.

complaint. The atmosphere of divided counsel that pervaded the Lindsay homelife, however, the stern manner of the father and the alternating coddling and domination of the mother, left their marks on the son.

From his mother, the poet apparently inherited his love for art and poetry and his passion for beauty and truth. The catalogue of her activities includes writing, organizing societies, urging civic reforms, the study of religious literature, and myriads of other things in which we see the origin of much of what the poet became:

> of all the themes he treated, of all the aspirations that he cultivated, of the sincerity and consecration with which he tried to be an artist, of the thoroughly-bred and authentic power with which he became an American poet, speaking for that Americanism which was the dream of the founders of the country and to which the poet tried to call his country again.[6]

Mrs. Lindsay made much of the fact that Vachel, her only son, was born with what is called a prophet's veil or a caul over his face. This was believed to make one so born sharper of inner vision -- a dreamer of dreams though unable to understand the outside world. In Lindsay's case there was apparent truth in this belief since all his life he was an ardent dreamer and idealist, never entirely able to analyze anything, himself least of all. From birth, Vachel was a rather delicate child and was spoiled and petted by his devoted mother. He never appeared as robust

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[6] Ibid., p. 22.

and vigorous as did his father. Because of his frail youth, his mother taught him at home during his early years. He was kept in curls and white pique long past the usual age for boys, and his first days in grammar school, at the age of eleven, were made miserable by huskier boys who resented his eccentricities in dress and precocity in manner. From his earliest memory, his mother instilled in him an ambition which she had for herself -- to be an artist. In the poem dedicated to his mother, Lindsay has left an idealistic, if mythical, portrayal of her:

> There dwelt a widow learned and devout,
> Behind our hamlet on the eastern hill.
> . . . . . .
> The mother had a hearth that would not quench,
> The deathless embers fought the creeping gloom.
> She said to us who came with wondering eyes --
> "This is a magic fire, a magic room."
> The pine burned out, but still the coal glowed on.
> Her grave grew old beneath the pear-tree shade,
> And yet her crumbling home enshrined the light.
> . . . . . .
> Then sturdy beggars, needing fagots, came
> One at a time, and stole the walls and floor.
> They left a naked stone, but how it blazed!
> And in the thunderstorm it flared the more.
> And now it was that men were heard to say,
> "This light should be beloved by all the town."
> At last they made the slope a place of prayer,
> Where marvellous thoughts from God came sweeping down.
> They left their churches crumbling in the sun
> They met on that soft hill, one brotherhood.
> . . . . . .
> Higher and higher burns the eastern steep,
> Showing the roads that march from every place,
> A steady beacon o'er the weary leagues,
> At dead of night it lights the traveller's face!
> Thus has the widow conquered half the earth,

She who increased in faith, though all alone,
Who kept her empty house a magic place,
Has made the town a holy angel's throne.[7]

When near the close of his senior year in high school Lindsay was asked by Susan Wilcox, an instructor and understanding friend, what he intended to do in the future, he replied, "If I were an orphan, I should be an artist, but I'm not, so I'm going to college and be a doctor."[8] He entered Hiram College in Ohio in 1897. His father wished him to study medicine and be prepared to take over his practice, but Lindsay hated chemistry, mathematics, and materia medica. He more or less followed a way of education all his own. The last year he spent at Hiram, he seldom went to class, preferring to sit in the library of some professor's home and read Kipling. After almost three years, he left college with the standing of perhaps a full sophomore. He had decided that he wished to go to art school in Chicago. This he did, living a more or less hand-to-mouth existence. He worked for a while at Marshall Field and Company for fifteen dollars a week, but he gave up the job when he had to work at night. After about four years in art school in Chicago, he went to New York to study art. He had begun sending his poems to various magazines by

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[7]Vachel Lindsay, "The Hearth Eternal," Collected Poems, pp. 345-346.

[8]Masters, Vachel Lindsay, p. 42.

this time, though none was accepted. About this time, too, he tried, with negligible success, peddling some of his poetry in business places in New York. He could get nowhere in his work, however. He was impractical, confused in mind, under-nourished in body, resentful against business America. He was like the soul of Saint Francis reincarnate, the prototype of Johnny Appleseed; so he took to the open road and beggary. In March of the year 1906 he and a friend, Edward Broderick, sailed for Jacksonville, Florida. From there, he began to walk back north. He has given an account of this walk through Florida, Georgia, and the mountain country of Kentucky in his first prose work, A Handy Guide for Beggars, dedicated to the hundred new poets in the land, to the younger sons of the wide earth, to the runaway girls and boys, to the prodigals, wasting their substance in riotous living, to heretics of whatever school to whom life is a rebellion with banners, to all the children of Don Quixote who see giants where most folk see windmills.[9] The rules of the road which he evolved from this journey and which he followed on subsequent walking trips over the country are given in the preface of this prose work:

(1) Keep away from the cities;
(2) Keep away from the railroads;
(3) Have nothing to do with money and carry no baggage.

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[9]Vachel Lindsay, A Handy Guide for Beggars, p. vii.

(4) Ask for dinner about quarter after eleven;
(5) Ask for supper, lodging and breakfast about quarter of five;
(6) Travel alone;
(7) Be neat, deliberate, chaste and civil;
(8) Preach the Gospel of Beauty.[10]

Although on a few occasions he secured a lecture hall and a few listeners to whom he recited his poems and expounded his Gospel of Beauty, for the most part he travelled, a penniless wayfarer, through the unfrequented sections of Florida, Georgia, and Kentucky, spending the night wherever he could beg a bed when night overtook him and eating the fare set before the family. Then in the light of the pine fagots in the fireplace, he read his rhymes to the assembled family. He met with hospitality and inhospitality, with gross ignorance and stupidity and with graciousness and dignity born of innate culture. He was welcomed here and rebuffed there; one night, he slept, lying on a blanket, in the corner of a firelit room, the next, in the spotless spare-room of a prosperous farmer. From such direct contact with the people of a nation, Lindsay developed a facility for "laying his ear to the ground" which no other member of his literary group ever possessed.

Lindsay's most extended walking trip was taken in 1912, when he set out from Springfield with the purpose of walking to California. The wheat harvest in Kansas was in

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[10] Ibid., p. viii.

full swing, and on occasion he stopped for several days to work in the harvest fields. For such work he usually received, besides three meals and a bed, $2.50 each day. The money he made in this way, however, he did not keep. Some of it he used to replace worn-out clothes; the remainder he sent to his mother.

These walking trips across portions of the United States were in the manner of revolt against the American commercial standard, against the type of life later set forth in Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt and Main Street. They were renunciations as well, somewhat similar to Whitman's abandonment of the plug hat and frock coat for the flannel shirt and sombrero and Emerson's resignation of the pulpit. What good these renunciations did can never be determined, but what good the trips did him is obvious. He returned to Springfield a developed poet, fast becoming a famous one, for from these journeys came such poems as "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven," and the vibrant and colorful masterpiece, "The Santa Fe Trail." No other American writer succeeded in nationalizing himself as did Lindsay. To speak with an American voice, one must be all American. With the possible exception of Mark Twain, no American writer of importance has ever geographically experienced the United States as Lindsay did when he thumbed his nose at convention and took to the open road.

In 1922 Lindsay's mother died, and this event appeared to disrupt his remaining years. A disagreement between him and his two sisters, one living in China and the other in Cleveland, lost him the occupancy of the old homestead which he loved. Thereafter, until the last few years of his life, he moved from place to place, always feeling, in his impulsive way, that at last he had found a permanent dwelling place only to become unhappy and distraught, longing for the old home in Springfield. In the years following World War I he began making appearances in lecture tours which took him over the nation. Dr. A. J. Armstrong, Professor of English at Baylor University, Waco, and the founder of the famous Browning Library, published, in 1940, some of the letters which Lindsay wrote him, as manager of his tours, over the period of years from 1918 to 1925. These letters, some of which are of a confidential nature, show Lindsay's enthusiasm for reaching the heart of America with his gospel and show as well his impulsiveness, his capacity for friendship and at times his despondency and unhappiness. On one of his lecture tours in California he met Miss Elizabeth Conner whom he married in 1925 at the age of forty-six. They had two children, a girl and a boy.

Twice during these lecture tours Lindsay believed he had found a place to settle permanently and continue his writing. One of these places of refuge was at the Gulfport

School for Girls in Gulfport, Mississippi, where he was a sort of resident poet during the school year of 1923-1924. But this was not a happy experience and was complicated further by his falling in love with a young girl of twenty who did not return his love. The other location was in Spokane, Washington, where he remained from the spring of 1924 until 1929. But Spokane was not a happy choice for Lindsay either. He felt that those who were responsible for inviting him to become a resident of Spokane wished to manage his life for him. They wished him to be a social lion, to become a Republican, to join the Episcopalian Church, and to write like Eddie Guest! Finally in the spring of 1929 he moved with his wife and children home to Springfield.

But he was weary and tired of the constant lecturing and travelling, an old man before his time, and huge debts pushed him on. Improvident and impractical, he never managed to keep his affairs in order. Often he gave to charity money he needed for himself. In 1928, the staff of Poetry, a magazine of verse, gave to Lindsay for the poem "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" the Award of Honor of $500, the largest prize in their long list of awards. This Award of Honor was given

> for the high distinction of his best work, which, in the opinion of the Committee, shows original genius,

> deriving to an extraordinary degree from nobody but himself.[11]

Unmindful of the fact that he needed the money, Lindsay gave the entire sum to the editor of some obscure, undeserving magazine.

The volume of Lindsay's publications was sufficient, if it had been handled in a practical manner, to have made him financially independent. In addition to the Handy Guide for Beggars, he wrote four prose works, none of which was of much significance. Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty, published in 1916, is an account of the walking trip of 1912. The Art of the Moving Picture, published in 1915, is a development of his theory of art, particularly that pertaining to symbols and hieroglyphics. The Golden Book of Springfield is a lengthy verbose representation of the Springfield of 2018. Published in 1920, it is a monstrosity of symbolism and allegorical obscurity. The last prose work, The Litany of Washington Street, was published in 1929. Although this is an attempt at the celebration of heroes of American history, it is a miserable failure, and that Lindsay found a publisher is cause for wonder.

Lindsay's first volume of verse was The Congo and Other Poems, published in 1914, and shortly afterward, in 1916,

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[11]Harriet Monroe, "Vachel Lindsay," Poetry, XXXIX (January, 1932), 206-212.

came General William Booth Enters Into Heaven. It was the appearance of this poem which brought him fame. This publication was followed the ensuing year by The Chinese Nightingale and Other Peems. The title poem Lindsay considered the best of all he wrote. In 1920 appeared The Golden Whales of California. This book contains several World War poems, including "Statue of Old Andrew Jackson" and the one addressed to Joyce Kilmer. Collected Poems includes practically all of Lindsay's important poems and was first issued in 1923. The edition of 1925 was expanded somewhat and illustrations were added.

