

## Vachel Lindsay and the Town of American Visions

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Summing up in one sentence what Vachel Lindsay's standing is today, one might say: He is still popular as a poet,<sup>1</sup> remembered as a performer, and generally despised by the critics. The critics seem to take their cue from T. S. Eliot who found Lindsay "impossible" after hearing him perform and from Ezra Pound who acknowledged Lindsay's originality but criticized the craftsmanship of his poetry: "Believe me one can write it by the hour as fast as one scribbles."<sup>2</sup>

Lindsay also found it difficult to be taken seriously by the academic world, as Henry Seidel Canby's report on a performance at Yale indicates. At the same time, this report shows the strange fascination that Lindsay's poetry evoked in performance:

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 literature as they had been taught to regard literature.<sup>3</sup>

Lindsay's performances have remained a problem for critics, a problem that warrants explanation. 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. . .," This view set the pattern for later assessments, even when they strongly react against Masters' views: Marc Chénétier, in a new study, stresses Lindsay's image making rather than his performance and places him close to the Imagists, to William Carlos Williams and e. e. cummings; Radford B. Kuykendall considers Lindsay's performances as persuasive speeches in the service of his spiritual and social goals; and Ann Massa, who emphasizes the importance of his prose works, sees Lindsay's oeuvre as "propaganda" and Lindsay as "a writer to whom content, not style, came first, a field worker for the American democracy in its physical, artistic, and spiritual dimensions" for the Town of American Visions, an ideal he mentions in the title of one of his poems.<sup>4</sup>

It can be argued that the problem with Lindsay's poetry performances is one of literary criticism rather than of Lindsay's biography, of its inability to deal with a phenomenon that is amenable neither to common notions of poetry, still based on the autonomy of the literary

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work, nor to those of persuasion. Indeed, as I shall try to show, Lindsay's performances are an integral part of his achievement. I will discuss this claim by juxtaposing Lindsay's poetry performances to his civic vision and draw conclusions from them about his social role as a poet.

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 dreams stifled by narrow mindedness, contentment, or the inability to communicate.

Lindsay goes so far as to present the small town as the best basis of the ideal community of the future, often drawing on his own hometown, Springfield, Illinois. One of his best known civic poems, "On the Building of Springfield," may serve as an example. In its first part, Lindsay describes the town of the future as a center of creative life, and gives 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 creativity; Lindsay prophesies: "Songs shall be sung by us in that good day, / Songs we have written. . ." Lindsay then warns that "Our little town cannot complete her soul / Till countless generations pass away." In order to move toward her goals, the city should become a church, every citizen should be 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."<sup>5</sup>

Lindsay's most detailed description of his vision of the future city, however, can be found in *The Golden Book of Springfield*, a narrative about a book of prophecies being given to Springfield in the year 2018. Lindsay's text does not present a traditional utopia in which history has 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. Dissension remains among its citizens, fighting remains in the streets, and one person is lynched. The spell of technology has not yet been broken, and there is still room in the year 2018 for visions of "Springfield, when it becomes the perfect and transcendent city."<sup>6</sup> The town, so far, has only become "half-way millennial" (*GB*, p. 21). It seems that Lindsay is as much interested in the process of building the city as in its results. In this process, visions and the sharing of visions play an important role. The book 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" (*GB*, p. 19). The text then describes the different visions of how the Golden Book comes to Springfield, and of what it contains: the Golden Book looks different according to the person who sees it in his or her vision.

Having visions and sharing them is more important than their exact content. The shape of the town of the future will depend on those who are building it, and no one vision is to be imposed on everybody. Having described the Prognosticators' Club as "a dithyrambic, chanting, improvising howling dervish set" (*GB*, p. 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. (*GB*, p. 65)

This appeal reminds us of the stifled dreams in Masters, Lewis, and Anderson. It also 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 elsewhere: "That which man desires, that will man become. He largely fulfills his own prediction and vision."<sup>7</sup>

We should also note that Lindsay considers visions as equal in their degree of reality to what we perceive with our senses. The visions therefore enable those who share them actually to experience the community of the future. By what means may people come to have visions again, "blow ashes into flame"? 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.<sup>8</sup>

*The Golden Book of Springfield* is clearly an attempt to suggest how a town can be transformed. Lindsay also addresses the problem of reviving people's imaginations in his pioneering study, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, and, as I will show, his public poetry performances serve the same purpose: blowing ashes into flame.

