

Balz Engler, "Poetry and Performance: The Case of Vachel Lindsay".  
*Anglistentag 1982 Zürich: Vorträge*. Ed. Udo Fries and Jörg Hasler.  
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Balz Engler

### **Poetry and Performance: The Case of Vachel Lindsay**

The power of print over literary criticism is still so great that all the verbal arts, with the partial exception of drama, are commonly considered in terms of reading -- the silent interaction between a fixed text and an individual. The power of print has been so strong that it has even affected what is left of the art of performing poetry. It has given us the poetry reading, in which the book is the central object, placed between reader and audience. It has given us the reader who speaks with a flat intonation, almost monotonously, and who avoids eye contact with his audience; and it has also given us listeners who turn their glance inwards, sitting motionless, individuals in meditation. This, one might say, is the closest the performance of poetry can get to becoming an imitation of reading a book.

Under these circumstances, other types of performance, including singing, gesturing and audience participation, have remained an embarrassing Problem to critics, one that can best be dealt with by excluding them from the realm of literature.

The reception of Vachel Lindsay is a case in point. T.S. Eliot found him "impossible" after hearing him perform (Perkins 353), and Ezra Pound, who acknowledged his originality, criticized the craftsmanship of his poetry: "Believe 'me one can write it by the hour as fast as one scribbles." (54) Already during his lifetime Lindsay found it difficult to be taken seriously by students of literature, as Henry Seidel Canby's report on a performance at Yale indicates:

The nice boys from the ivory towers of the best schools and the Gothic dormitories of Yale tittered at first. But as he began to swing the persuasive rhythms of *General William Booth Enters into Heaven* and *The Congo*, and as the rich imagery lifted the homely language into poetry, they warmed, and soon were chanting with him. Yet to them it was only a show -- America, a rather vulgar America speaking, but not

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literature as they had been taught to regard literature.  
 (252)

To critics Lindsay's performances have remained a biographical fact that demands explanation rather than a central aspect of his achievement. Edgar Lee Masters, in his biography of the poet, claims that Lindsay did it "for nothing except for the means of life, and for the sustenance that it gave to his inordinate desire for applause and appreciation ..." (331). This view has set the pattern for later assessments, even where these strongly react against others of Masters' views (e.g., Chénétier 161; Kuykendall 12-14; Massa 16).

The problem of Lindsay's poetry performances, however, is one of literary criticism rather than of Lindsay's biography, of its inability to deal with a phenomenon that is not amenable to common notions of poetry, still hankering after the idea that the literary work is an object that exists in a sphere of its own. In my attempt to reassess Vachel Lindsay's achievement as a performer-poet, I shall therefore first sketch an alternative approach to poetry, one that can accommodate both silent reading and public performance. I shall then turn to Lindsay's dynamic social vision, and discuss the role of performance in it. Finally, I shall suggest some conclusions that go beyond the case of Vachel Lindsay and concern the study of poetry in general.<sup>1</sup>

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Looking for an approach to poetry that can deal with the problems mentioned, we have to concentrate on the event of the poetry experience -- and more radically than this has been done in recent reader-response criticism. One way of doing so is for us to try and answer the question: What does poetry do?

In recent years the pragmatic dimension has become crucial to the study of language, and there is no reason why it should not be studied in poetry. Its best-known formulation is certainly that in Austin's speech-act theory. What he has to, say about perlocutionary acts in general is also pertinent to our discussion:

Saying something will often, or even normally,

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper is a radical revision of an article entitled "Vachel Lindsay and the Town of American Visions," published in *Literature in Performance* 3,1 (Nov. 1982), 27-34.

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produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or the speaker, or of other persons (101).