In 1921 Lindsay and Stephen Graham, British author and walking enthusiast, took a six-week tramp from Glacier Park to Alberta, Canada. The following year Graham published a book about the trip, Tramping With a Poet Through the Rockies. In 1923 appeared Lindsay's Going-to-the-Sun, which he called a sequel and a reply to Graham's book. Going-to-the-Sun was sharply criticized by Harriet Monroe, editor of Poetry, as having been written to accompany the drawings rather than the other way around. Lindsay and Elizabeth Conner spent their honeymoon tramping in Glacier Park from August 8 to September 15, 1925. Going-to-the-Stars was published in 1926 and contains poems about the places they visited. The only poems of importance in this volume are "Three Hours" and "These Are the Young," a poem

which shows Lindsay's regret in the passing of his youth. In 1926 appeared another volume of verse, The Candle in the Cabin, dedicated to his wife. The Johnny Appleseed poems appeared in a separate volume in 1928. Although a book of selected poems was issued in 1931, the final book of new verse was Every Soul Is a Circus, published in 1929. The only significant poem in this volume is "The Virginians Are Coming Again," a poetic summary of the prose work The Litany of Washington Street.

In the fall of 1931 Lindsay returned from a lecture tour which had taken him to Washington. For some reason, something he said or something he did, his Washington audience walked from the auditorium during his lecture. This weighed heavily upon his mind and caused him great mortification. In November of that year he spoke at the First Christian Church in Springfield. When he found the audience large and cordial, he felt, with something of his old enthusiasm, that at last he had won Springfield. But the winning came too late. He was fast failing in health and in bed a great deal of the time. He was having auditory hallucinations, thinking that he heard voices plotting his death and the death of his wife. At other times he would be in high spirits, and the physician who was attending him realized that this passing from melancholy to happiness was an ominous sign. The night he died Mrs. Lindsay

was up with him until the early hours. When he became calm, she fell asleep and was awakened by fast, heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. He fell in the upstairs hall after having drunk lysol. When the doctor arrived, Lindsay had ceased to breathe. His last words were "They tried to get me; I got them first." This was on December 5, 1931.

CHAPTER II

LINDSAY'S LOVE OF DEMOCRACY

Growing up in a home presided over by a mother who knew only Kentucky and Illinois, and even those interpreted through an early European trip, and supported by a father whose limited democratic ideas recognized only Kentucky and Kentuckians in Illinois, Lindsay did not have much opportunity to hear about the East and about New England. From the birth of the nation, these regions had dominated the politics, the finance, and the culture of the country. The people of western Illinois knew little of New York and Boston and cared even less. No eastern pattern of culture and behavior was mapped out and followed. Out of no eastern mold, but formed and shaped after the standards of life, the absorbing interests and the tastes peculiar to the locality and to the level of culture to which he was born, Lindsay was more nearly a representative of democratic America than could have been possible had he been reared in New England.

Not since Walt Whitman and Jack London has America produced a literary figure so democratic and so distinct. Lindsay occupies an isolated position among poets even in

his own country. The character of his work was determined in great measure by his environment. No man born and bred elsewhere than America could have written poetry like his. His poetry has a definitely communal character and is written to be read aloud, chanted, even sung. It has characteristic simplicity, garish color, and healthy coarseness. Lindsay is always at his best when writing about something noisy, colorful, exciting, vigorous, and commonplace. He is the only poet, perhaps, who has addressed himself, although not exclusively, to an unlettered audience. No man ever loved the American people more than Lindsay, and no one had a loftier vision of his country or tried harder to help his fellow citizens realize that vision. A part of the difficulty here, however, lay in the fact that Lindsay could never see others as individuals but always as "the people" who were to be elevated and reformed. From the beginning, Lindsay was led by certain articles of faith -- faith in beauty, faith in goodness, belief in the splendor of common things and of ordinary experiences. He knew of the littleness of man, but he also knew of the greatness. Man's greatness is implied in all of his poems; it is there without reservation in such poems as "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" and "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight."

When Lindsay published his "General William Booth,"

the condition of poetry in America was at rather low ebb. Whitman had been dead for about twenty years, and during that time poets of various abilities had emerged only, in most instances, to fade in importance. During his five years in New York, Lindsay had contact with magazine editors and should have known what they wanted in the way of contributions. But Lindsay was not one who had to search for a subject; he had a message. He was not interested in poetic theories, in perfecting a technique or in quibbling over the finer points in the structure of a poem. He had something to tell and was burning to tell it.

> Lindsay's interest, his passion was America, the American heroes, American democracy, beauty and religion; and in finding the soul of the U. S. A. and giving it voice. So on the one hand he was oblivious of the dead corpse of poetry lying about him mesmerically squeaking for culture, technique and form, and on the other hand he did not hear the raging schools quickly arising around him. . . . From the beginning, poetry with Lindsay was not technique, not fine writing, not culture, but it was courage, faith, vision, great belief in American democracy.[1]

In an interview in 1926, Lindsay said,

> The things most worthwhile are one's own hearth and neighborhood. We should make our own home and neighborhood the most democratic, the most beautiful and the holiest in the world.[2]

Lindsay's feeling toward America is expressed in a letter written to his wife in Spokane in 1926:

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[1]Masters, Vachel Lindsay, p. 68.

[2]"Why Vachel Lindsay Swears by the Log Cabin," Literary Digest, LXXXVIII (February 20, 1926), 50.

> I am in sight of a new nationalism in poetry, possibly best voiced from the Spokane region after we have really made friends with some injuns. I see this whole land as a unit. I have travelled over it so much, and a thousand songs and drawings have almost reached the surface about it. There is something in me that is patriotic; I just can't help it, and I see the whole land as a unit from the beginning. Patriotism like love is a most imperfect passion, and I surely have it, with all its imperfections. The fact that it is generally tied up with war has almost spoiled it for me, but just the same I have seen this land as a whole and as a peaceful splendor, and it really means a great deal to me. I seem to have a kind of heartache for every state in the Union, no matter how silly that may seem. I love the United States,however strange that may be and in spite of all the struggle of this tour, I love the land I have passed over and the land I have looked upon.[3]

The three -- democracy, beauty, goodness -- Vachel Lindsay believed in and fought for with wholehearted devotion. His writings as well as actions championed the good and the beautiful in a democratic America. Democracy was not just a theory with Lindsay. He was the great American democrat, not because he followed a political theory but because he simply was that. He was first and foremost a believer in Jeffersonian Democracy, that democracy which held to a deep and abiding faith in the ability of the common man in America to govern himself. Jefferson believed that so long as America kept the simplicity of her life and the door of opportunity open for every man to own his own home and to make a comfortable living in a wholesome way,

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[3]Masters, op. cit., p. 346.

she would be capable of governing herself. He feared the power of wealth and a strongly centralized government and would keep all matters pertaining to government close to the people. On his major premise -- belief in the common man -- Jefferson worked out his theory of government, and on this premise Lindsay based his faith in democracy.

Lindsay's prose works, although in no way measuring up to the delightful quality of some of his poetry, show his democratic spirit. The two books which were written about his walking trips, A Handy Guide for Beggars and Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty, are in themselves short dissertations on the democratic way of life. That he should so have outraged the traditions to which he was born as to make these trips of vagabondage showed him to be the stuff of which pioneers are made, but that he could meet people on all cultural levels, enjoying the hospitality each had to offer, showed his belief in a more thoroughgoing democracy than that attributed to the American heroes he so much admired.

More ambitious than the tramp books is Lindsay's prose work, The Art of the Moving Picture. Doubtless his interest in the moving picture may be explained in two ways. First, as an art student, he was naturally attracted by the possibilities of the cinema; second, as an apostle of democracy, he was interested in the most democratic form

of art the world knows. Through this unlimited medium he would wish his gospel of goodness and of beauty to be broadcast. In his book on the cinema, Lindsay classifies pictures as action pictures, intimate pictures, and splendor pictures. Action pictures he describes as sculpture-in-motion, intimate pictures as paintings-in-motion, and splendor pictures as architecture-in-motion. He advances the opinion that the best censorship is a public feeling for beauty. He advocates the movie house as an art gallery and recommends suppressing music and making the moving picture audience more conversational by taking a nightly ballot on the favorite film. Lindsay maintains that California, as the natural movie background, has the possibility of developing a unique cultural leverage on America. He asserts that the movie cuts deeper into some stratifications of society than the newspaper or the book have ever done. He tries to show that the

> destiny of America from many aspects may be bound up in what the prophet-wizards among her photo-playwrights and producers mark out for her, for those things which a whole nation dares to hope for, it may in the end attain.[4]

In closing this prose work on the moving picture in America, Lindsay says:

> Our democratic dream has been a middle-class aspiration built on a body of toil-saddened minds. The piles beneath the castle of our near-democratic

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[4]Lindsay, The Art of the Moving Picture, p. 7.

> arts were rotting for lack of folk-imagination. The Man with the Hoe has no spark in his brain. But now a light is blazing. We can build the American soul broad-based from the foundations. We can begin with dreams the veriest stone-club warrior can understand, and as far as an appeal to the eye can do it, lead him in fancy through every phase of life to the apocalyptic splendors.[5]

In Lindsay's poetry as well as in his prose may be found his articles of faith. Threaded through his poems, from first to last, may be traced the theme of democracy. The very rhythm of much of Lindsay's poetry is like the syncopated tempo of the music of his time, a rhythm that the average American was familiar with and understood. His subjects, too, were taken from familiar common things, and through the text of poem after poem, the spirit of democracy burns.

About the time Lindsay first came into prominence, a new kind of dance music was sweeping America. This music included not only Negro comic songs such as "Just Because She Made Them Goo-Goo Eyes" and "Alabama Jubilee" but also dance variations known as "The Rag" and "The Tango," all modified one-steps, indicative of the informal steps which matched the mood of the dancer as well as the mood of the music and to which the more formal dance routines were giving way. Long before this time Lindsay had been groping for a way to express his own themes in the voice of his own time. In much of his poetry, he caught this rhythm peculiar

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[5]Ibid., p. 263.

to a pre-war America. The medium may be a hymn tune of the pioneers such as that used in the poem, "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven," which is sung to the tune of "The Blood of the Lamb," but there is also present a rhythmic beat and syncopation which expresses the spontaneity and unconventionality of the American people. Much of the music of that period was called jazz, and Lindsay has, on numerous occasions, been dubbed in newspaper lingo the jazz-poet. This name he resented, yet Beethoven a hundred years earlier had used in his music the same pauses, silences and accentuations which Lindsay used in some of his poetry. But whether music be that which is peculiarly expressive of a country's growth, the stirring hymns of a world groping through darkness to the light of faith, or the ageless compositions of the masters, it is always the most democratic medium of mankind. Many of Lindsay's poems were written to be sung, chanted and danced; others are pure lyrics.

"General William Booth Enters Into Heaven," chanted to the hymn tune, "The Blood of the Lamb," is one of Lindsay's best. To an appreciable extent, the rhythm of this poem expresses the personality of the poet with its vigorous, decisive tempo and the strongly accented first syllable like the planting of a man's foot, hard and firm. Only one who sincerely felt a yearning over the common man could

have dealt so sympathetically with such a subject. No place is as democratic as the Salvation Army, where any man in need may apply for help if he is willing to mingle with the individuals usually to be found there. In this poem these individuals are paraded before the reader's eyes -- walking lepers, lurching bravos, drabs from the alleyways, drug fiends pale, and "unwashed legions with the ways of death" -- following Booth into Heaven. In the sheerest simplicity Heaven has been translated into the typical American town, and Jesus as the Mayor comes out of the courthouse door. Suddenly "the lame were straightened, withered limbs uncurled," as Jesus spread his hands in blessing over the motley crowd. Then Booth, who has drawn all these diverse natures to the love of Heaven, sees King Jesus face to face and receives his robe and crown. Considered to be among Lindsay's best, "General William Booth" was written on the walking trip in 1912. It raised him from the obscurity of a vagabond tramp to fame. This poem as well as the others mentioned in this chapter may be found in Collected Poems.

