

THE ADVANCE OF ENGLISH POETRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

PART VII

Lindsay the Cymbalist—first impression.—Harriet Monroe's Magazine—training in art—the long vagabond tramps—correct order of his works—his drawings—the "Poem Game"—"The Congo."—General William Booth—wide sweep of his imagination—sudden contrasts in sound—his prose works—his interest in moving pictures—an apostle of democracy—a wandering minstrel—his vitality—a primary man—art plus morality—his geniality—a poet and a missionary—his fearlessness.—Robert Frost—the poet of New England—his paradoxical birth—his education—his career in England—his experiences on a farm—his theory of the spoken word—an out-door poet—not a singer—lack of range—interpreter as well as observer—pure realism—rural tragedies—centrifugal force—men and women—suspense—the building of a poem—the pleasure of recognition—his sincerity—his truthfulness.

"But you—you can help so much more. You can help spiritually. You can help to shape things, give form and thought and poignancy to the most matter-of-fact existence; show people how to think and live and appreciate beauty. What does it matter if some of them jeer at you, or trample on your work? What matters is that those for whom your message is intended will know you by your work."

—STACY AUMONIER, *Just Outside.*

I

OF ALL living Americans who have contributed to the advance of English poetry in the twentieth century, no one has given more both as prophet and priest than Vachel Lindsay. His poems are notable for originality, pictorial beauty, and thrilling music. He belongs to no modern school, but is doing his best to found one; and when I think of his love of a loud noise, I call him a Cymbalist.

Yet when I use the word *noise* to describe his verse, I use it not only

in its present, but in its earlier meaning, as when Edmund Waller saluted Chloris with

While I listen to thy voice,
Chloris! I feel my life decay;
That powerful noise
Calls my flitting soul away.

This use of the word, meaning an agreeable, harmonious sound, was current from Chaucer to Coleridge.

My first acquaintance with Mr. Lindsay's poetry began with a masterpiece, *General William Booth Enters into Heaven*. Early in the year 1913, before I had become a subscriber to Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, I found among the clippings in the back of a copy of the *Independent* this extraordinary burst of music. I carried it in my pocket for a year. Nothing since Francis Thompson's *In No Strange Land* had given me such a spinal chill. Later I learned that it had appeared for the first time in the issue of *Poetry* for Jan-

uary, 1913. All lovers of verse owe a debt of gratitude to Miss Monroe for bringing the new poet to the attention of the public; and all students of contemporary movements in metre ought to subscribe to her monthly magazine; the numbers naturally vary in value, but almost any one may contain a "find"; as I discovered to my pleasure in reading *Niagara* in the summer of 1917.

Nicholas Vachel Lindsay—Vachel rimes with Rachel—was born at Springfield, Illinois—which rimes with boy—on November 10, 1879. His pen name omits the Nicholas. For three years he was a student at Hiram College in Ohio, and for five years an art student, first at Chicago, and then at New York. This brings us to the year 1905. From that year until 1910 he drew strange pictures, lectured on various subjects, and wrote defiant and peculiar "bulletins." Then he became a tramp, making long pilgrimages afoot in winter and spring through Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, invading even the Northern States. These wanderings are described with vigour, vivacity, and contagious good humour in his book called *A Handy Guide for Beggars*. His wallet contained nothing but printed leaflets—his poems—which he exchanged for bed and board. He was the Evangelist of Beauty, preaching his gospel everywhere by reciting his verses. In the summer of 1912 he walked from Illinois to New Mexico.

To understand his development, one should read his books not according to the dates of formal publication, but in the following order: *A Handy Guide for Beggars*, *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*, *The Art of the Moving Picture*—these three being mainly

in prose. Then one is ready for the three volumes of poetry, *General William Booth Enters into Heaven* (1913), *The Congo* (1914), and *The Chinese Nightingale* (1917). While I am writing this essay, another prose work is well under way, *The Golden Book of Springfield*, concerning which Mr. Lindsay tells me, "The actual Golden Book is a secular testament about Springfield, to be given to the city in 2018, from a mysterious source. My volume is a hypothetical forecast of the times of 2018, as well as of the Golden Book. Frankly the Lindsay the reviewers know came nearer to existing twelve years ago than to-day, my manuscripts are so far behind my notes. And a thing that has helped in this is that through changing publishers, etc., my first prose book is called my latest. If you want my ideas in order, assume the writer of the *Handy Guide for Beggars* is just out of college, of *Adventures While Preaching* beginning in the thirties, and the *Art of the Moving Picture* half-way through the thirties. The *Moving Picture* book in the last half embodies my main social ideas of two years ago. In mood and method, you will find *The Golden Book of Springfield* a direct descendant of the general social and religious philosophy which I crowded into the photoplay book whether it belonged there or not. I hope you will do me the favour and honour to set my work in this order in your mind, for many of my small public still think *A Handy Guide for Beggars* the keynote of my present work. But it was really my first wild dash."

The above letter was written August 8, 1917.

