

VACHEL LINDSAY: EVANGELIST OF POETRY

BY HERBERT S. GORMAN

It does not compel any perversion of logic to regard Vachel Lindsay as an inclusive representative of one of the three major manifestations in contemporary American poetry. Likewise he is a pivotal point and his influence will, in some measure, establish one of the potential roads in the future of our autochthonous verse. It is a peculiar fact that he is the one important figure of our day who seems to have attracted to himself no disciples, at least to the obvious extent to which Mr. Robinson, Mr. Frost and Mr. Masters have surrounded themselves with lesser atomies. His influence is of a more general sort; it is an atmosphere and not an attitude. It is this atmosphere, this subtle impregnation of the surrounding scene, that will manifest itself in the unmistakably opening roads which lead to the future American poetry. One aspect of that future is implied in noting that the roads will be plural. Our native poetry does not concentrate as poetry has done in some countries; it does not travel toward a unified expression. Indeed, the opposite is true. The variety of poets and the immensely dissimilar modes of conception are far greater today than they have been at any time in our history. At the same time they are more essentially American, less dependent on the cultural impulses of England. This, of course, is one reason for the diffuseness and variability of our national inspiration today. We have eventually discovered (long after Walt Whitman) our amazing variety and virility. In order to intimate (generally, of course) why Vachel Lindsay is a pivotal point in this variegated literature—so much of it admittedly tentative—it is necessary to point out briefly what he represents.

There are certain intellectual traits and emotional urges which we regard as peculiarly American. It is from the reasonable juxtaposition and fine marriage of these urges that our native

literature is due to issue. For instance, there is that calm New England reticence revealing life by side-glances, which we associate with the name of Edwin Arlington Robinson. Another urge is the crude, often shapeless, dynamic utterance that is best represented by the poetry of Edgar Lee Masters. And the third manifestation, to which I attach the name of Vachel Lindsay, is a virile evangelism, the reforming and revivalistic spirit rarified into literature. Of course there are other modes of literary expression, but none, I think, so peculiarly our own as the three enumerated above. There is the mental attitude toward life, certainly not American; and there is the sentimental attitude, assuredly American, but (it may be affirmed with equal assurance) now a decaying tradition, the weapon of secondary practitioners and no longer to be discovered in the front rank of those writers who are formulating the basic premises for the literature of tomorrow. Assuming, therefore, that the three urges I have noted are the most important, it is easily perceptible how important the status of Vachel Lindsay may be in the development of our poetry. For some reason we expect the majority of manifestations of the evangelistic spirit to emanate from the Middle West. It comes more naturally from Hiram College, which is Mr. Lindsay's Alma Mater, than it does from Harvard University, for instance. It is not so much that the closely settled East is more effete or less religious; the real reason seems to be that the Middle West is more naïve, and naïveté is nearly always a necessary corollary to evangelism. A man must be simple to be convinced that he has a mission. It also requires a lack of self consciousness. Anyone who has ever heard Vachel Lindsay recite will bear witness to the fact that he is not self conscious.

Now this poet is a pivotal point in American poetry in so far as he possesses the power to impress the fascination of the evangelistic attitude upon younger writers. Evangelism, as I have written, is a form of spiritual activity particularly attractive to a certain type of the American mind. At its worst it results in professional reformers and Harold Bell Wrights; at its best it can climb to the heights of a Garrison, even an Abraham Lincoln. The evangelistic mind, after all, is only the intense desire to better

mankind which has upset individualism and expressed itself in actual exertion. Whether or not it is wise for too many creative artists to act under this impulse is a moot question. Indeed, it is still arguable whether or not letters have anything to do with social propaganda. At the same time, it is manifest that they did have a lot to do with it during the formative period of our letters. But the doubt remains. There were many prophets, it will be remembered, and not all of them were true prophets. And evangelism often has a deplorable way of hardening into an obsession. Some of the greatest tyrants were perverted evangelists.