Another of Lindsay's best known poems is "The Santa Fe Trail," which he calls a humoresque. The marginal directions for reading the poem aloud indicate to some extent the manner of Lindsay's rendition. This poem, too, came out of the walking trip West in 1912. Day after day he

walked the Santa Fe Trail or sat beside it, watching the United States go by. The poet has gathered the memories of those experiences into a song of power and beauty. From the East in the early morning the watcher by the roadside hears a soft humming and a crooning. "The crooning turns to a sunrise singing," and the cars going West hurtle by. There are

> Cars from Concord, Niagara, Boston,
> Cars from Topeka, Emporia, Austin

The people of the United States, ever moving from West to East, from East to West, "are hunting the goals that they understand." The reader catches the feeling of restlessness characteristic of the nation. From the pioneer in the covered wagon who crossed the Appalachians and then the Rockies, blazing a trail for the railroads and highways to follow, to the traveller of the present to whom the automobile is a necessity, the people of the United States have been pushing West to new frontiers. Whether their goal be to settle new land, to mine for gold, to build new cities, or simply to search for adventure, the feeling they have shared appears to be that over-the-horizon is better than here. Each man is king; he is free to follow the beckoning highroad in search of his goal.

The rhythm of this poem is capricious, beginning with the movement of the whizzing cars,

Butting through the delicate mists of the morning
. . . . . .
Scooting past the cattle on the thousand hills;

dropping to the chant of the roadside watcher, "I am a tramp by the long trail's border"; returning to the harsh

Listen to the iron-horns, ripping, racking.
Listen to the quack-horns, slack and clacking;

finally fading away into the song of the Rachel-Jane

Singing o'er the fairy plain: --
"Sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet.
Love and glory,
Stars and rain,
Sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet . . ."

The democracy of a nation is interpreted in the traffic of a continent.

"The Congo," which Lindsay calls a study of the Negro race, was in greatest demand of all the poems he recited on the lecture platform; indeed, he came to hate the sound of it, so weary did he grow of the constant touring. But it stands near the top among his compositions. The poem has three divisions; the first division deals with the basic savagery of the race, the second with their irrepressible high spirits, and the third with the hope of their religion. All the lines are written in a style suggestive of the primitive, at times unrestrained, at others mysterious and concealing.

Then I heard the boom of the blood-lust song
And a thigh-bone beating on a tin-pan gong.
And "Blood" screamed the whistles and the
fifes of the warriors,
"Blood" screamed the skull-faced, lean witch-
doctors.

The Negro's natural urge to bedeck his body, his love of dancing, and his innate gregariousness are recounted. As deep-rooted as their savagery and as basic as their vanity is the fervor of their religion.

> And they all repented, a thousand strong
> From their stupor and savagery and sin and
> wrong
> And slammed with their hymn books till they
> shook the room
> With "glory, glory, glory,"
> And "Boom, boom, boom."

"The Booker Washington Trilogy," composed of the three poems "Simon Legree," "Old John Brown," and "King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba," is another comment on the Negro race. Although his grandfather Lindsay owned slaves in Kentucky, and his father was reared by a Negro mammy, Lindsay felt the injustice of slavery. His democratic creed included freedom for the Negro as well as for the white man. Simon Legree had made it hard for the Negro. He had "eyes like dirt" and cheeks that were "fish belly white." But the Negro had his revenge when Old John Brown came along -- Old John Brown who sits in Palestine

> To judge the world.
> His hunting-dogs
> At his feet are curled.
> His eyes half closed
> But John Brown sees
> The ends of the earth,
> The Day of Doom.
> And his shotgun lies
> Across his knees --

"King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba" is a poem game which Lindsay often read on the lecture platform. The audience,

according to directions, responded at the appropriate places.

The contribution of the Negro to American folklore and music is inestimable. Indeed it may be that the only purely American music we have is that which developed through the Negro. From the melancholy nostalgic crooning in the Southern cotton fields to the spirituals and semi-classics of stage and radio, Negro music has become a part of our national heritage. The Negro himself, racial problem or not, is a part of America and has contributed to its history almost from the beginning. It is fitting that he be celebrated in song by a poet as national as Lindsay, a man free from race prejudice, a believer in the common man.

Lindsay's belief in justice and equal opportunity for every man dominates his social poems. The philosophy of "The Leaden-Eyed" is similar to that found in Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt" and in Edwin Markham's "The Man with the Hoe."

> Let not young souls be smothered out before
> They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.
> It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull,
> Its poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed.
> Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly,
> Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap,
> Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve,
> Not that they die, but that they die like sheep.

In this category is "The Golden Whales of California," a poem of freshness and imagery but which lacked the completeness necessary to make it a success. A plea for equality and justice, too, is in "The Cornfields,"

The cornfields rise above mankind,
Lifting white torches to the blue,
Each season not ashamed to be
Magnificently decked for you.

What right have you to call them yours,
And in brute lust of riches burn
Without some radiant penance wrought
Some beautiful, devout return,

and in "Why I Voted the Socialist Ticket,"

I am unjust, but I can strive for justice,
My life's unkind, but I can vote for kindness.
I, the unloving, say life should be lovely.
I, that am blind, cry out against my blindness.

"In a Curse for Kings" the feeling is almost that of bitterness.

. . . . . .

Curse me the fiddling, twiddling diplomats,
Haggling here, plotting and hatching there,
Who make the kind world but their game of cards,
Till millions die at turning of a hair.

What punishment will Heaven devise for these
Who win by others' sweat and hardihood,
Who make men into stinking vultures' meat,
Saying to evil still "Be thou my good"?

Although back of Lindsay's poems there was no philosophy such as "He prayeth best who loveth best," which Coleridge used in "The Ancient Mariner," nevertheless he did love and wish to protect the things of nature and the beasts of burden serving mankind. In "The Santa Fe Trail" a note of whimsy emerges from the boom and bustle of a continent's traffic in his plea for the lowly grasshopper.

I want live things in their pride to remain.
I will not harm one grasshopper vain
Though he eats a hole in my shirt like a door.

I let him out, give him one chance more.
Perhaps, while he gnaws my hat in his whim,
Grasshopper lyrics occur to him.

An incident which occurred on the walking trip West in 1912 became the subject of a poem written in 1917. He had interrupted the walking trip to work for a few days in a Kansas wheat field. The owner of the wheat was attempting to break to the reaper a wild broncho. In his poem "The Broncho That Would Not Be Broken" Lindsay deplores the cruelty of taking the glory of freedom from the wild colt and asserts that when the horse dies in the Kansas wheat fields, he dies from a broken heart because he "would not be broken of dancing."

Since a study of Lindsay's poems on national heroes is a study of his democratic faith, most of the discussion to follow in Chapter III is pertinent here. Indeed, Chapter III may be considered a continuation of the discussion of Lindsay's democracy. The same is true of some of the poems in the subsequent chapter on Lindsay's Gospel of Beauty, particularly those on the poet's hopes and plans for Springfield; for to Lindsay a beautiful America was a democratic America. His was a love of country and a faith in democracy which saw beyond his own nation and beyond a passive state of goodness and beauty. Goodness and beauty to be enduring must permeate and infiltrate the whole world, binding the nations together in one brotherhood.

CHAPTER III

POEMS WHICH SHOW THE INFLUENCE OF GREAT AMERICANS

Vachel Lindsay was the most American of all poets. He may be grouped with this poet or with that, but his voice is his own. It has been possible to say of every other American poet that he is kin to some American or English poet. Not so Vachel Lindsay. He sings of Americanism but not as Whitman did; he indulges in evangelism but not as Whittier; he turns to mystical chants but not as Emerson did; he uses the repetend as did Poe, but his ideas and Poe's are as far apart as the poles. Since the average person looks for glamor and color away from home, it would have been easy for Lindsay to believe that romance was to be found everywhere rather than in Illinois. But he was reared in a country colored with history and legend, and he took the homespun tales he heard and wove them into colorful tapestry. Lindsay was a native of the Lincoln country, more native than any other American writer, and he grew up in Lincoln's own town of Springfield. Every day he listened to stories of happenings of fifty years before his birth, to recountings of the early revivals of Peter Cartright,

nationally-famous preacher, to descriptions of the activities of Lincoln and Douglas, and from the Kentuckians in Illinois, to legends of Daniel Boone.

Lindsay was a greedy reader. The list of matter he read resembles a card file of a good-sized library. Included were works ranging from McGuffey's Reader to Howell's History of the World. He read all of Shakespeare, Hamlet many times, but nothing from Chaucer, Bacon, Homer or Virgil, and no philosophy of any sort. He appeared to reach the conclusions he did reach entirely without outside influence. Had he been guided in his reading, perhaps more time for his genius to flower could have been gained. Not until he had reached maturity did he appear to find Whitman, although in some ways he was more like Whitman than any other American. He seemed to realize at a much later period than he should have that Whitman's political faith was his own, that Whitman was a Jeffersonian just as he had always been. In his excessive Americanism, as in other ways, Lindsay resembled Whitman, but "the relation was like that of a gifted son who does not resemble his father, while using modified, and in some respects finer, gifts to an entirely different end."[1]

Many of Lindsay's poems and some of his prose were inspired by and written about great national heroes. He

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[1]Masters, op. cit., p. 257.

was tremendously influenced by the great defenders of democracy -- Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Lincoln, Bryan, Wilson -- and his poems in praise of these men were in most part worthy of the subject. The prose work The Litany of Washington Street might have been more exact and coherent had Lindsay known more constitutional history. This work, although verbose and obscure, does show Lindsay's devotion to Americanism and his efforts to pull America back to a vision almost forgotten. Since he is always better in poetry, however, than in prose, he accomplished his purpose much better in the poem "The Virginians Are Coming Again." This poem ranks with the best that Lindsay did. He calls it a summary of The Litany of Washington Street, but it is much more than that. The poet longs for the fall of the economic regime which came into power with the Civil War. He asks for another Robert E. Lee to ride gallantly before his men. In this poem, Lindsay appears to have moved his heart entirely south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

. . . . . .

Babbitt, your tribe is passing away.
This is the end of your infamous day.
The Virginians are coming again.

. . . . . .

Do you think that all youth is but grist to your
mill
And what you dare plan for them, boys will fulfill?
The next generation is free. You are gone.
Out of your loins, to your utmost confusion
The Virginians are coming again.

. . . . . .

Let no musician, with blotter and pad
Scribble his pot-hooks to make the song sad.
  Find
Your own rhythm
When Robert E. Lee
Gallops once more to the plain from the sea.
Give the rebel yell every river they gain
Hear Lee's light cavalry rhyme with rain.
In the star-proud,natural fury of men
The Virginians are coming again.[3]

In his devotion to Andrew Jackson, Lindsay is in another way like Whitman. His Grandfather and Grandmother Frazee, born in 1824 and 1827, respectively, lived during the time of Jackson's fame. Jackson became President in 1828 and died in 1847. It is probable that these two talked to their grandson of Jackson's famous ways and deeds. At any rate, he heard much about Jackson in his youth and was without doubt drawn to him because of Jackson's staunch belief in a democratic way of life. Jackson was very different in background, character and mentality from the line of presidents -- Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and John Quincy Adams -- who had preceded him. The South, the West, and the poorer classes in the East found democracy incarnate in "Old Hickory," and voted solidly for his election. To them he seemed the embodiment of everyday humanity, a man of the people from the common ranks, one whom they could understand and who could understand them. But he was no ordinary man whom they had chosen. Although his knowledge of books was not great,

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[3]Vachel Lindsay, "The Virginians Are Coming Again," Every Soul Is a Circus, pp. 39-43.

he was far from illiterate, and his judgment was quick and firm. He possessed courage and strength, tenacity of purpose, and an unwavering honesty, and he believed in democracy to a greater extent than any previous president, with the possible exception of Jefferson. He was chosen because the people believed he would give them a "square deal," and that he would release the government from the hands of the rich and conservative classes. One can imagine with what interest Lindsay listened to the deeds of this man of the people, particularly when much of the recounting was done by those who had lived during Jackson's lifetime.