Like many creative writers, Mr. Lindsay is an artist not only with

the pen, but with the pencil. He has made drawings since childhood; drawing and writing still divide his time and energy. The first impression one receives from the pictures is like that produced by the poems—strangeness. The best have that Baconian element of strangeness in the proportion which gives the final touch to beauty; the worst are merely bizarre. He says, "My claim for them is that while laboured and struggling in execution, they represent a study of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Japanese art, two most orthodox origins for art, and have no relation whatever to cubism, post-impressionism, or futurism. . . . I have been very fond of Swinburne all my life, and I should say my drawing is nearer to his ornate mood than any of my writing has been. But that is a matter for your judgment." I find his pictures so interesting that I earnestly hope he will some day publish a large collection of them in a separate volume.

One of his latest developments is the idea of the *Poem Game*, which is elaborated with interesting poetic illustrations in the volume called *The Chinese Nightingale*. In giving his directions and suggestions in the latter part of this book, he remarks, "The present rhymer has no ambitions as a stage manager. The Poem Game idea, in its rhythmic picnic stage, is recommended to amateurs, its further development to be on their own initiative. Informal parties might divide into groups of dancers and groups of chanters. The whole might be worked out in the spirit in which children play King William was King James's Son, London Bridge. . . . The main revolution necessary for dancing improvisers, who would go a longer

way with the Poem Game idea, is to shake off the Isadora Duncan and the Russian precedents for a while, and abolish the orchestra and piano, replacing all these with the natural meaning and cadences of English speech. The work would come closer to acting than dancing is now conceived."

Here is a good opportunity for house parties, in the intervals of Red Cross activities; and while I am writing this, word comes to me from the University of Chicago, that on February 15, 1918, at Mandel Hall, *The Chinese Nightingale* was given with a spoken chorus of twelve girls, selected for their speaking voices. From the testimony of one of the professors at the university, it is clear that the performance was a success, realising something of Mr. Lindsay's idea of the union of the arts, with Poetry at the centre.

Among the games given in verse by the author in the latter part of *The Chinese Nightingale* volume is one called *The Potatoes' Dance*, which appears to me to approach most closely to the original purpose. It is certainly a jolly poem. But whether these games are played by laughing choruses of youth or only by the firelight in the fancy of a solitary reader, the validity of Vachel Lindsay's claim to the title of Poet may be settled at once by witnessing the transformation of a filthy rum-hole into a sunlit forest. As Edmond Rostand looked at a dunghill, and saw the vision of Chantecler, so Vachel Lindsay looked at some drunken niggers and saw the vision of the Congo.

Fat black bucks in a wine-barrel room,
Barrel-house kings, with feet unstable,
Sagged and reeled and pounded on the
table,

Pounded on the table,
 Beat an empty barrel with the handle of a
 broom,
 Hard as they were able,
 Boom, boom, BOOM,
 With a silk umbrella and the handle of a
 broom,
 Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM.
 THEN I had religion, THEN I had a vision,
 I could not turn from their revel in
 derision.
 THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH
 THE BLACK,
 CUTTING THROUGH THE FOREST WITH A
 GOLDEN TRACK.
 Then along that river bank
 A thousand miles
 Tattooed cannibals danced in files;
 Then I heard the boom of the blood-lust
 song
 And a thigh-bone beating on a tin-pan
 gong. . . .
 A negro fairyland swung into view,
 A minstrel river
 Where dreams come true.
 The ebony palace soared on high
 Through the blossoming trees to the even-
 ing sky.
 The inlaid porches and casements shone
 With gold and ivory and elephant-bone. . . .
 Just then from the doorway, as fat as
 shots,
 Came the cake-walk princes in their long
 red coats,
 Canes with a brilliant lacquer shine,
 And tall silk hats that were red as wine.
 And they pranced with their butterfly part-
 ners there,
 Coal-black maidens with pearls in their
 hair,
 Knee-skirts trimmed with the jessamine
 sweet,
 And bells on their ankles and little black-
 feet.

There are those who call this non-
 sense and its author a mountebank.
 I call it poetry and its author a poet.
 You never heard anything like it be-
 fore; but do not be afraid of your
 own enjoyment. Read it aloud a
 dozen times, and you, too, will hear
 roaring, epic music, and you will see
 the mighty, golden river cutting
 through the forest.

I do not know how many towns I

have visited where I have heard
 "What do you think of Vachel Lind-
 say? He was here last month and
 recited his verses. Most of his audi-
 ence were puzzled." Yet they re-
 membered him. What would have
 happened if I had asked them to give
 me a brief synopsis of the lecture
 they heard yesterday on "The Mes-
 sage of John Ruskin." Fear not, lit-
 tle flock. Vachel Lindsay is an au-
 thentic wandering minstrel. The fine
 phrases you heard yesterday were
 like snow upon the desert's dusty
 face, lighting a little hour or two,
 now gone.