There would be no need to dwell upon this subject if it were not for the fact that a well defined strain of American blood responds with the utmost alacrity to the evangelistic urge. Messianic delusions are a yearly crop in this country, and there are enough self appointed angels to reach from here to Mars. Vachel Lindsay has not progressed to that exalted state where he regards himself as a Messiah, and it is perfectly evident that he will never reach that perilous predicament because he possesses altogether too much common sense. Allied with his common sense is an uncommon sense of humour, a trait that is generally defunct in the typical reformer. But in spite of these agreeable possessions Lindsay very clearly gives evidence of the evangelistic streak. There is hardly a poem which he has written that is not marked with that impulse somewhere. His *Collected Poems*, for instance, is more than a mere book; it is a weapon, a whole armoury of weapons, with which he has steadfastly fought on the side of the angels against the Powers of Darkness. He slashes out against greed, political chicanery, militarism, alcohol, war, capitalistic oppression, and all preservations of unequalities. He is frankly religious time and again with a vehemence that is almost stentorian. An essentially modern knight, he whacks away at vice with a resounding rhythm that sounds like a stuffed club. Yet there is a horseshoe in that club. He is as vigorous in his love of humanity as Walt Whitman.

Many of his poems are hymns of praise, visions of a golden future (a Utopia of gentleness, justice, charity and skyscrapers) when the lion will lie down in cosy amity with the lamb; above all,

the high song of brotherliness and love. He has written a *Litany of the Heroes* in which he roundly praises all those great minds which have aided Mankind in its long and difficult progress up the bloody slopes of Time. Because Vachel Lindsay is adapted to this sort of expression, because it is born and bred in his bones and is woven like a golden thread through his mind, he is thoroughly successful in handling subjects that would be but jaded repetitions of old truisms from the pen of a lesser writer. Everything he writes is the direct result of a strong and authentic emotion. To this bold evangelism he has brought a sweet reasonableness, a rare and delightful sense of humour, and a metrical emphasis that has been, to say the least, unusual.

A word should be written about this metrical emphasis. Lindsay himself has pointed out that his readers have given his so-called "jazz" poems an importance far out of their due, that they form but a small proportion of his work, and that he desires in no wise to be regarded as an exponent of what has been termed "the higher vaudeville". Such poems as *The Kallyope Yell*, *The Congo* and several others occupy but a few pages in the *Collected Poems*. They are delicious, particularly so when Lindsay recites them in a sonorous voice, but they can hardly be regarded as the essential Lindsay. Like all revivalists, he has his loud moments; like most sincere revivalists he has those other more important moments when the voice is softer and the passion more intense. The real Lindsay is implicit in such poems as *The Chinese Nightingale*, *I Know All This When Gypsy Fiddles Cry*, *In Praise of Johnny Appleseed*, *Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight*, the delicately conceived series of moon poems, *When the Mississippi Flowed in Indiana*, and *The Eagle That is Forgotten*. He is to be found in such a personal revelation (although practically every poem which Lindsay has written is, in some measure, a personal revelation) as *My Fathers Came from Kentucky*, which is well worth setting down as a self-portrait:

I was born in Illinois,—
Have lived there many days.
And I have Northern words,
And thoughts,
And ways.

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But my great-grandfathers came
To the west with Daniel Boone,
And taught his babes to read,
And heard the redbird's tune;

And heard the turkey's call,
And stilled the panther's cry,
And rolled on the blue-grass hills,
And looked God in the eye.

And feud and Hell were theirs;
Love, like the moon's desire,
Love like a burning-mine,
Love like rifle-fire.

I tell tales out of school
Till these Yankees hate my style.
Why should the young cad cry,
Shout with joy for a mile?

Why do I faint with love
Till the prairies dip and reel?
My heart is a kicking horse
Shod with Kentucky steel.

No drop of my blood from north
Of Mason and Dixon's line.
And this racer in my breast
Tears my ribs for a sign.