Lindsay wrote his first poem about Jackson in 1918, during the first World War. As an introduction to the poem Lindsay wrote :

> When the statue of Andrew Jackson before the White House in Washington is removed, America is doomed. The nobler days of America's innocence, in which it was set up, always have a special tang for those who are tasty. But this is not all. It is only the America that has the courage of her complete past that can hold up her head in the world of artists, priests, and sages. It is for us to put the iron dog and deer back upon the lawn, the John Rogers group back into the parlor, and get new inspiration from these and from Andrew Jackson ramping in bronze replica in New Orleans, Nashville and Washington, and add to them a sense of humor, till it becomes a sense of beauty that will resist the merely dulcet and affettuoso.[4]

This poem, "The Status of Old Andrew Jackson," shows Lindsay's characteristic use of exaggeration to express

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[4]Lindsay, Collected Poems, p. 90.

an idea.

> Andrew Jackson was eight feet tall.
> His arm was a hickory limb and a maul.
> His sword was so long he dragged it on the ground.
> Every friend was an equal. Every foe was a hound.[5]

To Lindsay, as to the voters of the early nineteenth century who elected Jackson President, the important thing was that Jackson was a Democrat, the champion of the people, holding to his course despite powerful opposition. Only the rich, Lindsay asserts, want Jackson's name to grow dim. As he recalls Jackson's victory against the British at New Orleans when he "beat them out of their elegant jeans," he reminds the nation that he continues to fight "to set the sad big world to rights."

At the Jefferson Birthday Dinner, April 15, 1925, in Spokane, Washington, Lindsay read his "Old, Old, Old, Old Andrew Jackson." This poem is one of eloquence. It carries a specific characterization of America, because it is written around an American who strove to remake America in the image of her original makers. Lindsay expressed in this poem the essential spirit of Jackson. The times and circumstances surrounding his rise to the Presidency had made him a leader of the rising democracy of the nation, and it is doubtful whether any other man of his day could have carried out his task with greater ability or success.

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[5] Ibid.

Although

> Some are born to be bullied and chidden,
> To be bridled
> And ridden,
> Born to be harried or whipped or hidden;

others like Jackson are

> Born
> Booted and spurred to ride,
> To make the aristocrats stand aside.
> I dreamed, as a boy, of Andrew Jackson,
> Relentless, furious, high in his pride,
> Democracy irresistible,
> Booted and spurred
> To ride.

The repetend of this poem

> Oh the long, dusty highway,
> Oh, the rain,
> Oh, the sunburnt men![6]

gives it a feeling of sadness. Lindsay directed this poem to be read in a vigorous oratorical style, the manner in which he doubtless read it at the Jefferson Birthday Dinner in 1925. But it is more of an elegy than an oration.

Lindsay's late grammar and high school years were filled with a dramatic stir throughout the country. No period in American history, perhaps, except when the country was at war, has been more colorful. During these years came an economic depression such as few people had seen and which was denounced in speech and the press. All of this made a deep impression on the youthful Lindsay. There in Springfield, the capital of Illinois, many things of

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[6]Lindsay, Selected Poems, pp. 27-39.

interest were taking place. Living near the Executive Mansion, Lindsay often saw the Governor, John P. Altgeld, going about his official duties. He maintained an admiration for Altgeld all his life and made him famous in the poem "The Eagle That Is Forgotten." Altgeld, in the latter part of the 1880's, wrote for the press on economic questions, on taxation and prisons, on juvenile offenders, and on police brutality, protesting against certain practices in the state. He protested against sending Federal troops to Chicago during a strike in 1894 and was flayed by the press. Lindsay may have seen in Altgeld another Lincoln, although the two were quite unlike. But it is likely that Lindsay's devotion to Altgeld was based on certain qualities of character Altgeld reputedly had; for example, that of never shirking a disagreeable task, never running from danger, and never standing back when a worthy cause was failing and needed help. Altgeld was also associated in Lindsay's boyhood memories with William Jennings Bryan, whom he idealized. When Bryan came to Springfield in his campaign of 1896, he was introduced by Altgeld.

Everything that Altgeld lived and died for, politically speaking, is a dead issue, but the spirit that made him fight deserves to live and does live in Lindsay's poem. It is a beautiful tribute to a man who fought, as did the author himself, for what he believed to be right.

Sleep softly . . . eagle forgotten . . . under the stone.
Time has its way with you there, and the clay has its own.
. . . . . .
Where are those lovers of yours, on what name do they call
The lost, that in armies wept over your funeral pall?
They call on the names of a hundred high-valiant ones,
A hundred white eagles have risen the sons of your sons,
The zeal in their wings is a zeal that your dreaming began
The valor that wore out your soul in the service of man.

Sleep softly . . . eagle forgotten . . . under the stone,
Time has its way with you there and the clay has its own.
Sleep on, O brave-hearted, O wise man, that kindled the flame --
To live in mankind, is far more than to live in a name,
To live in mankind, far, far more . . . than to live in a name.[7]

When a lad of sixteen, Lindsay saw William Jennings Bryan, who came to Springfield in his campaign for the Presidency in 1896. The two important questions in the Presidential campaign of that year were prosperity and free silver, with the tariff a subsidiary one. The irony of the situation was that the depression of the early nineties was practically over by 1896 and that new deposits of gold which had been discovered were to lay the ghost of the silver question for many years to come. But by 1896 gold had become the symbol in the eyes of vast numbers of people of the money power of Wall Street, of a plutocracy riding roughshod over the ordinary individual. This situation made the campaign of that year almost a religious

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[7] Collected Poems, p. 95.

crusade. The real issue in the campaign was the rights of the common man as represented by Bryan arraigned against the powers of plutocracy, which threatened to make a machine of the government and slaves of its citizens. Although Bryan's views on gold and silver may have been erroneous, few people in public life have been guided by a more genuine desire to serve the people. Pleading for the little business man, the farmer, the country storekeeper, the wage earner, Bryan spoke in their name. Lindsay heard him protest against the demonetization of silver, against the oppression of monopolies, against the tariff, against everything that made the poor man poorer and the rich man richer. Lindsay was at an impressionable age, and his sensitive mind took in the happenings about him. He was of a definite environment and of a people that made Bryan's coming to Springfield mean more to him in Americanism than it would have meant to a young poet in, for example, New England. In his way, Lindsay was like Bryan. He, too, undertook to change conditions about him, to make his city and his country freer and more beautiful. Bryan was defeated in his campaign, a fact which Lindsay laments in his poem on Bryan, and Lindsay went to his grave with his social dreams unrealized, but such poems as "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan" are eloquent testimony of his devotion to democracy.

This poem was an indictment of dishonesty in government, of bribery and shady political machinations. The Republican Party, backed by Mark Hanna of Ohio, spent $7,000,000 on the campaign to put McKinley in office as against $300,000 with which Bryan had to fight. Farmers were offered five-year renewals of mortgages on easy terms if McKinley were elected, and factory hands were paid off the day before election and told that there would be no further work for them if Bryan won. Well might the poet ask

> Where is that boy, that Heaven-born Bryan,
> That Homer Bryan, who sang from the West?

For Bryan's defeat was more than the defeat of a Presidential candidate. It was

> Defeat of alfalfa and the Mariposa lily.
> Defeat of the Pacific and the long Mississippi.
> Defeat of the young by the old and silly.
> Defeat of tornadoes by the poison vats supreme.
> Defeat of my boyhood, defeat of my dream.[8]

Lindsay was a folk poet. His love of folklore is typified in his long poem "In Praise of Johnny Appleseed." Johnny Appleseed was John Chapman, who was born in New England in 1775 and died near Fort Wayne in 1847. For nearly fifty years, he went barefoot through the wilderness, clothed only in an old sack with holes for his head and arms. He sowed the seed for orchards for the pioneer

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[8]"Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan," ibid., pp. 103-104.

children of a coming generation. So did Lindsay, on his walking trips across the nation, sow the seed of democracy, goodness, and beauty. There is reason to believe that in much of what he wrote and in what he thought Lindsay considered himself another Johnny Appleseed.

> Leaving behind august Virginia,
> Proud Massachusetts, and proud Maine,
> Planting the trees that would march and train
> On, in his name to the great Pacific,
> Like Birnam wood to Dunsinane,
> Johnny Appleseed swept on,
> Every shackel gone,
> Loving every sloshy brake,
> Loving every leathery weed,
> Johnny Appleseed, Johnny Appleseed.
> . . . . . .
> In the four-poster bed Johnny Appleseed built,
> Autumn rains were the curtains, autumn leaves
> were the quilt.
> He laid him down sweetly, and slept through
> the night,
> Like a bump on a log, like a stone washed white,
> There by the doors of old Fort Wayne.[9]

In 1909, at Springfield, Lindsay wrote "The Heroes of Time" in commemoration ofthe Centenary of Lincoln's birth. This is the poem which after several revisions became "The Litany of the Heroes." All through Lindsay's diaries and notes, one can see this poem taking form. The theme may have originated from the plays and colloquys his mother wrote and directed when Lindsay was a curly-haired cherub in a Fauntleroy suit. At any rate, a large portion of his notes took these heroes into account, and his apparently constant prayer was that all might be as brave and as wise

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[9]Collected Poems, pp. 82-90.

as were these heroes of history. The author wishes that he might waken in every one the spirit of Moses to make men brave, of Confucius to make men scholars, of Alexander to make men fierce and strong. He would free St. Paul to give men faith, St. Francis to make men saints. The poem continues in this vein with Shakespeare, Napoleon, Lincoln, Emerson, Roosevelt, and Wilson, a veritable hodgepodge of names, little more than a roll call of the great. Although the theme, that such men cannot be conquered by death but by their deeds are immortal, could have been developed into something worthwhile, actually nothing that Lindsay wrote showed as little for the planning involved as did this poem. It was re-shaped and re-modelled, revised and re-written with infinite patience, but the idea his imagination sought failed to materialize. At the best the work is merely oratorical.

Masters recalls that one genealogist suggests that the Lindsays and Lincoln were related.[10] The presupposition for such a suggestion was that Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks, was the daughter of Lucy Shipley Hanks. In 1754, there was a Shipley child named Vachel. However that may be, the father of Vachel Lindsay did not share with him and his mother their hero-worship of Lincoln. It seems apparent that not only the environment of the Lindsay home

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[10] *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

but also the environment of Springfield divided the poet's heart. He himself said that the Mason-Dixon line ran through his heart, setting on one side a love for the culture of the South and on the other an admiration for and devotion to Lincoln as a national hero. The very house in which Lindsay was born and in which he died had entertained Lincoln within its walls, for it was formerly the home of a sister of Mary Todd Lincoln. Four blocks north of the Lindsay home was the residence of Abraham Lincoln, then as now a shrine, and next door to the Lincoln house lived Vachel Lindsay's cousin, Ruby. Together the two children played around the old Lincoln home. The elderly caretaker allowed them the run of the place. To the poet Lincoln became more than a legendary hero; he became a man and a friend. During these days were laid the foundations for a deep devotion to Lincoln throughout Lindsay's life.