Austin's notion of the perlocutionary act is surprisingly close to what scholars have observed in the study of oral culture. Walter J. Ong writes about the function of language there:

Words in an oral-aural culture are inseparable from action for they are always sounds. Thus they appear of a piece with other actions, including even grossly physical actions.... In oral-aural cultures it is thus eminently credible that words can be used to achieve an effect such as weapons and tools can achieve... Charms and magical formulas abound. (*The Presence of the Word* 112-13)

The notion of words as acts then suggests an interesting place in the history of culture for Austin's cautiously worded position. It is indicative of even our high culture moving towards secondary orality. This transition from literacy to a new orality is also borne out by recent developments in American poetry, centering around the Beats and their successors. They show a preoccupation with primitive forms of religious and social life, and the role of performance in it. As Jerome Rothenberg has observed, this has brought about

a new sense of function in art, in which the value of a work isn't inherent in formal or aesthetic characteristics its shape or its complexity or simplicity is an object but in what it does ... (168)

The poem is to be considered an "instrument-of-power" (168), the poet a "shaman" in the somewhat loose usage of the term, a religious functionary in primitive society gifted in wielding such instruments-of-power for the benefit of those he serves. Rothenberg, therefore, describes the poet as "the one who sees/the one who sings/the one who heals" (134).

In order to do justice to Lindsay's achievement-- this is my thesis—we must consider it in the light of the approach sketched here. He was a pioneer of developments that have only come to fruition since the 1950's -- even though he articulated his primitivist social vision in terms quite different from those of the Beats.

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Vachel Lindsay, like many of his Midwestern contemporaries, saw the United States in terms of the small town and the spiritual life of its inhabitants. Today we are most familiar with its negative image, as presented in Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*, and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. The world of the town in these texts is one of stifled dreams, stifled by narrow-mindedness, contentment, or the inability to communicate. But these texts also call up the counter-image of the town offering a feeling of primitive togetherness, as it appears elsewhere in Midwestern fiction (Atherton 181-86).

Lindsay agrees with his fellow-writers, but he also sees the small town as the best basis for the ideal community of the future. He describes the vision of his hometown Springfield, Illinois, in many of his poems, in *The Art of the Moving Picture* and *The Golden Book of Springfield*. In one of his best-known civic poems, "On the Building of Springfield", Lindsay presents the town of the future as a centre of creative life, and given Athens, Oxford, and Florence as examples. This kind of community will have a strong civic sense, which finds expression in the beautiful buildings, squares, and parks of the town; these in turn reinforce the Spirit that has created them. Eventually all the citizens will again have the gift of being creative; Lindsay prophesies: "Songs shall be sung by us in that good day, / Songs we have written ..." (*Collected Poems* 74)

Lindsay warns that "Our little town cannot complete her soul / Till countless generations pass away." In order to move towards her goals, the City should become a church; every citizen should become its member, and every street should "be made a reverent aisle / Where music grows and Beauty is unchained." But this is only possible if science, machinery and trade are subordinated to Beauty, and if the community protects itself "against our blatant, restless time" by an "unseen, skilful, medieval wall" (74).<sup>2</sup>

Lindsay's most detailed description of his vision of the future city, however, is to be found in *The Golden Book of Springfield*, a narrative about how a book of prophecies is given to Springfield in the year 2018. Lindsay's text does not present a traditional Utopia, in which history has

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<sup>2</sup> These lines also indicate some of the sources of Lindsay's views: his reading of Ruskin, and Midwestern agrarianism. See Yatron 71-122.

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fulfilled itself: The city has by no means become an ideal one, even though it has been rebuilt and shows some' of the characteristics mentioned in the poem. There is still room in the year 2018 for visions of "Springfield, when it becomes the perfect and transcendent city" (118). The town is only "half-way millennial" (21).

This suggests that Lindsay is as much interested in the process of building the City as in its precise results. The shape of the City will depend on those who are building it—no one vision is to be imposed on everybody. Rather, the city will grow out of the visions that its citizens have shared.

The Golden Book of Springfield opens with the foundation of a "Prognosticators' Club" in 1918, where a number of Springfield citizens meet: "When we come together for' our meetings it is inevitable that our talk should be of the Springfield of our fancy and of the manner in which the vision has come to each one" (19). The text then describes the different visions of how the Golden Book comes to Springfield, and of what it contains—the Golden Book different according to the person who sees it in his or her vision. Having described the Prognosticators' Club as "a dithyrambic, chanting, improvising howling dervish set" (64), Lindsay addresses the reader:

Reader, in your town many like these are brooding alone over unaccountable vistas of the future of their city, that have come to them in battle or by the fireside or in the storm. They have found themselves standing momentarily at cross streets of vision, before they felt their hearts to be as dust again. Call •them together. Blow ashes into flame. Start a brotherhood of your own. Live in the New City that is revealed to' you, as we are living in our City and in the streets.of our Tomorrow (65).