Lindsay's career as a public performer may be said to have begun in 1914, when, at a *Poetry* dinner, he impressed William Butler Yeats with his delivery of "The Congo," and was asked by him, "What are we going to do to restore the primitive singing of poetry?"<sup>9</sup> We are fairly well informed about Lindsay's public performances, although none of them has been recorded,<sup>10</sup> through Radford B. Kuykendall's report on his interviews with a number of people who attended them. But our most important sources are two pamphlets that Lindsay sent out to those who

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invited him: *A Letter About My Four Programmes* (1916) describes the contents of the performances and the audiences for which Lindsay thought them suitable; *A Letter for Your Wicked Private Ear Only* (dated January 1, 1921)<sup>11</sup> says more about how he wanted his performances to be prepared for by the audience and acknowledges the recent publication of *The Golden Book of Springfield*.

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. (*LPE*, p. 2)

He insists that his audiences should learn his poems by heart beforehand, or at least be familiar with them. He wants to have at least two audiences: the first is to consist of "the entire inner machine of the town, all types and kinds of chieftains" (*LPE*, p. 4), with whom he intends to discuss *The Golden Book of Springfield*. The second is the High School Assembly, which contains the future leaders of the town. After the two, he is ready to perform to any other audience.

In *A Letter About My Four Programmes* Lindsay describes what he is prepared to offer. The first programme, on the Gospel of Beauty, consists of poems "threaded together with a discussion of Democracy and Art" (*LFP*, p. 3); it is intended for art schools and departments. The second offers "A Talk on The Art of the Moving Picture" (*LFP*, p. 5), based on Lindsay's book of the same title; it also includes the reading of some poems. The third programme is "An Evening of Higher Vaudeville, and Orthodox Verse as well" (*LFP*, p. 5), and the fourth, called "The Chinese Nightingale, and Dramas for Impromptu Actors" (*LFP*, p. 6), is adapted to small audiences, emphasizing their participation in the performance..

Here I shall concentrate on the third programme, which is intended for a general audience "of tired businessmen and the like" (*LFP*, p. 5). It shows most vividly how Lindsay addresses people who "have found themselves standing momentarily at cross streets of vision, before they felt their hearts to be as dust again" (*GB*, p. 65), or, as he puts it in *A Letter for Your Wicked Private Ear Only*, how he attempts to "unify towns" (*LPE*, p. 9).

Without going into a poem by poem analysis, we may roughly divide the programme into three parts: the first consists of poems that Lindsay classifies as Higher Vaudeville, the second offers poems in which private visions are shared, and the third contains poems about great men who had vision.<sup>12</sup> Of these three parts, the first, which precedes the sharing of visions, is the most interesting for us because it is here that Lindsay has to try to "blow ashes into flame."

Lindsay, with his amazing sense of the potential of popular art, was aware of the opportunities vaudeville could offer him in pursuing his purpose decades before they were described in detail by Albert F. McLean Jr. in *American Vaudeville as Ritual*.<sup>13</sup> 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" (p. viii). Vaudeville helped to overcome the trauma of urbanization by creating myths that could be shared by everybody. The most familiar among them was 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. . . . It offered, in symbolic terms, the sweet fruits of success neither as a reward nor as a promise, but as an accessible right for all those participating in the new life of the cities. (McLean, p. 11)

The ability of vaudeville "to implant feelings of solidarity, enthusiasm and purposefulness" (McLean, p. 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.