Different in every way from his great predecessors in the White House, Lincoln stands out in history above them all except Washington. Born of a shiftless family, Lincoln slowly and somewhat tortuously made his spiritual and political way from a log cabin to the White House. In many respects inferior to Washington, he excelled him in others, and no President among those who had gone before him equalled him in that love of the nation which included the humble with the great,the rich with the poor, the rebel with the

loyal. In the eyes of Lincoln the nation was indeed one nation, united, indissoluble. Less than a generation had intervened between the stirring days of Lincoln's administration and Lindsay's childhood in Springfield. Intimate contact with Lincoln's home, growing up in the same place must have given to Lindsay a feeling of kinship with Lincoln and, although he could not have said it as beautifully, one believes that he would have been in full accord with the spirit of Lincoln's second inaugural address:

> With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan -- to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

One of Lindsay's most popular short poems is "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight," which was written at the beginning of World War I and was included in The Congo and Other Poems, published in 1914. The poem pictures a lank bowed figure, pacing to and fro near the old courthouse, sorrowing for a war-torn world.

> He cannot sleep upon his hillside now.
> He is among us: -- as in times before!
> And we who toss and lie awake for long
> Breathe deep, and start, to see him pass the door.
> . . . . . .
> It breaks his heart that kings must murder still,
> That all his hours of travail here for men
> Seem yet in vain. And who will bring white peace
> That he may sleep upon his hill again?[11]

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[11]Page 145.

Among Lindsay's poems written on great Americans were three about the Roosevelts. The first of these, "In Which Roosevelt Is Compared to Saul," was written and published in 1913. This poem was re-published in 1918 on the death of Theodore Roosevelt. The second poem, "Hail to the Sons of Roosevelt," is inscribed to Theodore Roosevelt's sons, while a third, the best of the three, is titled "The Spacious Days of Roosevelt."

> These were the spacious days of Roosevelt.
> Would that among you chiefs like him arose
> To win the wrath of our united foes,
> To chain King Mammon in the donjon-keep,
>
> To rouse our godly citizens that sleep
> Till as one soul, we shout up to the sun
> The battle-yell of freedom and the right --
> "Lord, let good men unite."[12]

Many of the purest songs Lindsay wrote took their themes from the mundane happenings of a nation experiencing growing pains. On the occasions when Lindsay wrote of historical figures, however, he made history into myth. To the reader of Lindsay's poems, Johnny Appleseed still roams the valleys, sowing his seed far and wide; Alexander Campbell still rides his circuit; and Abraham Lincoln still walks restlessly through the streets of Springfield. Lindsay believed that

> the spirit of Andrew Jackson and the spirit of Abraham Lincoln represent America and Americanism, and it is this spirit which is living in the America of today as in the America of yesterday!

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[12]Lindsay, The Golden Whales of California, pp. 155-156.

Jackson and Lincoln -- all that they stood for -- are America's best contribution to the world.[13]

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[13]"Why Vachel Lindsay Swears by the Log Cabin," Literary Digest, LXXXVIII (February 20, 1926), 50.

CHAPTER IV

LINDSAY'S GOSPEL OF BEAUTY

Inextricably interwoven with his belief in democracy and his faith in his role as missionary was Lindsay's love of and quest for beauty. His walking trip South and the others he made West were inspired by a resentment against commercialism, against the submerging in the general public of the search for the aesthetic, and by a desire to urge every one with whom he came in touch to exchange the "loaf for the hyacinth!" In his book, Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty, 1916, Lindsay tells of an incident on his walking trip West in 1912 in which he is accosted by a troop of gypsies passing along the highway in their automobiles. Noting his dress, which by that time in his journey was of a hue and variety similar to that of the gypsy, they accepted him as one of their kind and hailed him with the question, "What you selling, boy?" He gave them copies of his Gospel of Beauty (what he calls a one-page formula for making America lovelier) and Rhymes to Be Traded for Bread, and they went happily on their way. The story is pertinent here because Lindsay asserts that the

essential principle of his gospel of beauty is that one should not be a gypsy forever but should go home and plant the seed of art and beauty in his own yard, in his own town, in his own state, and make his home, his town, and his state the most beautiful in the world! Although he agreed that it was paradoxical for him to leave home on such expeditions expressly to urge others to stay in their homes and to make them the most beautiful in the world, he felt that his message of beauty was one that all should hear and that "word of mouth" was the most effective medium.

From his childhood Lindsay's mother encouraged him to believe he could express his love of beauty in art. The hope on her part that Lindsay might become an artist doubtless was a carry-over from her own ambition to draw and paint. Despite more than four years spent in art school in Chicago and New York, however, he never produced anything of value as an artist. Several of his books are illustrated by his drawings, most of which are of the symbolic type. At intervals during his years in art school, Lindsay wrote some of his earlier poems. But from childhood his ambition was to become an artist; the desire to write poetry was secondary. In the recesses of his mind perhaps the attitude of his Grandfather Frazee served to restrain his efforts in attempting to write poetry. As a child he heard his grandfather speak rather contemptuously

of poets, saying that they were clever men but that "almost all of them had a screw loose somewhere."[1] Believing his grandfather to be a great man, the child Lindsay stored this bit of philosophy away in his mind and decided that if one wrote poetry, one wrote it as a side-line. But his great hope was that some day he could publish a beautiful book of drawings and verse.

Although by 1912 Lindsay had not realized his ambition to be an artist, he determined to make another walking trip, this time from Springfield to California, spreading his gospel of beauty along the way. To entertain the people along his route, he carried with him a scrapbook bound in oilcloth to protect it from the rain. A recital of the contents of this scrapbook will give some idea of the intellectual standards Lindsay had set up by this time. Inside the front cover was pasted the "Gospel of Beauty," the one-page formula for making America lovelier:

> I come to you penniless and afoot, to bring a message. I am starting a new religious idea. The idea does not say "no" to any creed that you have heard. . . . After this, let the denomination to which you now belong be called in your heart "the church of beauty" or "the church of the open sky." . . . The church of beauty has two sides: the love of beauty and the love of God.
>
> The things most worthwhile are one's own hearth and neighborhood. We should make our own home and neighborhood the most democratic, the most beautiful and the holiest in the world. The children now growing up should become devout gardeners or architects

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[1] Collected Poems, p. 15.

> or park architects or teachers of dancing in the Greek spirit or musicians or novelists or poets or story-writers or craftsmen or wood-carvers or dramatists or doctors or singers. They should find their talent and nurse it industriously. They should believe in every possible application to art-theory of the thoughts of the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. They should, if led by the spirit, wander over the whole nation in search of the secret to democratic beauty with their hearts at the same time filled to overflowing with the righteousness of God. Then they should come back to their own hearth and neighborhood and gather a little circle of their own sort of workers about them and strive to make the neighborhood and home more beautiful and democratic and holy with their special art. . . . They should labor in their little circle expecting neither reward nor honors. . . . In their darkest hours they should be made strong by the vision of a completely beautiful neighborhood and the passion for a completely democratic art. Their reason for living should be that joy in beauty which no wounds can take away, and that joy in the love of God which no crucifixion can end.[2]

Following this formula were varied groups of pictures, an excerpt from a magazine of an account of his walking trip South, a copy of The Village Magazine for 1910 with a number of his poems, including "The Village Improvement Parade," "The Illinois Village," and "The Building of Springfield." There was also a copy of Lindsay's "Rules of the Road" as carried in his book, A Handy Guide for Beggars, pictures of Tolstoi, of the Taj Mahal, the leaning tower of Pisa, Trinity Church in New York, Lincoln's home and law office in Springfield, and scattered among these pictures were some of his poems which had been printed

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[2]Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty, p. 15.

on leaflets. In addition to this scrapbook Lindsay carried with him a sixteen-page pamphlet which contained forty-four of his poems. Some of the principal ones were "The Hearth Eternal," "Look You, I'll Go Pray," "The Leaden-Eyed," "The Eagle That Is Forgotten," and "The Road to Nowhere." Thus equipped, Lindsay set forth to spread the Gospel of Beauty. He took no money and no baggage. He believed that the message he had for the world was worth whatever it cost the listener in food and lodging. Indeed he believed that the world owed him sustenance in return for the message he carried. Obviously one of the weaknesses of such a premise was that the individuals who could afford to give him shelter, food and drink were in the secluded areas,and the responsibility for caring for his needs fell to the section hand by the railroad, the farmer, and the country store and country hotel proprietor.

During this trip many ideas for additional gospel messages came to Lindsay; some of these ideas he partially carried through in later years but most of them, as was too often the case with him, remained dreams out of proportion to his ability and strength to bring to maturity. Among these dreams were illustrated books (his own illustrations) to be called The Golden Book of Village Improvement, The Golden Book of Springfield, and The Golden Book of the United States, all of which were to surpass in power and

beauty his The Village Magazine. He did later write The Golden Book of Springfield, which is not among his best work.

The chief difficulty Lindsay had in carrying his messages to the American people was brought about by the fact that he never really analyzed his beliefs, his feelings, other people or himself. Apparently he was incapable of analysis. Frequently his attempts to convey to others his ideas on beauty, democracy, and goodness were clouded by vague and hazy expressions. Typical of the man was the Utopian theme he advanced. Although his visions might seem lucid to his prejudiced eye, analysis frequently proved them impractical. He advocated that

> We should build parks that students from afar
> Would choose to starve in rather than go home,[3]

but even allowing something for poetic license, the practical reader, knowing the fundamental urge of hunger, doubts that it could be done. Lindsay never tells how it can be done. In one of the issues of his War Bulletin in 1909 Lindsay exhorts America to waste not the youth of the land in industry, in raising wheat, in toiling in the sun; he enjoins any man who has a dollar in his pocket to throw it away before he becomes spiritually contaminated, and warns the man whose house is painted and whose fields are in order that he is in danger of hell fire, urging him

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[3]"On the Building of Springfield," Collected Poems, p. 75.

to use his time to worship the Christ of beauty, to carve something lovely that has not been touched by machinery, or to sing a homely song. It is small wonder that the people of Springfield, after reading these War Bulletins, considered him eccentric, to say the least, and that some even called him a crackpot. Looking back to his one-page formula for making America lovelier, the reader feels an impatience with his talk of "teachers of dancing in the Greek spirit" and the search for the "secret to democratic beauty with hearts filled to overflowing with the righteousness of God." One wishes to ask him, "What is the secret to democratic beauty?" Might it not be made up of the earthy smell of a freshly-plowed field, the first star in the evening, the fragrance of brown, spicy hot gingerbread, a dog lying before an open fire, the voices of children mingled in play, and a myriad of other simple pleasures? Doubtless because of his lack of ability to analyze either himself or others, Lindsay made the quest of the beautiful involved when more often than not the simplest things are the most beautiful.