*General William Booth Enters
 into Heaven*—with the accompany-
 ing instruments, which blare out
 from the printed page—is a sublime
 interpretation of one of the varie-
 ties of religious experience. Two
 works of genius have been written
 about the Salvation Army—*Major
 Barbara* and *General William Booth
 Enters into Heaven*. But *Major
 Barbara*, with its almost appalling
 cleverness—Granville Barker says
 the second act is the finest thing
 Shaw ever composed—is written,
 after all, from the seat of the scorn-
 ful, like a metropolitan reporter at
 a Gospel tent; Mr. Lindsay's poem
 is written from the inside, from the
 very heart of the mystery. It is in-
 terpretation, not description.
 "Booth was blind," says Mr. Lind-
 say; "all reformers are blind." One
 must in turn be blind to many ob-
 vious things, blind to ridicule, blind
 to criticism, blind to the wisdom of
 this world, if one would understand
 a phenomenon like General Booth.

Booth led boldly with his big bass drum—
 (Are you washed in the blood of the
 Lamb?)

The Saints smiled gravely and they said:
 "He's come."

(Are you washed in the blood of the
Lamb?)

Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,
Lurching bravoos from the ditches dank,
Drabs from the alleyways and drug fiends
pale—

Minds still passion-ridden, soul-powers
frail:—

Vermin-eaten saints with mouldy breath,
Unwashed legions with the ways of Death—
(Are you washed in the blood of the
Lamb?)

And when Booth halted by the curb for
prayer

He saw his Master thro' the flag-filled air.
Christ came gently with a robe and crown
For Booth the soldier, while the throng
knelt down.

He saw King Jesus. They were face to
face,

And he knelt a-weeping in that holy place.
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

Dante and Milton were more successful
in making pictures of hell than of
heaven—no one has ever made a
common conception of heaven more
permanently vivid than in this poem.

See how amid the welter of
crowds and the deafening crash of
drums and banjos the individual
faces stand out in the golden light.

Big-voiced lassies made their banjos bang,
Tranced, fanatical they shrieked and
sang. . . .

Bull-necked convicts with that land make
free. . . .

The lame were straightened, withered limbs
uncurled

And blind eyes opened on a new, sweet
world. . . .

Gone was the weasel-head, the snout, the
jowl!

Sages and sibyls now, and athletes clean,
Rulers of empires, and of forests green!

It is a pictorial, musical, and
spiritual masterpiece. I am not
afraid to call it a spiritual master-
piece; for to anyone who reads it as
we should read all true poetry, with
an unconditional surrender to its
magic, General William Booth and
his horde will not be the only persons
present who will enter into heaven.

Vachel Lindsay needs plenty of
room for his imagination—the more
space he has in which to disport him-
self, the more impressive he becomes.
His strange poem, *How I Walked
Alone in the Jungles of Heaven*, has
the vasty sweep congenial to his
powers. *Simon Legree* is as accurate
an interpretation of the negro's
conception of the devil and of hell
as *General William Booth* is of the
Salvation Army's conception of
heaven, though it is not so fine a
poem. When he rises from hell or
descends from heaven, he loves big,
boundless things on the face of the
earth, like the Western Plains and
the glory of Niagara. The contrast
between the bustling pettiness of the
artificial city of Buffalo and the
eternal fresh beauty of Niagara is
like Bunyan's vision of the man busy
with the muck-rake while over his
head stood an angel with a golden
crown.

Within the town of Buffalo
Are prosy men with leaden eyes.
Like ants they worry to and fro,
(Important men, in Buffalo.)
But only twenty miles away
A deathless glory is at play:
Niagara, Niagara. . . .

Above the town a tiny bird,
A shining speck at sleepy dawn,
Forgets the ant-hill so absurd,
This self-important Buffalo.
Descending twenty miles away
He bathes his wings at break of day—
Niagara, Niagara.

True poet that he is, Vachel Lind-
say loves to show the contrast be-
tween transient noises that tear the
atmosphere to shreds and the
eternal beauty of unpretentious
melody. After the thunder and the
lightning comes the still, small
voice. Who ever before thought of
comparing the roar of the swiftly
passing motor-cars with the sweet

music of the stationary bird? Was there ever in a musical composition a more startling change from fortissimo to pianissimo?

Listen to the iron-horns, ripping, racking,
Listen to the quack-horns, slack and clack-
ing.

Way down the road, trilling like a toad,
Here comes the *dice*-horn, here comes the
vice-horn,

Here comes the *snarl*-horn, *brawl*-horn,
lewd-horn,

Followed by the *prude*-horn, bleak and
squeaking:—

(Some of them from Kansas, some of them
from Kansas.)

Here comes the *hod*-horn, *plod*-horn, *sod*-
horn,

Nevermore-to-roam-horn, *loam*-horn, *home*-
horn,

(Some of them from Kansas, some of them
from Kansas.)

Far away the Rachel-Jane,
Not defeated by the horns,
Sings amid a hedge of thorns:—
“Love and life,
Eternal youth—
Sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet,
Dew and glory,
Love and truth,
Sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet.”