Lindsay's literary friends did not always have much understanding for what he was trying to do, and he had to explain and justify his venture to them, particularly his use of popular elements. In March 1913, he wrote Jessie Rittenhouse:

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.. .<sup>14</sup>

In *A Letter About My Four Programmes* (p. 5) he mentions three characteristics of his own, the *Higher Vaudeville*, each of which can be seen as serving his purpose in a particular manner. First, "a hymn or ballad of long standing somewhat parallel in thought" is chosen as "the natural meter." In his poem on General William Booth, for example, Lindsay uses the Salvation Army hymn, "The Blood of the Lamb," creating common ground between the poet/performer and his audience and fusing the unusual and the familiar. Second, tone color, "imitative verbal music," is extensively used, supporting communication on the affective level. Finally, the chanting of lines in a manner reminiscent of Gregorian chant adds a ritualistic element to the experience of sharing.

As we know from reports, Lindsay also invited his audiences to participate actively by clapping their hands, nodding and shaking their heads at certain points, and by repeating lines or by chanting refrains.<sup>15</sup> This physical involvement helped create a community of those liberated from the passivity typical of such occasions. A community would then be more receptive to the vision that followed the Higher Vaudeville portion 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 toward knowing the poem by heart, which would enhance the feeling of community and help create what Lindsay calls "that strange unity of the literary audience" (*LFP*, p. 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:

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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. (*LFP*, p. 8)

All the improvements that the community plans, "though they take a hundred years, may, happily, begin with the unity of a simple chorus, or some simple rhymes, sung lightly by everybody on a sunny day" (*LFP*, pp. 25-26).

We can now compare Lindsay's vision of how Springfield will be built in the future with the event of his poetry performance. By serving the beauty of the community instead of their own material interests, the citizens of the town receive their gift of vision. They build what they have seen together: the shape of the new City grows out of their dreams. Lindsay's poetry performances attempt to create the conditions that will lead to the building of this new city. Lindsay does not use persuasion; he does not attempt to impose one vision on those he wants to be involved. Instead, he tries to rekindle their own visions and to create the community which can guarantee that these will not be smothered again. If successful, the poetry performance is therefore like a meeting of the Prognosticators' Club-sharing a vision and, according to Lindsay's view, actually creating the foundations of the city that is to be built.

The role of the poet in what I have described is an unusual one. It is that of a poet who has visions and sings about them, not as an end in itself or as a persuasive strategy. Neither madman nor preacher, he tries to give his audience the vision that has been suppressed. In short, he engages in the healing of man's spirit and the social body.<sup>16</sup> This role of the poet corresponds to the one of the shaman in tribal society, as described by the postmodernist poet Jerome Rothenberg: "the one who sees / the one who sings / the one who heals."<sup>17</sup> The audience that is transformed by the knowledge of the songs and by participating in their performance may be compared to the tribe.

Such a primitivist interpretation of the poet's role is supported by Lindsay's use of vaudeville, which may indicate his interest in primitive forms of art. Moreover, in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Lindsay theorizes about the cinema in a way that may be directly applied to his poetry performances. The cinema offers the opportunity to "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" (*MP*, p. 263). Lindsay calls those who lead this progress "prophet-wizards. These were the people that dominated the cave-man of old" (*MP*, p. 263). In their hands the cinema will be "a higher form of vision-seeking" (*MP*, p. 271). They should "show us everyday America as it will be when we are only halfway to the millennium yet thousands of years in the future" (*MP*, pp. 283-284). This was a task that Lindsay himself accepted in *The Golden Book of Springfield* and in his poetry performances.

Looking at Lindsay's achievement from this point of view reduces some of the problems mentioned earlier. His performances need no longer be explained by his financial difficulties and his vanity. They need no longer be a problem to the critics. on the contrary, they are a central part of Lindsay's works. The Higher Vaudeville does no longer appear as a mere concession to the taste of the crowds. Even Lindsay's expansive and often repetitive style, which annoyed Ezra Pound so much, can be understood by the conditions of his performances.<sup>18</sup>

Lindsay as a shaman faced an insurmountable obstacle. Although his healing consisted of creating unity in the tribe, he could not assume that he was taken seriously. As Canby's report illustrates, his audiences would often consider his performance to be "only a show." Neither could he expect his literary friends fully to understand what he was doing.

This situation may help explain parts of his 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 forced to play a role of which he had long grown tired. They were the result of a deep wound: his audiences refused to be healed by him; he was rejected by the tribe.