Since, as pointed out above, Lindsay's three gospels are so closely interwoven, it is impossible to take any one poem and say of it, "This shows Lindsay's Gospel of Beauty." True, some of his poems proclaim that gospel more than others. Once or twice already the three poems which he called a triad and which he said taken together held in

solution his theory of American civilization have been mentioned. These are "The Proud Farmer," "The Illinois Village," and "On the Building of Springfield." This chapter on his Gospel of Beauty would not be complete without further reference to these. In the Collected Poems the three are grouped under the heading "Gospel of Beauty," and Lindsay asserts that on his walking trip West in 1912 he recited these three poems more than any others. "The Proud Farmer" is dedicated to his Grandfather Frazee and pictures him as pioneer, nobleman, democrat, and well-nigh king. He is beloved by his neighbors, respected by his associates, and feared by his enemies. He tilled the rich earth during the day, read his books and enjoyed his fireside at night, and preached the Christian gospel on Sunday. Now among those who sat beneath his voice he lies in the village cemetery, behind him a life well-spent in fostering beauty, goodness, and democracy in a weary world; and the grandchildren who bear his name call him blessed. The second poem of the triad is "The Illinois Village," in which the poet deplores the attraction of thundering commerce at the village railraod station where flocks of girls watch wistfully as the Sunday train goes by, and celebrates the village church, "rural in form, foursquare and plain," and the district school from which may come one "to make the whole wide village gleam a strangely carved celestial gem." The third and last of the triad is "On the Building

of Springfield." Lindsay would have the effort used to make Springfield large diverted into making it beautiful. Here no man would rule to whom money came first, and every citizen would be a disciple of God. He reminds his fellow citizens that a town is not builded in a day and that each generation must make its contribution.

In the manner in which he attempted to spread his gospel of beauty Lindsay was, perhaps, more like John Chapman or Johnny Appleseed than any of the heroes he celebrated. He wrote in all twelve poems on this subject. A volume called Johnny Appleseed, containing these poems, was published in 1928. The best known of the twelve, however, is the lengthy "In Praise of Johnny Appleseed." In a pack on his back Johnny Appleseed carried

> The ghosts of all the forests and the groves
> Tomorrow's peaches, pears and cherries,
> Tomorrow's grapes and red raspberries.
> . . . . . .
> Porches untrod of forest houses
> All before him, all day long . . .

In his imagination Johnny Appleseed saw stretched before him the beautiful orchards, the magnificent forests, the never-ending carpet of grass and flowers stemming from his hand which dropped the seed. Sowing with a lavish hand, neither looking to see whether the seed fell on fertile ground nor returning to nurture the seedlings and till the soil, Johnny Appleseed

> Went forth to live on roots and bark,
> Sleep in the trees, while the years howled by --

While he sowed he saw

> An angel in each apple that touched the forest mould
> A ballot-box in each apple,
> A state capital in each apple,
> Great high schools, great colleges,
> All America in each apple . . .

So Lindsay spread his gospel of beauty, looking neither to the fertility of the soil nor the garnering of the fruit. Had Lindsay concentrated his efforts, not spreading himself thin over too much territory, figuratively speaking, all of his songs might have borne the deeper meaning he intended and which many of them missed.

Lindsay wrote many poems on Springfield to which reference has been made throughout these chapters. Some of these take the note of the reformer, such as "The Soul of the City Receives the Gift of the Holy Spirit," a broadside once distributed by Lindsay in Springfield. All of them express a yearning for the city of the perfect for which he hoped to the last. In "Springfield Magical" he sees

> Angels come down, with Christmas in their hearts,
> Gentle, whimsical, laughing, heaven-sent;

and in "The Town of American Visions" he wishes the reader to see Springfield

> Dazzling the eye of faith, the hope-filled heart:
> Rooms rich in records of old deeds sublime:
> Books that hold garnered harvests of far lands,
> Pictures that tableau Man's triumphant climb:
> . . . . . .
> Come enter there, and meet Tomorrow's Man,
> Communing with him softly day by day.

In "The Springfield of the Far Future" Lindsay asserts that although the town may now be "wicked and raw," "awkward and brash and profane," some day she will grow old,

> Filled with the fullness of time,
> Treasure on treasure heaped
> Of beauty's tradition sublime.

"The Chinese Nightingale," which Lindsay believed to be his best poem, is a thing of beauty. Chang, the Chinese laundryman, irons the night away while near him the small gray bird sings. Chang knows that love and creation are eternal, that out of tragedy comes light and hope, and the nightingale sings on,

> I remember, I remember
> That Spring came on forever
> That Spring came on forever.

Another of Lindsay's poems on China is "Shantung, or the Empire of China Is Falling Down." Not ranked as high as "The Chinese Nightingale," this poem is quite lyrical. Although Alexander, King Arthur and Napoleon attempted to conquer China, she did not fall. It is an indictment of those who try to seize her wealth and put her people under the yoke, but

> Always the generations pass,
> Like sand through Heaven's blue hour-glass,

and China does not fall.

Far afield with the gypsies Lindsay goes in "I Know All This When Gipsy Fiddles Cry." He sings of the gypsy princess he has wed and of their lives free from care and

filled with beauty and the joy of living.

> We will sow secret herbs, and plant old roses,
> And fumble through dark, snaky palaces,
> Stable our ponies in the Taj Mahal,
> And sleep outdoors ourselves.
> In her strange fairy mill-wheel eyes will wait
> All windings and unwindings of the highways,
> From India, across America --

In "The Traveller-Heart" the poet identifies himself with the lavish earth and the apples red, with the Indian corn and the dark-bright night, "on to the end, till I sleep with the dead."

The poem "Kansas" was written after his walking trip of 1912, when he worked in the harvest fields for a while. Although a tramp, he is a king in the Kansas wheat harvest because the grain must be saved. He ate at tables piled high with food and slept in the sweet alfalfa hay with the loft doors wide to the wind and the moon.

> I loved to watch the windmills spin
> And watch that big moon rise.
> I dreamed and dreamed with lids half-shut,
> The moonlight in my eyes.
>
> For all men dream in Kansas
> By noonday and by night,
> By sunrise yellow, red and wild
> And moonrise wild and white.

In "The Amaranth" Lindsay again sees the City Perfect.

> Friends, I will not cease hoping though you weep.
> Such things I see, and some ofthem shall come
> Though now our streets are harsh and ashen-gray,
> Though our strong youths are strident now, or dumb.
> Friends, that sweet town, that wonder-town, shall rise.

Many of the moon poems are delicate and ethereal. He calls the moon a brass-hooped water-keg, a peck of corn, an

opening flower, a golden skull, a snowball, and a candle-glow. In "Beyond the Moon" the poet says his sweetheart is the Truth Beyond the Moon. He is lonely and cannot see the face of woman because cold truth has stepped between:

> I have a lonely goal beyond the moon;
> Ay, beyond Heaven and Hell, I have a goal!

The "Epilogue to Beauty" calls on all lovers to build

> Each home with a great fireplace as is meet.
> When there you stand, with royal wonder filled,
> In bridal peace, and comradeship complete,
>
> While each dear heart beats like a fairy drum --
> Then burn a new-ripe wheat-sheaf in my name.
> Out of the fire my spirit-bread shall come
> And my soul's gospel swirl from that red flame.

Mention has already been made of Lindsay's hope of writing several Golden Books, only one of which materialized. This was The Golden Book of Springfield, the result of many years of dreaming and planning but which like most of his dreams and plans came to poor fruition. In his notes on his walking trip in 1912 he speaks of plans for this book many times, making such comments as, "Have been thinking all afternoon about The Golden Book of Springfield. I want it to be four times as impressive as The Village Magazine." The Golden Book of Springfield was published in 1920, and it was not what he had planned it to be. Another literary effort on the Utopian theme, it is even less practical than those of other writers. Although there is no record that Lindsay ever read Plato's Republic or More's

Utopia, he didknow Morris's News from Nowhere and was familiar with the venture at New Harmony, Indiana. He may have had the same dreams and hopes upon which these other ideas were founded, yet he lacked altogether the ability to interpret these dreams and hopes into a mold of philosophic thought. Like Plato, Lindsay sought to show how the soul could be shaped to the strains of music. Consider his advocacy of dancing to poems, chanting the lines, and his theory of the moving picture and of appropriate music for the theater. He would have his Springfield a city in which the citizens did not hate, did not compete, did no injustice; where they had the closest contact with trees and flowers and fields, saw beautiful architecture, and joined in rhythmical dancing and song. He is fighting the age-old factors of greed and selfishness, commercialism, feudalism, poverty and fear which do not belong in this new soil of America, but the background of the book is lost in the jungle growth of allegory and symbolism.

Concluding the book on Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty are what Lindsay calls Proclamations. These Proclamations were printed in Farm and Fireside immediately upon his return from the tramp in 1912. The first is A Proclamation of Balm in Gilead which is an admonition to the city dweller to go to the fields to renew his spirit. He urges the man from the crowded area:

> With the farmer look again upon the Constitution as something brought by Providence, prepared for by the ages. Go to church, the cross-roads church, and say the Lord's Prayer again. Help them with their temperance crusade. It is a deeper matter than you think. Listen to the laughter of the farmer's children. Know that not all the earth is a-weeping. Know that so long as there is black soil deep on the prairie, so long as grass will grow on it, we have a vast green haven.

In the second Proclamation he hails a new time for farmers and a New England. Already, he says, in the new West and in the South

> . . . men have learned to pray to the God of the blossoming world, men have learned to pray to the God of Beauty. They meditate upon His ways. They have begun to sing.

In the three other Proclamations Lindsay expresses his belief in the coming into its own of religion, equality and beauty. All this will come about through the services of three kinds of men in cooperation: the priest, the statesman, and the artist.

> Religion, equality, and beauty! By these America shall come into a glory that shall justify the yearning of the sages for her perfection, and the prophecies of the poets, when she was born in the throes of Valley Forge.

CHAPTER V

LINDSAY'S EVANGELISM

America was established primarily because of a search for religious freedom. However, in eighteenth century America two opposing forces were at work. One was the rationalism of such men as Franklin, Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and, perhaps, Washington. The other was the evangelistic feeling, reaching back to Jonathan Edwards and the Methodist revivalists, John Wesley and George Whitefield. The nineteenth century saw the decline of rationalism and the growth of evangelism. Lindsay's affinities were with the evangelistic rather than the rationalistic tradition, and his identification with the former enabled him to become perhaps the most national poet in America. He was both poet and missionary. His best work contains the two elements of harmony and elevation. In his best work, too, are combined his quest for beauty and his search for goodness.

Lindsay's heritage and training were in devoutly Christian surroundings. His grandfather Frazee was a preacher and like Lindsay's parents a devoted follower of Alexander Campbell. His mother was an indefatigable church

worker. Among his earliest memories was that of participation in church pageants written and produced by his mother. He particularly mentions one in which, at the age of six or seven, he portrayed the part of Cupid. He relates how, with few clothes, a silver bow and arrow in his hands, and a silver quiver under his pasteboard wings, he climbed into the pulpit with Venus, his Sunday School teacher. Just what part Cupid and Venus might play in a church pageant, Lindsay never knew, but he agreed that his mother could mix the pagan and the Christian and make the deacons approve.[1]

The religious discipline in the home was rigid and demanding. All the Lindsay children were drilled in memorizing choice verses from King James' Bible. Each was required to recite three verses before he could sit down to breakfast. Lindsay memorized every Sunday School lesson, having it letter perfect by the end of the week, for fourteen years.[2]

In speaking of their church preference, Lindsay points out that the cold logic of the Campbellites made them the "dearest foes of the wild Methodists,"[3] and that he bitterly resented being called a Methodist. He maintained that there was always a cold second thought among the

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[1]Foreword, Collected Poems, pp. 13-14.