Of Mr. Lindsay's prose works, the one first written, *A Handy Guide for Beggars*, is by all odds the best. Even if it did not contain musical cadenzas, any reader would know that the author was a poet. It is full of the spirit of joyous young manhood and reckless adventure, and laughs its way into our hearts. There is no reason why Mr. Lindsay should ever apologise for this book, even if it does not represent his present attitude; it is as individual as a diary, and as universal as youth. His later prose is more careful, possibly more thoughtful, more full of information; but this has a touch of genius. Its successor, *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*, does not quite recapture the

first fine careless rapture. Yet both must be read by students of Mr. Lindsay's verse, not only because they display his personality, but because the original data of many poems can be found among these experiences of the road. For example, *The Broncho That Would Not Be Broken*, which first appeared in 1917, is the rimed version of an incident that happened in July, 1912. It made an indelible impression on the amateur farmer, and the poem has a poignant beauty that nothing will ever erase from the reader's mind. I feel certain that I shall have a vivid recollection of this poem to the last day of my life, assuming that on that last day I can remember anything at all.

A more ambitious prose work than either of the tramp books is *The Art of the Moving Picture*. It is rather singular that Mr. Lindsay, whose poetry primarily appeals to the ear, should be so profoundly interested in an art whose only appeal is to the eye. The reason, perhaps, is twofold. He is professionally a maker of pictures as well as of chants, and he is an apostle of democracy. The moving picture is the most democratic form of art that the world has ever seen. Maude Adams reaches thousands; Mary Pickford reaches millions. It is clear that Mr. Lindsay wishes that the limitless influence of the moving picture may be used to elevate and ennoble America; for here is the greatest force ever known through which his gospel may be preached—the gospel of beauty.

Like so many other original artists, Mr. Lindsay's poetry really goes back to the origins of the art. As John Masefield is the twentieth century Chaucer, so Vachel Lindsay

is the twentieth century minstrel. On the one occasion when he met Mr. Yeats, the Irishman asked him point-blank, "What are we going to do to restore the primitive singing of poetry?" and stayed not for an answer. Fortunately the question was put to a man who answered it by accomplishment; the best answer to any question is not an elaborate theory, but a demonstration. In *The Congo*, we have real minstrelsy. The shoulder-notes, giving detailed directions for singing, chanting, and reciting, are as charming in their way as Mr. Barrie's stage-directions. They not only show the aim of the poet; they admit the reader immediately into an inner communion with the spirit of the poem.

Everyone who reads *The Congo* or who hears it read cannot help enjoying it; which is one reason why so many are afraid to call it a great poem. For a similar reason, some critics are afraid to call Percy Grainger a great composer, because of his numerous and delightful audacities. Yet *The Congo* is a great poem, possessing as it does many of the high qualities of true poetry. It shows a splendid power of imagination, as fresh as the trackless forests it describes; it blazes with glorious colours; its music transports the listener with climax after climax; it interprets truthfully the spirit of the negro race.

I should not think of attempting to determine the relative position of Percy Grainger in music and of Vachel Lindsay in poetry; but it is clear that both men possess an amazing vitality. Is it not the lack of vital force which prevents so many accomplished artists from ever rising above the crowd? I suppose we have all read reams on reams of

magazine verse exhibiting technical correctness, exactitude in language, and pretty fancy; and after a momentary unspoken tribute to the writer's skill, we straightway forget forevermore what we have read. But when a poem like *Danny Deever* appears, it is vain to call it a music-hall ballad, or to pretend that it is not high art; the fact is that the worst memory in the world will always retain it. Such a poem comes like a breeze into a close chamber; it is charged with vitality. We are in contact with a new force—a force emanating from that mysterious and inexhaustible stream whence comes every manifestation of genius. To have this super-vitality is to have genius; and although one may have with it many distressing faults of expression and an unlimited supply of bad taste, all other qualities combined cannot atone for the absence of this one primal element. Indeed the excess of wealth in energy is bound to produce shocking excrescences; our Springfield poet is sometimes absurd when he means to be sublime, bizarre when he means to be picturesque. The same is true of Walt Whitman—it is true of all creative writers whom John Burroughs calls *primary* men, in distinction from excellent artists who remain in the secondary class. Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, Walt Whitman, John Masefield, Vachel Lindsay are primary men.

I have often wondered who would write a poem worthy of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. Vachel Lindsay is the only living American who could do it, and I hope he will accept this challenge. Its awful majesty can be revealed only in verse; for it is one of the very few wonders of the world which no

photograph and no painting can ever reproduce. Who ever saw a picture that gave him any conception of this incomparable spectacle?

In order to understand the primary impulse that drove Mr. Lindsay into writing verse and making pictures, one ought to read first of all his poem *The Tree of Laughing Bells, or The Wings of the Morning*. The first half of the title exhibits his love of resounding harmonies; the second gives an idea of the range of his imagination. His finest work always combines these two elements, melody and elevation, "and singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest." I hope that the picture he drew for *The Tree of Laughing Bells* may some time be made available for all students of his work, as it was his first serious design.

Vachel Lindsay is essentially honest, for he tries to become himself exactly what he hopes the future American will be. He is a Puritan with a passion for Beauty; he is a zealous reformer filled with Falstaffian mirth; he goes along the highway, singing and dancing, distributing tracts. "Apollo's first, at last the true God's priest."