Lindsay's performances also have a bearing on the study of poetry in general, as they show that the study of the texts alone may seriously distort the achievement of an author. They also remind us that the performance of poetry, as it has become central in postmodern culture, has a tradition that deserves more critical attention than it has thus far received.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1 His *Collected Poems* went into its 24th printing in 1981.

2 Eliot quoted, without reference, by David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry*, 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), p. 353; *The Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. D.D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 54.

3 *American Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), p. 295.

4 Edgar Lee Masters, *Vachel Lindsay: a Poet in America* (New York: Scribners, 1935), p. 331; Marc Chénétier, "L'obsession des signes: L'esthétique de Vachel Lindsay," Diss. Université de Paris 3— Sorbonne nouvelle 1979, p. 161; Radford B. Kuykendall, "The Reading and Speaking of Vachel Lindsay," Diss. Northwestern University 1952, especially pp. 12-14; Ann Massa, *Vachel Lindsay: Fieldworker for the American Dream* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970), p. 16; Vachel Lindsay, "The Town of American Visions," *Collected Poems*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p.346; hereafter cited as *CP*.

5 *Collected Poems*, p. 74. These lines also indicate some of the sources of Lindsay's vision: his reading of Ruskin, and Midwestern agrarianism. See Michael Yatron, *America's Literary Revolt* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), pp. 71-122.

6 *The Golden Book of Springfield* (New York: Macmillan, 1920); hereafter cited as *GB*.

7 Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), p. 286; hereafter cited as *MP*.

8 *Letters of Vachel Lindsay*, ed. Marc Chénétier (New York: Burt Franklin, 1979), p.158.

9 "Mr. Lindsay on 'Primitive Singing,'" *Poetry* 4 (1914),161.

10 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.

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Some of the recordings have been released on *Vachel Lindsay Reading* (New York, Caedmon).

11 *A Letter About My Four Programmes* (Springfield, Ill: privately printed, 1916); hereafter cited as *LFP*; *A Letter for Your Wicked Private Ear Only* (Springfield, Ill.: privately printed, 1921); hereafter cited as *LPE*.

12 Lindsay gives a list of the poems in *LFP*, p. 5. In the following, the figures after the titles indicate the page number in *CP*:

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" (*LFP*, pp. 33-46); "Kansas" (150); "The Spice-Tree" (42); "The Ghost of the Buffaloes" (78).

3) Poems on men who had vision: "The Wizard in the Street" (256); "The Knight in Disguise" (255); "The Eagle that is Forgotten" (95); "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight" (53).

Any detailed analysis will show that my classification simplifies matters: additional distinctions can be drawn, and parallels between the different parts can be pointed out.

13 *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1965).

McLean does not mention Lindsay in his book.

14 Jessie B. Rittenhouse, "Vachel Lindsay," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 32 (1933), 274.

15 Eleanor Ruggles, *The West-Going Heart: A Life of Vachel Lindsay* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959), p. 243. Unfortunately, audience participation does not appear on the recordings of Lindsay's poetry. Often, however, italics in *CP* indicate that a line should be repeated by the audience. There are also explicit directions, as in "King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba" (*CP*, pp. 167-174).

16 In *LPE*, p. 24, Lindsay suggests that people should revise his *GB* according to their own needs, and then use it "as a kind of civic 'Science and Health' for the beginning of *civic healing*." (my italics)

17 Jerome Rothenberg, "Pre-Face to a Symposium on Ethnopoetics," *Alcheringa*, NS 2 (1976), p. 11. I am grateful to Nicholas Cave Lindsay, the poet's son, for drawing my attention to this article. See also Marc Chénétier, "'Free-Lance in the Soul-World': Toward a Reappraisal of Vachel Lindsay's Works," *Prospects* 2 (1976), 497-512, especially p. 505.

18 Cf. also my study *Reading and Listening: The Ways of Communicating Poetry and Their Influence on the Texts* (Berne: Francke, 1982), especially pp. 90-110.

19 Cf. *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Madison, Wisconsin: Coda Press, 1977).