This appeal reminds us of the stifled dreams in. Masters, Lewis, and Anderson. it indicates a way of reviving the dreams: By being shared they will grow; and by being dreamt they will eventually come true. As Lindsay puts it in *The Art of the Moving Picture*: "That which man desires, that will man become. He largely fulfills his own prediction and vision" (286).

This raises the question by what means people may again come to have visions, how ashes may be blown into flame.

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In a letter to Louis Untermeyer Lindsay writes on December 21, 1917:

Civics is not yet a religion. I hope to make it as much a religion as healing is a religion in Christian Science, or Undertaking was a religion in Egypt. And I do not want to do it on an ethical or argumentative basis. I hold that men may be transformed by their imaginations. It is not the only basis of transformation, but it is one basis, and the one to which I have access. I think [Springfield] could be transformed, not by being better or more pious, but simply by dreaming, as fervently as one hundred poets you and I know. If a high imagination be once accepted as the first requisite in citizenship, and be made the main fact of citizenship, the rest will follow. (Letters 158)

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The general characteristics of social transformations have been analysed and described by the American anthropologist Victor Turner, in both so-called primitive and twentieth-century American societies in a manner that is very helpful in the discussion of Lindsay's work. Turner distinguishes two contrasting social experiences, structure and *communitas*: "Structure is all that holds people apart, defines their differences, and constrains their actions" (Dramas 47). The "bonds of *communitas*," on the other hand,

are anti-structural in that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, non-rational (though not irrational) ... *Communitas* is most evident in "liminality," ... any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life. It is often a sacred condition or can readily become one. For example, the world over, millenarian movements originate in periods when societies are in liminal transition between social structures. (Dramas 46-47)

The very notion of *communitas* suggests, of course, that it must always be a state-in-between, a stage between social structures.

A' form of structure is represented by the Midwestern town as described by Masters, Lewis, and Anderson; and *communitas* is obviously what the members of Lindsay's

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Prognosticators' Club experience—the experience he would like to see induced everywhere. But, as Turner notes, there are no techniques that can guarantee the coming of *communitas*. In preindustrial and early industrial societies it appears

to be very frequently associated with mystical power and to be regarded as a charism or grace sent by the deities or ancestors. Nevertheless, by impetrative ritual means, attempts are made to cause the deities or ancestors to bring this charism or *communitas* among men. (The Ritual Process 137-38)

In an American context, this phenomenon is represented by the frontier revival meeting, as described by Dickson D. Bruce, or by the revival campaigns of Dwight Lyman Moody and Billy Sunday. Turner also refers to

attempts made fairly recently in America and Western Europe to re-create the ritual conditions under which spontaneous *communitas* may be, dare one say it, invoked. The beats and the hippies, by the eclectic and syncretic use of symbols and liturgical actions drawn from the repertoire of many religions ... try to establish a "total" communion with one another. (138)

Lindsay's attempts at social transformation must be viewed in this light; and his poetry performances show how he proceeded.

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Vachel Lindsay's career as a public' performer may be said to have begun in 1914, when he impressed William Butler Yeats at a Poetry dinner in Chicago with his delivery of "The Congo," and was asked by him: "What are we going to do to restore the primitive singing of poetry?" (Lindsay, "Singing" 161) Until his death in 1931 Lindsay performed extensively all over the United States, and claimed to have presented his poetry to three million people. From reports we are fairly well informed about his public performances; unfortunately none of them was recorded.<sup>3</sup> But among the

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<sup>3</sup> 3 We do have recordings of single poems made in the studio. Most of them have been deposited in the C. Waller Barrett Collection at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Some of the recordings have been released: *Vachel Lindsay Reading* (New York, Caedmon).

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most important sources are two pamphlets that Lindsay sent out to those who invited him: *A Letter About My Four Programmes* and *A Letter for Your Wicked Private Ear Only*.