We know that two mighty streams, the Renaissance and the Reformation, which flowed side by side without mingling, suddenly and completely merged in Spenser's *Faery Queene*. That immortal song is a combination of ravishing sweetness and moral austerity. Later the Puritan became the Man on Horseback, and rode roughshod over every bloom of beauty that lifted its delicate head. Despite the genius of Milton, supreme artist plus supreme moralist, the Puritans managed somehow to force into the common

mind an antagonism between Beauty and Morality which persists even unto this day. There is no reason why those two contemporaries, Oscar Wilde and the Rev. Charles H. Spurgeon, should stand before the London public as the champions of contending armies; for Beauty is an end in itself, not a means, and so is Conduct.

In the best work of Vachel Lindsay, we find these two qualities happily married, the zest for beauty and the hunger and thirst after righteousness. He made a soap-box tour for the Anti-Saloon League, preaching at the same time the Gospel of Beauty. As a rule, reformers are lacking in the two things most sedulously cultivated by commercial travellers and life-insurance agents, tact and humour. If these interesting orders of the Knights of the Road were as lacking in geniality as the typical reformer, they would lose their jobs. And yet fishers of men, for that is what all reformers are, try to fish without bait, at the same time making much loud and offensive noise. Then they are amazed at the callous indifference of humanity to "great moral issues."

Vachel Lindsay is irresistibly genial. Nor is any of this geniality made up of the professionally ingratiating smile; it is the foundation of his temperament. What has this got to do with his poetry? It has everything to do with it. It gives him the key to the hearts of children; to the basic savagery of a primitive black or a poor white; to peripatetic harvesters; to futurists, imagists, blue-stockings, pedants of all kinds; to evangelists, college professors, drunken sailors, tramps whose robes are lined with vermin. He is the great American democrat, not be-

cause that is his political theory, but simply because he cannot help it.

His attitude toward other schools of art, even when he has nothing in common with them, is positively affectionate. Could there be two poets more unlike in temperament and in style than Mr. Lindsay and Mr. Masters? Yet in the volume, *The Chinese Nightingale*, we have a poem dedicated "to Edgar Lee Masters, with great respect." He speaks of "the able and distinguished Amy Lowell," and of his own poems "parodied by my good friend, Louis Untermeyer." Many of the uninformed have supposed that because he is a new poet and wholly unconventional, he must be either an "imagist" or a believer in "free verse," or both. Now as a matter of fact, his work is as near as may be to an antithesis of both these schools. He says, "I admire the work of the Imagist Poets. We exchange fraternal greetings. . . . But neither my few heterodox pieces nor my many struggling orthodox pieces conform to their patterns. . . . The Imagists emphasise pictorial effects, while the Higher Vaudeville exaggerates musical effects. Imagists are apt to omit rime, while in my Higher Vaudeville I often put five rimes on a line."

Impossible to quarrel with Vachel Lindsay. His stock of genial tolerance is inexhaustible, and makes him regard not only hostile humans, but even destructive insects, with inquisitive affection.

I want live things in their pride to remain.
I will not kill 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.

During his tramps, the parents who unwillingly received him discovered, when he began to recite stories to their children, that they had entertained an angel unawares; and I have not the slightest doubt that on the frequent occasions when his application for food and lodging was received with a volley of curses, he honestly admired the noble fluency of his enemy. When he was harvesting, the singing stacker became increasingly and distressingly pornographic; instead of rebuking him for foulness, which would only have bewildered the stacker, Mr. Lindsay taught him the first stanza of Swinburne's chorus. "The next morning when my friend climbed into our barge to ride to the field he began:

When the hounds of spring are on winter's
traces,
The mother of months, in meadow or plain,
Fills the shadows—

'Dammit, what's the rest of it? I've been trying to recite that piece all night.' Now he has the first four stanzas. And last evening he left for Dodge City to stay overnight and Sunday. He was resolved to purchase *Atalanta in Calydon* and find in the Public Library *The Lady of Shalott* and *The Blessed Damozel*, besides paying the usual visit to his wife and children."

If a man cannot understand music, painting, and poetry without loving these arts, neither can a man understand men and women and children without loving them. This is one reason why even the cleverest cynicism is never more than half the truth, and usually less.

Mr. Lindsay is a poet and a missionary. As a missionary, he wishes all Americans to be as good judges of poetry as they are, let us say, of baseball. One of the numerous joys

of being a professional ball-player must be the knowledge that you are exhibiting your art to a prodigious assembly of qualified critics. John Sargent knows that the majority of persons who gaze at his picture of President Wilson in the Metropolitan Museum are incompetent to express any opinion; his subtlety is lost or quite misunderstood; but Tyrus Raymond Cobb knows that the hundreds of thousands who daily watch him during the summer months are quick to appreciate his consummate mastery of the game. Vachel Lindsay, I suppose, wants millions not merely to love, but to detect the finer shades of the poetic art.