[2]Ibid., p. 17.

[3]Ibid., p. 11.

Campbellite theologians that prohobited excessive emotionalism. However, Lindsay came to manhood in an era when religious devotion in the nation was of the ecstatic kind, and some of that "Methodist fervor" is reflected in his poems. Those were the days of the mourner's bench, the old camp meeting grounds, the annual revival, and the travelling evangelist who preached "fire and brimstone." Those were the days which produced the Billy Sundays and the Gypsy Smiths. In the revival common at that time the skillful revivalist made his appeal either to the emotion of fear or through hypnotic suggestion. The reader gets from a few of Lindsay's poems, particularly those about the Negro, the feeling of zeal and the pent-up excitement that was apparent in the old-time revival.

Carl Van Doren, writing on Vachel Lindsay, says that Church and State in the United States are allied to the degree that reforms and revivals take lessons from each other. The rhythm of each is the rhythm of the crusade. The roots of the American revival go back to Jonathan Edwards, that old crusader who tried to elevate his fellows and draw them after him. Lindsay rose from a level of culture on which such enthusiasm thrived. Probably alone among important poets, Lindsay had an enthusiasm for the Salvation Army, for foreign missions, for prohibition and for the Campbellite Church. Instead of the dull and

unimaginative, Lindsay saw in these things knights fighting in the cause of Christianity, a gallant revolution against John Barleycorn, and the disciples of Campbell, the pioneer who proclaimed the New Millenium.[4]

Edward Davidson says Lindsay is to modern poetry what the Salvation Army is to modern religion -- a revivalist with many converts to his credit. He believes Lindsay's literary rhetoric is a deliberate adaptation of Negro pulpit oratory, especially that of the revivalist preachers. His verse, too, imitates the rhythm and figures which are the most original features of the religious folk-song of the American Negro. He is also indebted to the parallel oratory of the white race -- that of the platform politician and the revivalist of the Billy Sunday type.[5]

Lindsay has been likened to a medieval crusader in a world forgetful of chivalry.[6] Although he maintained the crusading spirit throughout his life, in 1909 and 1910 the preacher strain almost overcame the poet when he launched a program of itinerant lecturing for the Anti-Saloon League. Those were the years which saw the issue of his War Bulletins, The Village Magazine, and The Tramp's Excuse. This crusading spirit, which gave him sympathy with the Salvation Army and the Anti-Saloon League, he inherited from his

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[4]"Salvation with Jazz," Century Magazine, CV (April, 1923), 951-956.

[5]Some Modern Poets, pp. 221-255.

[6]Harriet Monroe, Poets and Their Art, p. 21.

mother. If his missionary leanings were the outgrowth of training, however, his poetry was his very own.

Although there have been Americans before Lindsay who hoped to make an Athens out of New York or Boston, Lindsay was the first to campaign for goodness and beauty in the common American language. In "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" he puts the theme of a revival sermon to the rhythm of a revival hymn, but he gives the whole significance by making the locale a typical American town -- Springfield doubtless -- with a courthouse and a square. The crusader must meet the masses halfway. He must have the same interests and the same enthusiasm, and he must speak the same language. Lindsay fulfilled these requirements perfectly. But something in him better than his conscious goals taught him, however much he may have borrowed from the circuit rider, the crusader, the booster, that "true eloquence comes from the individual, not from the mass; that true poetry is actually lived, not merely shared or argued."[7]

Lindsay has been called a pagan with a puritan complex. He was a social reformer, an evangelist preacher, a troubadour -- all these and more. He was fundamentally a folk-poet, "singing of the hearth fires of Springfield, the cornfields of Kansas, the Salvation Army lassies rattling

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[7]Van Doren, op. cit., p. 956.

their tambourines, the blacksmith aristocracy."[8]

William Lyon Phelps asserted that "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" was written from the inside. It is interpretation, not description. Booth was blind; so are all reformers. In turn, one must be blind to many obvious things, blind to ridicule, blind to criticism, blind to the wisdom of this world if one would understand "General William Booth."[9] "Simon Legree" is probably as accurate an interpretation of the Negro's idea of hell as "General William Booth" is of the Salvation Army's conception of Heaven.

On July 19, 1909, at Springfield, Lindsay issued what he called War Bulletin Number 1. It consisted of four pages, nine by twelve inches. At the head of the first column was the title "Why a War Bulletin?" Lindsay proceeded to answer this question in this manner:

> I have spent a great part of my few years fighting a soul battle for absolute liberty, for freedom from obligation, ease of conscience, independence, from commercialism. I think I am farther from slavery than most men. But I have not complete freedom of speech. In my daily round of work I find myself taking counsel to please the stupid, the bigoted, the conservative, the impatient, the cheap. A good part of the time I can please these people, having a great deal in common with all of them -- but -- The things that go into the War Bulletin please me only.

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[8]Paul Benjamin, "Vachel Lindsay -- A Folk Poet," Survey, XLVII (October 15, 1921), 73-74.

[9]"The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century," Bookman, XLVII (April, 1918), 125-134.

> To the Devil with you, average reader. To Gehenna with your stupidity, your bigotry, your conservatism, your cheapness, your impatience. In each new Bulletin the war shall go farther and farther. War! War! War!

This was hardly the way to go about gaining the good will of the people of his hometown, but in those bitter years from 1909 to 1912 when he made such little progress toward the goals he had set he must have known a kindred feeling for Don Quixote and the windmills. War Bulletin Number Two was issued on August 4, 1909, and War Bulletin Number Three came forth on August 30, 1909. Two additional issues were published that year; none of them served any purpose other than to turn many people in Springfield against him.

In 1909, also, Lindsay published The Tramp's Excuse and Other Poems in pamphlet form, using his own illustrations. Many of his religious poems were contained in this pamphlet. Included were "Star of My Heart," a poem to Jesus, musical and tender, and "The Beggar's Valentine," one of his sweetest songs, in which he sees himself as "the pilgrim boy, lame but hunting the shrine." These are words of tragic suffering.

. . . . . .

This is the price I pay
  For the light I shall some day see
At the ends of the infinite earth
  When truth shall come to me.

And what if my body die
  Before I meet the truth?
The road is dear, more dear
  Than love or life or youth.

. . . . . .

Also included was the four-line stanza which he called "A Prayer to All the Dead Among Mine Own People."

> Are these your presences, my clan from Heaven?
> Are these your hands upon my wounded soul?
> Mine own, mine own, blood of my blood be with me,
> Fly by my path till you have made me whole!

In the pamphlet, too, appeared "A Prayer in the Jungles of Heaven," later placed in Collected Poems under the title "Heart of God." This is a poem of great religious fervor.

> . . . . . .
> Wild thundering heart of God
> Out of my doubt I come,
> And my foolish feet with prophets' feet,
> March with the prophets' drum.

The final poem in the pamphlet was "I Heard Immanuel Singing," one of the most musical things Lindsay did; it "shows the Master with his work done, singing to free his heart in Heaven."[10]

In 1910 the first issue of The Village Magazine appeared. A re-print was published in 1920. The Village Magazine contained many of the poems which were in the pamphlet of 1909. Seven hundred copies of this magazine were printed and distributed. While travelling about the Springfield district making speeches at crossroad churches for the Anti-Saloon League of Illinois, Lindsay placed copies of the magazine on the parlor tables of the League's rural workers. The publication was a miserable failure, but

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[10] Collected Poems, p. 369.

examination shows Lindsay's fundamental ideas on goodness and beauty. As an example, an excerpt from a page entitled "Conversion" goes thus:

> In protracted meetings 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. But there are other conversions and other kinds of sin to be rid of. 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 sin against loveliness.[11]

In his early years Lindsay formed his aesthetic creed, and the poems he wrote during those years and afterward were an adherence to that creed. He often mentioned in his notes and his diaries plans for his thirty-third year, which he hoped to be the year of dedication and consummation. In this, curiously enough, he was right, for it was following the walking trip in 1912 that he became known to the American public, and his struggles received recognition. From this trip came "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven," "The Santa Fe Trail," and "The Broncho That Would not Be Broken," this last written in 1917. In practically everything he did, beginning with his years in art school and extending through the lecture tours, and in virtually everything he wrote from "Rhymes to Be Traded for Bread" to Every Soul Is a Circus, published in 1929, Lindsay was essentially the evangelist. In art, in prose, in poetry,

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[11]Page 48.

in missionary vagabondage, and on the lecture platform he preached his gospel. He was tremendously interested in hieroglyphics and in symbolism, and his drawings were of this type but very poor. His prose, although drawn from a wealth of material, was mediocre. Only in poetry did he excel, a medium of expression which he adapted to his evangelistic needs.

Many of his poems were definitely religious; some of those were discussed in consideration of The Tramp's Excuse and Other Poems. All of the poems mentioned in this and subsequent paragraphs of this chapter, unless otherwise stated, may be found in Collected Poems. Lindsay's faith in a hereafter and his hope of the resurrection are voiced in the two Easter stanzas, "The Hope of the Resurrection" and "We Meet at the Judgment and I Fear It Not." Although love poems, too, they express anticipation of reunion in the after life rather than fulfillment of earthly love. In "The Celestial Circus" Lindsay likens Heaven to a thousand-year circus where he and his love will be dancing and where they "will howl in the praise of God" and "will ride in the joy of God" on circus horses. "In the Immaculate Conception Church" Lindsay breathes a prayer that his feet may be kept toward Heaven as it was planned in his prenatal days. He asks that he be armed against "great towns, strong spirits old!" He prays for help

to seek the sunburned groups afield
The iron folk, the pioneers free-born.
Make me to voice the tall men in the corn.
Let boyhood's wildflower days a bright fruit yield.

That Lindsay at times plumbed the depths of darkness and despair is attested by "I Went Down Into the Desert."

I went down into the desert
To meet my God.
O Lord my God, awaken from the dead!
I see you there, your thorn-crown on the ground,
I see you there, half-buried in the sand.
I see you there, your white bones glistening bare
The carrion-birds a-wheeling round your head.

One of Lindsay's dreams was a world unity, a world peace, a universal brotherhood. This dream may be found in many of his poems: "Foreign Missions in Battle Array"; "The Town of American Visions"; "The Springfield of the Far Future"; "Sew the Flags Together"; the two poems addressed to Jane Addams at The Hague, "Speak Now for Peace" and "Tolstoi Is Plowing Yet"; "The Merciful Hand," written to a nurse going to the battle front during World War I; and the poem on Joyce Kilmer, "In Memory of My Friend, Joyce Kilmer, Poet and Soldier," which was written Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. Many of Lindsay's poems were written in the key of the reformer. Such poems are "The Drunkard's Funeral," an indictment of the saloon; "The Soul of the City Receives the Gift of the Holy Spirit"; "Why I Voted the Socialist Ticket"; "The Trap," a protest against white slavery; "Gamblers"; and "A Rhymed Address to All Renegade Campbellites."