Lindsay did not consider his public performances to be isolated phenomena. In *A Letter for Your Wicked Private Ear Only* he writes:

I want to stay in your region, if I come at all, not only the few days necessary to meet (my) fee easily, by subdividing it as you please among several audiences, I want to stay long enough to make an attempt at a complete civic-literary revival of a sort.  
 (2)

In *A Letter About My Four Programmes* Lindsay describes what he is ready to offer to different kinds of audiences. One programme consists of a talk on his study *The Art of the Moving Picture*. In the others commentary is less important. Without going into a poem-by-poem analysis these programmes may roughly be divided into three parts.<sup>4</sup> They all begin with poems that Lindsay classifies as Higher Vaudeville. They are followed by poems which are intimate, and in which private visions are shared. The third and final part offers poems that deal with vision and great men who were visionaries.

In terms of Victor Turner's analysis of social transformation the first part may be viewed as the ritual invoking *communitas*. The second part takes its existence for granted in the sharing of visions, and the third is an attempt to ensure the renewal of vision and *communitas*—which is all-important in the long gradual process of building the ideal

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<sup>4</sup> The third programme may serve as an example here. A list of the poems is given in *Four Programmes* (5). In the following, the figures after the titles indicate the page-number in **Collected Poems**. / 1) Higher Vaudeville (Lindsay's own classification): "The Village Improvement Parade" (203); "The Flute of the Lonely" (76); "The Congo" (178); "The Santa Fe Trail" (152); "The Firemen's Ball" (319); "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" (123). / 2) Poems in which visions are shared: "The Moon's the North Wind's Cooky" (67); "Yet Gentle Will the Griffin Be" (68); "Jests from the Spring Harbinger" (*Four Programmes* 33-46); "Kansas" (150); "The Spice-Tree" (42); "The Ghost of the Buffaloes" (78). / 3) Poems an men who had visions: "The Wizard in the Street" (256); "The Knight in Disguise" (255); "The Eagle that is Forgotten" (95); "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight" (53).

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city.

The first, the Higher Vaudeville part of the programme is of particular interest to us, because it is here that Lindsay tries to induce *communitas*. Lindsay, with his amazing sense for the potential of popular art, was aware of the opportunities vaudeville could offer him in pursuing this purpose -- decades before they were described in detail by Albert F. McLean Jr. McLean explains the success of vaudeville between 1885 and 1930 by its social function, as "a manifestation of the belief in progress, the pursuit of happiness, and the hope for material success" (viii). Vaudeville helped to overcome the trauma of urbanization by creating myths that could be shared by everybody—the most familiar among them probably that of stardom. He insists that vaudeville had a more direct effect than Horatio Alger success stories:

Not the happy ending but the happy moment, not fulfillment at the end of some career rainbow but a sensory, psychically satisfying here-and-now were the results of a vaudeville Show ... (11)

The ability of vaudeville "to implant feelings of solidarity, enthusiasm and purposefulness" (52) must have interested Lindsay in particular, when he began to use it, in the opening section of his programmes, against the myth of material success, and for encouraging the sharing of visions. In March 1913 he justified his venture as follows:

Up until this year I have looked upon actual vaudeville with loathing. Now I suddenly understand, without altogether approving. Still I am all keyed up on the issue. I see how a great many massive superstructures can be built upon that primitive foundation ... (Letters 274)

In *A Letter About My Four Programmes* (5) Lindsay mentions three characteristics of the Higher Vaudeville, each of which can be seen as serving his purpose in a particular manner: He chooses "a hymn or ballad of long standing somewhat parallel in thought" as "the natural meter"; in his poem on General William Booth, for example, he uses the familiar Salvation Army hymn "The Blood of the Lamb." This creates common ground between the poet/performer and his audience, and fuses the unusual with the familiar. Moreover, tone-color, "imitative verbal

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music," is extensively used, which supports communication on the affective level. The chanting of lines in a manner reminiscent of Gregorian chant, finally, places the performer in the position of a quasi-religious functionary, and adds a ritualist element to the experience of sharing.