If he set out to accomplish this dream by lowering the standards of poetry, then he would debase the public and be a traitor to his guild. But his method is uncompromising—he taught the harvester not Mrs. Hemans, but Swinburne. He calls his own verse the higher vaudeville. But *The Congo* is the higher vaudeville as *Macbeth* is the higher melodrama.

Mr. Lindsay is true to the oldest traditions of poetry in his successful attempts to make his verses ring and sing. He is both antique and antic. But he is absolutely contemporary, "modern," "new," in his fearlessness. He has this in common with the practitioners of free verse, with the imagists, with the futurists; he is not in the least afraid of seeming ridiculous. There can be no progress in art until artists overcome wholly this blighting fear. It is the lone individual, with his name stamped all over him, charging into the safely anonymous mass; but that way lies the Advance.

When Thomas Carlyle took up

the study of Oliver Cromwell, he found that all previous historians had tried to answer this question: What is the masque that Oliver wore And suddenly the true answer came to him in the form of another question: What if it should prove to be no masque at all, but just the man's own face? So there are an increasingly large number of readers who are discerning in the dauntless gambols of Vachel Lindsay, not the masque of buffoonery, worn to attract attention, but a real poet, dancing gaily with bronchos, children, field-mice and potatoes.

Such unquenchable vitality, such bubbling exuberance, cannot always be graceful, cannot always be impressive. But the blunders of an original man are sometimes more fruitful than the correctness of a copyist. Furthermore, blunders sometimes make for wisdom and truth. Let us not forget Vachel Lindsay's poem on Columbus:

Would that we had the fortunes of Columbus,
Sailing his caravels a trackless way,
He found a Universe—he sought Cathay.
God give such dawns as when, his venture o'er,
The Sailor looked upon San Salvador.
God lead us past the setting of the sun
To wizard islands, of august surprise;
God make our blunders wise.

II—COLD PASTORAL!

The difference between Vachel Lindsay and Robert Frost is the difference between a drum-major and a botanist. The former marches gaily at the head of his big band, looking up and around at the crowd; the latter finds it sweet

with unuplifted eyes
To pace the ground, if path be there or
none.

Robert Frost, the poet of New England, was born at San Francisco, and published his first volume in London. Midway between these two cities lies the enchanted ground of his verse; for he belongs to New England as wholly as Whittier, as truly as Mr. Lindsay belongs to Illinois. He showed his originality so early as March 26, 1875, by being born at San Francisco; for although I have known hundreds of happy Californians, men and women whose love for their great State is a religion, Robert Frost is the only person I ever met who was born there. That beautiful country is frequently used as a spring-board to heaven; and that I can understand, for the transition is less violent than from some other points of departure. But why so few natives?

Shamelessly I lift the following biographical facts from Miss Amy Lowell's admirable essay on our poet. At the age of ten, the boy was moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts. He went to school, and disliked the experience. He tried Dartmouth and later Harvard, staying a few months at the first and two years at the second. Between these academic experiences he was married. In 1900 he began farming in New Hampshire. In 1911 he taught school, and in 1912 went to England. His first book of poems, *A Boy's Will*, was published at London in 1913. The review in *The Academy* was ecstatic. In 1914 he went to live at Ledbury, where John Masefield was born, and where in the neighbourhood lived W. W. Gibson. His second volume, *North of Boston*, was published at London in 1914. Miss Lowell quotes a sentence, full of insight, from the review in the *Times*. "Poetry burns up out of it, as when

a faint wind breathes upon smouldering embers." In March, 1915, Mr. Frost returned to America, bringing his reputation with him. He bought a farm in New Hampshire among the mountains, and in 1916 appeared his third volume, *Mountain Interval*.

Was there ever a better illustration of the uncritical association of names than the popular coupling of Robert Frost with Edgar Lee Masters? They are similar in one respect; they are both poets. But in the glorious army of poets, it would be difficult to find two contemporaries more wholly unlike both in the spirit and in the form of their work than Mr. Frost and Mr. Masters. Mr. Frost is as far from free verse as he can stretch, as far as Longfellow; and while he sometimes writes in an ironical mood, he never indulges himself in cynicism. As a matter of fact, Mr. Frost is nearer in his art to Mr. Lindsay than to Mr. Masters; for his theory of poetry, which I confess I cannot understand, requires the poet to choose words entirely with reference to their spoken value.

His poetry is more interesting and clearer than his theories about it. I once heard him give a combination reading-lecture, and after he had read some of his poems, all of which are free from obscurity, he began to explain his ideas on how poetry should be written. He did this with charming modesty, but his "explanations" were opaque. After he had continued in this vein for some time, he asked the audience which they would prefer to have him do next—read some more of his poems, or go on talking about poetry? He obtained from his hearers an immediate response, picked up his book, and read in admirable fashion his excel-

lent verse. We judge poets by their poems, not by their theories.

Robert Frost is an out-door poet. Even when he gives a picture of an interior, the people are always looking out of the windows at something or other. In his poems we follow the procession of the seasons, with the emphasis on autumn and winter. One might be surprised at the infrequency of his poems on spring, were it not for the fact that his knowledge of the country is so precise and definite. Spring is more beautiful in the city than in the country; it comes with less alloy. No one has ever drawn a better picture of a country road in the pouring rain, where "the hoof-prints vanish away."