Lindsay was not, like Wordsworth, a nature poet, finding God in Nature and revealing the soul of the world in sublime interpretations. On his walking trips he had extensive opportunity for communion with the out-of-doors, but the chief poems on nature are those written after his tramp in 1921 through Glacier Park with Stephen Graham, and in these he gave only imaginative touches to his observations of flowers, trees, and mountains. However, in his book Tramping with a Poet in the Rockies, Stephen Graham, in an almost day-by-day account of the six-week walking trip he and Lindsay took from Glacier Park to Alberta, Canada, has given some insight into Lindsay's reaction to nature -- his love of the freedom of uninhabited places and his sensitiveness to the majestic beauty of the mountains, to the vast panorama of the valleys, to sleeping under the stars at night, and to waking before the dawn to witness the rising sun from a mountain top. Graham says:

> I find a belief in the wilderness strong in Vachel Lindsay. He holds that the wild West has been and still must be the spiritual lodestone of American men. Untamed America has remade the race. Andrew Jackson was the voice of the West of his day, Abraham Lincoln of his. And though New England has held the hegemony of letters he divines that the wilderness -- the mountains -- will be the source of the inspiration of the coming time. Early America derived most of her inspiration from across the Atlantic. Her heart was outside her body. But mature America, conscious of herself as a whole, will know more surely that she has a heart and a soul and a way to God in herself.[12]

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From his childhood in Springfield Lindsay had an intimate knowledge of the Negro, his superstitions, his simple faith, and his native bent for rhythm and song. His father, Dr. Lindsay, was brought up in Kentucky by a Negro nurse and loved to read "Uncle Remus" stories to his children and to sing Negro folk songs. The Lindsay home was kept by Negro servants who sang about their work. The family, too, often went to hear the Jubilee Concerts given by the Fiske and Hampton singers. Since one fifth of the population of Springfield was composed of colored people, Lindsay grew up among them, often playing in the schoolyard with Negro youths. He has written several poems on the Negro, showing an understanding of their feeling for music and their naturally religious natures. Chief among the religious poems of this kind is "The Congo," in which the Negro is portrayed in his savagery, in his vanity, and finally in his hope of salvation.

> Then along that river, a thousand miles
> The vine-snared trees fell down in files.
> Pioneer angels cleared the way
> For a Congo paradise, for babes at play,
> For sacred capitals, for temples clean.
> Gone were the skull-faced witch-men lean.

Two of the poems about the Negro's religion are based on Negro spirituals. "When Peter Jackson Preached in the Old Church" is set to the tune of "Every Time I Feel the Spirit Moving in My Heart I'll Pray," and "Daniel" calls on Heaven with the old spiritual "Lord, Save My Soul." "How Samson

Bore Away the Gates of Gaza" is a Negro sermon in which the congregation is admonished:

> Let Samson
> Be coming
> Into your mind.

Although sometimes despondent, often weary and spent, Lindsay in his later years kept unflagging the ardor of his evangelism. In his book Going to the Stars, published in 1926, his poems were growing thin, but the exquisite "Three Hours" is a cry of aspiration and hope.

> The moon was like a boat one night,
> And like a bowl of flowers;
> Three butterflies were riding there,
> Named for three lonely hours.
>
> The first hour was the hour the night
> Was a great dome of peace;
> The second hour was when the night
> Gave my heart release
>
> From all old grief and all lost love.
> And the third hour was when
> I found that I was reconciled
> To Heaven and earth and men.[13]

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CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In common with other members of the human species Lindsay, both as a writer and as a man, had his weaknesses and his strong points. He was strong in purpose, steadfast in his faith in his creed, and prolific and versatile in his writings. He was tolerant, sincere, and genuinely democratic. The spark of genius in the man at times blazed to a glorious flame. The uneven merit of his work is a testimony to his genius. Only the minor poet dares not publish the poem which is imperfect in technique and marred by error. To the genius every message he has is of importance to the world and worthy to appear in print.

Lindsay never entirely grew up, or perhaps it would be better to say that he grew up without maturing emotionally. The conditioning he received during his childhood, torn between the wills of a stern father and an over-protective mother who tended to dominate him, doubtless left its mark. His mother he alternately feared and loved and quite often resented. Yet he was in many respects truly his mother's son, wishing always to live in the excitement of reform programs or in some agitation stimulating to that egotism

he confessed he had. From a physical point of view this may have been the result of excessive thyroid. He was afraid of marriage, and when, at the age of forty-seven, he did marry a woman whose background and personality made her a congenial companion, he was unable to adjust himself to the new relationship. His attitude toward sex was complicated by a poor sex education, by his mixture of feelings toward his mother, by the unhappiness of his own parents together, and by a conviction that sex is debasing.

Lindsay was unable to analyze himself or others, and his plans for the future constantly outdistanced his ability to catch up. He grew little, if any, in power and ability after he was forty. All of his greatest poems were written from experiences he had and memories he gathered before 1920. Many poems and books which he planned to write never materialized; others did not fulfill the promise held out in the magic of their titles. Some of these titles are strokes of genius. Consider these for examples: "I Know All This When Gypsy Fiddles Cry"; "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan"; "We Meet at the Judgment and I Fear It Not"; "Look You, I'll Go Pray"; "I Heard Immanuel Singing"; "The Golden Whales of California"; and one of the sections of his Collected Poems which he called "Incense and Praise and Whim and Glory." Could Lindsay have had sufficient income to permit his living in peace and serenity, perhaps in the

quiet seclusion of a farm or among the mountains, his genius might have flowered earlier and longer. On the other hand, his restless nature and apparent need for applause and commendation would doubtless have made him unhappy in a secluded life.

Like Keats, who said that beauty is truth and truth is beauty, Lindsay believed that beauty and goodness are interchangeable and inseparable. To beauty and goodness Lindsay added freedom, without which he believed the first two impossible. The possession of these three -- beauty, goodness, and democracy -- Lindsay considered the birthright of every man, irrespective of color, race or religion. Early in life Lindsay formulated this creed, and he adhered to it throughout his life. Born of it were his walking trips on which he preached his aesthetic creed and with gratitude accepted hospitality where he found it. On the walking trip North from Jacksonville, Florida, in 1906, he spent the night as a guest in a Negro's cabin. The Negro couple were tremendously interested in his material on Lincoln. That night the Negro man told him that the bird he had heard singing during the day was called the Rachel-jane. Years later Lindsay used the song of the Rachel-jane as a contrasting note to the bustle of traffic in "The Santa Fe Trail." Subsequent walking trips in 1908 through New Jersey and Pennsylvania and in 1912 West through Kansas

to Colorado followed the same pattern. Lindsay failed to include in his creed, however, the importance of work in the attainment of his goal. He believed that the world owed him food and drink in exchange for his poems. Although he did some work in the grain fields of Kansas, most of the walking trips were guided by his "rules of the road." From his diaries, however, there is reason to believe that Lindsay realized the fallacy of the omission of work from his walking rules. Although as late as the 1912 venture his tramping resolutions included "looking for the honey in labor, not the thorns," he afterward came to the decision that any subsequent trips of that nature would be financed entirely by the sweat of his brow.

The achievements of celebrated heroes in American history wielded a strong influence over Lindsay, an influence which was apparent in much of what he wrote. On Thomas Jefferson's ideology he based his democratic faith, believing in the inalienable rights of the common man. In his last book of poems, Every Soul Is a Circus, published in 1929, he declares, in a poem called "Thomas Jefferson Rules," that Jeffersonian democracy has permeated the farthest reaches of the nation and that "Jefferson rules, northwest of the west." In the political faiths of Andrew Jackson and William Jennings Bryan Lindsay saw an adherence to the Jeffersonian theory. They, too, were staunch believers in

and defenders of the rights of the poor and the lowly. For Lincoln, who rose above but never forgot his impoverished beginning, Lindsay had a profound admiration, strengthened by a personal knowledge of Lincoln's home and the town of Springfield. To Lindsay the log cabin of Andrew Jackson, of Nancy Hanks, and of Lincoln symbolized America.

In many ways Lindsay appeared to identify himself with John Chapman, the Johnny Appleseed of his poems on that subject. His walking trips were obvious attempts to sow the seed of goodness and beauty as Johnny Appleseed sowed his orchard seed. Like Johnny Appleseed, Lindsay looked West and often quoted Horace Greeley's famous advice to young men of his day.

The prose work The Litany of Washington Street, published in 1929, was intended by Lindsay to be a culmination of years of planning and thought on America's great men, but the publication falls far short of his dreams. In this work, however, he does show that at long last he recognized in Whitman one who had the same democratic faith and many ideas similar to his own. Lindsay asserts that this prose work is the work of his imagination and that the litanies are held together by quotations from Walt Whitman.

Lindsay was a prolific and a versatile writer. His subject matter included insects, animals, nature, man, the sun, the moon, and Heaven. Exclusive of Collected Poems,

Selected Poems, and the volume of Johnny Appleseed poems, he published eight volumes of verse besides the five prose publications and The Village Magazine. Although after a particularly cordial reception of some of his moon poems he impulsively resolved to write a hundred poems on the moon, he compromised by writing about thirty. Most of these begin with a metaphor, such as, "The moon's a cottage with a door." Most of the moon poems show great imagery and some have beauty and delicacy. Lindsay was inordinately proud of the fact that many of his poems were danced. The inscription in The Golden Whales of California and Other Rhymes in the American Language is to Isadora Bennett because "she danced the 'Daniel Jazz.'" With few exceptions, however, these poems are not ranked with Lindsay's best. Although Lindsay wrote five prose volumes, prose was not his forte. He lacked the ability to present character and was unable to select the important points of interest or to marshal the details in such manner as to make them vivid to the reader.

When Lindsay made his entry into literary America shouting, "Are you washed in the Blood of the Lamb?" poetry was at the lowest ebb in many years. Twenty years had passed since Whitman's death in 1892. Although Riley was still living, he was an invalid, and Edwin Arlington Robinson had not yet attained fame. Minor poets had contributed

their meager spark, but it remained for Lindsay to start the conflagration which initiated the poetic revival of 1914 to 1920 in America. Lindsay had imagination, and the impetus back of poetry is imagination. It is doubtful whether he was familiar with Aristotle's theory of poetry, but he followed it in introducing a free metrical form which Aristotle was the first to advocate. Lindsay was in the vanguard in the revival of minstrel singing and in the new emphasis on folklore and the folksong. (He was a bard in the true meaning of the word. He was the first American poet to sing predominantly of the West.) Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Poe, and even Whitman were born in the East and wrote chiefly of their immediate sections. But Lindsay knew little about New England and cared less. His eyes were turned toward the West, and his heart was there. In his eyes were the hope of the City Perfect and a steadfast faith in a country beautiful and democratic. To the West he turned the eyes of America.

Notwithstanding the fact that Lindsay wrote nothing of importance before he was thirty years of age, the sum of his lyrical poetry probably exceeds that of any other American poet. Practically all of his themes were American, and his greatest poems were of the West. While Emerson wrote chiefly in a philosophic mood and Poe was preoccupied with tombs and worms, Lindsay sang lustily, at

times magically, of America. Despite the fact that his poems are so American in nature, many of them have the quality of being "out of space and out of time" which makes literature endure. Nowhere in the history books even now may be found an account which reflects the America of the late nineteenth century as does the poem "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan." Conceivably this may be because no America such as Lindsay saw actually existed, but his idealization of his country will be found in the hearts of his countrymen long after the America of the courthouse and the log cabin has passed away.

America is young and like all youth has had rapid and luxuriant growth. Lindsay came to manhood and to literary maturity at the time when America, too, was growing up, politically and nationally. Emerging from her infancy, she was on her way, particularly after World War I, to becoming a world power. The geographical location of his birthplace, his family background, and the political circumstances surrounding his early years were important contributing factors in moulding his literary thought. That Lindsay could and did interpret America during one of the most luxuriant stages of her development will give him a permanent, albeit a minor, place in the history of literature.

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