As Eleanor Ruggles reports, Lindsay also invited his audiences to participate actively, not only clapping their hands, nodding and shaking their heads at certain points, but also by repeating lines or by chanting refrains (243). This physical involvement helped in creating *communitas* among those liberated from the passivity conventional on such occasions -- the thrill experienced by the Yale students in Canby's report --, and made them more receptive to the visions that followed the Higher Vaudeville part of the programme.

Repeating lines also meant that the poem itself became something shared between the poet and his audience. At the same time it was a first step towards knowing the poem by heart, which would, of course, enhance *communitas*, and help to create what Lindsay calls, in his Letter About My Four Programmes "that strange unity of the literary audience" (7). This unity, which Lindsay claims to have experienced with audiences of poets -- that is people who have vision is not an end in itself:

The essential psychic unity of the choruses of my poems, when an audience of poets is listening, I hope some day to transform and enlarge into a civic unity, with every citizen of the town a poet, and every poet a citizen. (8)

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We can now compare Lindsay's vision of how Springfield will be built in the future with the event of his poetry performances. The citizens, by serving the beauty of the community, not their own material interests, release their own gift of vision. The shape of the new city grows out of their dreams; they build what they have seen together.

Lindsay's poetry performances attempt to create the conditions that will lead to the building of the new city. Lindsay does not use persuasion, he does not attempt to impose one vision (in those he wants to be involved). Instead he tries to rekindle their own visions, and to make sure that these will not be smothered again.

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If successful, the poetry performance is therefore like a meeting of the Prognosticators' Club, sharing a vision, and as such, according to Lindsay's conviction, it actually lays the foundations of the City that is to be built.

The role of the poet in what I have described is an unusual one. His performance is not an end in itself; nor does he try to persuade people to act. He is neither a madman nor a preacher. He tries to help his audience in regaining their vision, which has been suppressed. This role of the poet corresponds to the one described by Rothenberg, as "the one who sees/the one who rings/the one who heals." (134)<sup>5</sup>

If we look at Lindsay's achievement from this point of view, some problems that it raises can be solved. His performances need no longer be explained by his financial difficulties and by his vanity alone. They need no longer be a problem to the critics. On the contrary, they prove themselves to be a central part of his work as a poet. The Higher Vaudeville does no longer appear to be a mere concession to the taste of the crowds. Even Lindsay's expansive and often repetitive style, which annoyed Pound so much, can be justified by the conditions of his performances.

Lindsay faced two insurmountable obstacles. He could not take for granted that he was taken seriously—as Eliot's reaction and that of the Yale students show. Knowing what he was trying to achieve we also understand why Lindsay was deeply hurt when audiences demanded Higher Vaudeville poems as encores at the end of his performances—they showed him that he had failed. In addition to this, even where he was successful in invoking *communitas*, he could not take for granted that this experience would lead to the emergence of new social structures that had room for new experiences of vision.

This situation may help us to give focus to the study of the problems posed by Lindsay's biography. His increasing exasperation with his audiences, his weariness with performing, his feeling of being rejected, his renewed interest in picture-writing, and his breakdown in 1923 were not simply the result of physical exhaustion, and of being

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<sup>5</sup> Such a primitivist interpretation is supported by what Lindsay has to say about the cinema in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, as a "higher form of vision-seeking" (271).

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forced to play a role of which he had long got tired. They were the result of a deep wound: His audiences refused to be healed by him.

Finally, Lindsay's performances suggest conclusions that concern the study of poetry in general. Here only a few can be hinted at: The study of texts, without considering their intended use, can seriously distort the achievement of a poet. Reading is only one mode of reception among several, and must not be generalized.

The paradigm of literate poetry, then, cannot be generalized either. Poetry (and poets) may be shaped by oral culture or by the conflict between the oral and literate modes. These conflicts show particularly clearly at certain moments in history, e.g. during the transitional stage between the two modes in high culture; but they are always present, because oral elements are always active outside the domain of high culture.

Finally, Lindsay's achievement reminds us that the performance of poetry, as it has again become central in postmodern culture, has a tradition that deserves more critical attention than it has so far received.

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