In spite of his preoccupation with the exact value of oral words, he is not a singing lyrist. There is not much *bel canto* in his volumes. Nor do any of his poems seem spontaneous. He is a thoughtful man, given to meditation; the meanest flower or a storm-bedraggled bird will lend him material for poetry. But the expression of his poems does not seem naturally fluid. I suspect he has blotted many a line. He is as deliberate as Thomas Hardy, and cultivates the lapidary style. Even in the conversations frequently introduced into his pieces, he is as economical with words as his characters are with cash. This gives to his work a hardness of outline in keeping with the New England temperament and the New Hampshire climate. There is no doubt that much of his peculiarly effective dramatic power is gained by his extremely careful expenditure of language.

It is, of course, impossible to prescribe boundary lines for a poet, although there are critics who seem to enjoy staking out a poet's claim.

While I have no intention of building futile walls around Mr. Frost's garden, nor erecting a sign with the presumptuous prohibition of trespassing beyond them, it is clear that he has himself chosen to excel in quality of produce rather than in variety and range. In the first poem of the first volume, he concludes as follows:

They would not find me changed from him
they knew—

Only more sure of all I thought was true.

This is certainly a precise statement of the impression made on the reader who studies his three books in chronological order. *A Boy's Will*, as befits a youth who has lived more in himself than in the world, is more introspective than either *North of Boston* or *Mountain Interval*; but this habit of introspection gave him both the method and the insight necessary for the accurate study of nature and neighbours. He discovered what other people were like, simply by looking into his own heart. And in *A Boy's Will* we find that same penetrating examination of rural scenes and common objects that gives to the two succeeding works the final stamp of veracity. I do not remember ever having seen a phrase like the following, though the phrase instantly makes the familiar picture leap into that empty space ever before the reader's eye—that space, which like bare wall-paper, seems to demand a picture on its surface.

*Or highway where the slow wheel
pours the sand.*

It is fortunate that the law of diminishing returns—which every farmer is forced to heed—does not apply to pastoral poets. Out of the same soil Robert Frost has successfully raised three crops of the same

produce. He might reply that in the intervals he has let the ground lie fallow—but my impression is that he is really working it all the time.

The sharp eye of the farmer sees nothing missed by our poet, but the poet has interpretation as well as vision. He not only sees things but sees things in their relations; and he knows that not only is everything related to every other thing, but that all things are related to the eternal mystery, their source and their goal. This is why the yellow primrose is so infinitely more than a yellow primrose. This also explains why the poems of Mr. Frost, after stirring us to glad recognition of their fidelity, leave us in a muse.

His studies of human nature are the purest realism. They are conversations rather than arias, for he uses the speaking, not the singing voice. Poets are always amazing us, and some day Robert Frost may astonish me by writing a romantic ballad. It would surely be a surprise, for with his lack of operatic accomplishment, and his fondness for heroes in homespun, he would seem almost ideally unfitted for the task. This feeling I find strengthened by his poem called *An Equal Sacrifice*, the only one of his pieces where anything like a ballad is attempted, and the only one in all three books which seems to be an undeviating failure. It is as flat as a pancake, and ends with flat moralising. Mr. Frost is particularly unsuccessful at preaching.

No, apart from his nature poems, his studies of men and women are most impressive when they follow the lines of Doric simplicity in the manner of the powerful stage-plays written by Susan Glaspell. The rigidity of the mould seems all the better

fitted for the suppressed passion it contains, just as liquid fire is poured into a vessel with unyielding sides. His two most successful poems of this kind are *Home Burial*, in *North of Boston*, and *Snow*, in *Mountain Interval*. The former is not so much a tragedy as the concentrated essence of tragedy. There is enough pain in it to furnish forth a dozen funerals. It has that centrifugal force which Mr. Calderon so brilliantly suggests as the main characteristic of the dramas of Chekhov. English plays are centripetal; they draw the attention of the audience to the group of characters on the stage; but Chekhov's, says Mr. Calderon, are centrifugal; they throw our regard off from the actors to the whole class of humanity they represent. Just such a remark applies to *Home Burial*; it makes the reader think of the thousands of farmhouses darkened by similar tragedies. Nor is it possible to quote a single separate passage from this poem, for each line is so absolutely necessary to the total effect that one must read every word of it to feel its significance. It is a masterpiece of tragedy. And it is curious, as one continues to think about it, as one so often does on finishing a poem by Robert Frost, that we are led first to contemplate the number of such tragedies, and finally to contemplate a stretch of life of far wider range—the broad, profound difference between a man and a woman. Are there any two creatures on God's earth more unlike? In this poem the man is true to himself, and for that very reason cannot in his honest, simple heart comprehend why he should appear to his own wife as if he were some frightful monster. He is perplexed, amazed,

and finally enraged at the look of loathing in the wide eyes of his own mate. It was a little thing—his innocent remark about a birch fence—that revealed to her that she was living with a stranger. Grief never possesses a man as it does a woman, except when the grief is exclusively concerned with his own bodily business, as when he discovers that he has cancer. To the last day of human life on earth, it will seem incomprehensible to a woman that a man, on the very day of a death in the family, can sit down and eat with gusto a hearty meal. For bodily appetite, which is the first thing to leave a woman, is the last to leave a man; and when it has left every other part of his frame, it sometimes has a repulsive survival in his eyes. The only bridge that can really cross this fathomless chasm between man and woman is the bridge of love.