But I ran in Kentucky hills
Last week. They were hearth and home. . . .
And the church at Grassy Springs,
Under the redbird's wings
Was peace and honeycomb.

In such a poem as this we find the vehemence (it takes a fine writer to flare naturally into such phrases as "love like rifle-fire" and "my heart is a kicking horse shod with Kentucky steel"), the intense ardour and passion of the real Lindsay. He does not require "boomlays" and such exclamations to drive the magic home.

I have said that naïveté is a necessary corollary of evangelism, and considered from certain aspects Vachel Lindsay is the most naïve poet that we have. His heart is always exposed. His

passions are unveiled. He is unique in his spontaneous giving of himself to the casual reader. There is a clean, childlike quality about him, and it comes most naturally when we observe him fashioning dance poems for children or moon poems which are first of all children's rhymes and only secondarily meant for adults. Like Rupert Brooke, although in a far different way, he is a great lover. Brooke's passions were mainly sensory. He loved bright colours, things he could see like plates and grasses and holes in the ground, things he could taste and smell and touch. Lindsay's love is more an adoration of the spirit, an intimate sensing of natures and personalities. This emotion floods the autobiographical introduction to his *Collected Poems*, and there, too, we find many hints concerning the genesis of his abilities and achievements. He was an art student for many years (no one knows Lindsay who has not seen his amusing drawings) and many of his shorter poems were written for pictures. He possesses unusual ideas about the alphabet, and he maintains that he is working toward an American hieroglyphic. His enthusiasm for these things is the enthusiasm of a boy; loud, infectious.

It is true that he has lapses as a poet. Sometimes his thought outruns his content and the result is a ragged poem. Many of his pieces are light as thistledown, unimportant bits flung off at random, and the fact that he includes them in his printed volumes has caused astonishment in some quarters. But Lindsay must be taken as he gives himself, whole-heartedly. It is part of his naïveté that he is not selective. He just pours out everything until the whole man is before the reader. No other American poet has so given himself to his readers. No other has been so confirmed in his conviction of a mission. If he does influence young men into an evangelical type of literature, they cannot go far wrong if they go no farther than he does and with as exalted a spirit. But young men generally take a hint and then make their own road thereafter, and a good evangelist often has poor disciples who pervert their mission. After all, there can be but one touchstone for poetry, and that is art. If it is that, it may be anything else it pleases. Lindsay, when he is at his best, is art. The fact that it is often achieved unconsciously no whit lessens its value.

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AFFAIRS OF THE WORLD

THE YEAR IN RETROSPECT

BY WILLIS FLETCHER JOHNSON

THE tragedy which dominates American annals for 1923 conveys a useful lesson which thus far has been too little noted. It was the sixth removal of a President in mid-term by death. Three of those removals were by natural causes, and three by murder. No one of them produced, through the sudden change in the personnel of the Chief Executive, any menace to, or strain upon, the integrity of the Government, nor even any considerable political disturbance, such as some other countries suffer at changes of sovereign or of ministry. But—this is the lesson to which I have referred—in this last case there was far less change in the Government, in personnel, in policy, in spirit, than in any of its five predecessors. Indeed, we may say that, save for the occupancy of the White House, there was no change at all. And that highly desirable and grateful achievement was effected through the circumstance that for the first time in two generations the President and Vice-President had been selected on the same basis and from the same element of the party, and for the first time in our history the Vice-President had been associated with the Administration as a supernumerary member of the President's Cabinet. Thitherto the rule had generally been to choose the Vice-President from the opposite wing of the party from the President. The result was that in the first four successions of Vice-Presidents there was no attempt or serious pretense at continuing unchanged the policy of the late President, and in fact very marked changes promptly occurred. In the fifth case there was a sincere purpose to carry on the President's policy, though the radical difference between the two men in temperament and manner made its fulfilment impossible. If what occurred in that respect last year was beneficent and was