The dramatic quality of *Snow* is suspense. The object through which the suspense is conveyed to the reader is the telephone, employed with such tragic effect at the Grand Guignol. Mr. Frost's art in colloquial speech has never appeared to better advantage than here, and what a wave of relief when the voice of Meserve is heard! It is like a resurrection.

In order fully to appreciate a poem like *Mending Wall*, one should hear Mr. Frost read it. He reads it with such interpretative skill, with subtle hesitations and pauses for apparent reflection, that the poem grows before the audience even as the wall itself. He hesitates as

though he had a word in his hands, and was thinking what would be exactly the best place to deposit it—even as the farmer holds a stone before adding it to the structure. For this poem is not written, it is built. It is built of separate words, and like the wall it describes, it takes two to build it, the author and the reader. When the last line is reached, the poem is finished.

Nearly every page in the poetry of Robert Frost gives us the pleasure of recognition. He is not only sincere, he is truthful—by which I mean that he not only wishes to tell the truth, but succeeds in doing so. This is the fundamental element in his work, and will, I believe, give it permanence.

GOOD HOURS

I had for my winter evening walk—
No one at all with whom to talk,
But I had the cottages in a row
Up to their shining eyes in snow.

And I thought I had the folk within:
I had the sound of a violin;
I had a glimpse through curtain laces
Of youthful forms and youthful faces.

I had such company outward bound.
I went till there were no cottages found.
I turned and repented, but coming back
I saw no window but that was black.

Over the snow my creaking feet
Disturbed the slumbering village street
Like profanation, by your leave,
At ten o'clock of a winter eve.

A poem like that gives not only the pleasure of recognition; it has an indescribable charm. It is the charm when joy fades, not into sorrow, but into a deep, abiding peace.

Professor Phelps's next essay will discuss the work of Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters, Louis Untermeyer, Conrad Aiken.

CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

BOOTH TARKINGTON has achieved the fame of having a book written about him. It is a good book, too, and interesting even if, unimaginable as it

**Booth
Tarkington:
A Biography**

seems, one is not particularly interested in Mr. Tarkington, because the author has a point of view that in itself is interesting and somewhat unusual in the criticism of living authors. Mr. Tarkington is considered "with an effort at honesty and intelligence" that contrasts with the "flood of 'blurb' tales about living authors, as florid and as empty as the gift book," and, asks the author, "Has he (Tarkington) got any justification for being around these days and for going on? Are you making a decent use of your time in reading him? Ought all his early books to be scrapped? And how, exactly, did he come about, anyhow?" Mr. Robert C. Holiday, who is responsible for this biography, *Booth Tarkington*, makes out a strong case for his client and we leave the book well convinced that Tarkington is quite a desirable citizen. Holiday used to review books for the *New York Times*, and of his reviews it was said that he seldom mentioned either the book under discussion or its author—that he just wrote. This deft criticism, however, would not apply to his book, for with all his interesting excursions into the evolution of the novel and the allusions to the famous stories of the past decade or two, he always reverts to Tarkington as an illustration of his theme.

It is as the protagonist of the boy that we are most likely to think of Tarkington to-day, for his *Penrod* and *Penrod and Sam* are fresher in our minds than even *Monsieur Beaucaire*. And Mr. Holiday is best in his description of this phase of Tarkington's work; let us quote from his book:

**The Boy
of Him**

Mr. Tarkington's interpretation of the creature, boy, has a weird quality; and, one has an uncanny feeling, his studies in boy psychology call for some sort of a pathological explanation. In effect his analysis of the utterly mad workings of the boy's mind and the throbbing of his inflamed nerves is as if a boy himself had suddenly become endowed with the faculty of thinking it out aloud. That is, the author's interpretation of the boy, moving about in what is to him the cataclysm of life, does not so much seem to be the work of a mind observing him from without, as it appears to be a voice from within explaining the matter, the voice of a boy uniquely gifted with the power of self-analysis. It is as if the author had a device in his head like the plumbing giving hot and cold water to a bath-tub, and as if he could at will turn off the stream of mature thinking and turn on the boy thinking. And to recapture the sensations of twelve or of seventeen is exactly what the normal adult mind cannot do. Mr. Tarkington's earlier books might have been produced by any brilliant young writer had he happened to possess this particular author's personality, but for the production of his boy stories something else was required, something for which I really know no other name than genius, though that is a deuce of a word to have to use. However, to talk you have to use what words we have. And a genius, according to the most modern theories, bears a relationship to the so-called trance medium: he goes into a sort of trance, and produces work which no other person can produce by the