

## VACHEL LINDSAY ACROSS THE CHASM

*By* EDWIN H. CADY

**I**F YOU grew up in the 1930's, you ran across Vachel Lindsay if you cared anything about poetry at all. You knew about Lincoln in Springfield and General Booth in Heaven, you had boom-lay'd "The Congo" and, if you were lucky, had discovered "Simon Legree" in an anthology. But it was my fortune to read Lindsay for the first time at all seriously at a fateful moment in American history. During that hiatus between the fall of France and Pearl Harbor, the United States was consciously gathering its forces. And at that moment, in spite of the dominance of Eliotian, metaphysical poetry and the burgeoning New Criticism to enforce it, the vision of Lindsay at his best seemed somehow precious. The bardic voices in which he sang that vision seemed, again at his best, appropriate if not inevitable. In short, twenty years ago Lindsay could seem a true poet.

But the two decades since 1940 have almost wholly neglected him. Out of fashion, scornfully ignored by "Criticism," his poetry has been apparently dead. Still worse, there stands a chasm of terrible events between us now and him, possibly far less passable than barriers of time and fashion. After Dachau and Warsaw, Bataan and Hiroshima, Czechoslovakia, Korea, Hungary, and all the chilling rest, can a Lindsay be supposed poetically audible? Cartoons and editorials on the Congo's time of troubles showed that

newspaper people think allusions to "The Congo" will ring a bell with the public—that Lindsay's word and mood-magic still live for the popular imagination. But might he be taken as in any sense now a serious poet? Only a rereading can tell.

Upon a by no means exhaustive or long-considered recurrence to Vachel Lindsay across the chasm of the mid-twentieth century, at least one reader can report that he does retain poetic vitality, that we are probably going to have, in the most precise meaning of the word, to rehabilitate his reputation. It is time, at any rate, to reconsider Lindsay carefully. The all-important bibliographical bases are being laid by Professor Cecil Byrd and his associates. There needs to be a much more exact placing of the man and his poetry in our literary history—a job best done by means of a thorough, responsible literary biography. There needs to be scrupulous, critical evaluation of the poems from a 1960's point of view. Finally, that should all eventuate in a solid anthology of the best and most representative of Lindsay's verse and prose.

It is not hard to predict that the central and ultimate issues regarding Lindsay will be joined over his commitment to being a wholly "public" poet, over the poetic program of "The Gospel of Beauty." The horrors of our times, with their imminent destruction of humanity either spiritually or physically in a world out of which, for many people, God has died, mock the optimisms of a Lindsay. They present overwhelming prestige to "private" poets of the struggle for personal survival and integrity. Yet many observers have asked whether the conditions of such a poetry do not threaten not only the efficacy but also the existence of the art. Can a wholly "private" poetry long



exist? Isn't it living on cultural capital and headed for extinction? Has it not alienated all but an elite fraction of readers and reduced the poets to taking in each others' wash?

Notoriously this is a world in which industrial urbanization and all the phenomena of rising population with increasing interdependence make the quality of culture increasingly important. Notoriously this is a culture in which the rise of mass entertainment media and their industries threaten increasingly to debase quality. Can we afford to have serious poetry simply alienated from a culture so threatened? And how long could serious poets be expected to come out of a culture from which poetry had largely disappeared? There is all too probably a limit to the endurance even of academic conservatism.

Furthermore, the people of the United States have a stake in this question which might be, but probably had best not be, put in the too-familiar terms of "Cold War." From the beginning of the Republic, as Tocqueville and other representatives of aristocratic taste observed, one of the most crucial questions was whether living under democratic conditions did not demand too high a cultural price. It was much doubted that a democracy could satisfy the natural demands of its people for the beauties of a culture rich in consoling and inspiring forms. The American answer, a central part of the American Dream, was launched by Jefferson and expressed variously by such followers as Emerson, Whitman, William Dean Howells, and Frank Lloyd Wright. The American solution would be to create, for the first time in history, a mass culture so high in quality that full cultural satisfactions were available to everyone. For all its drawbacks and shortcomings, our na-

tional effort to realize that dream has been peaking up higher and more massively than ever by far. Yet there is reason to ask whether the ideal which set the peak to gathering has not been withdrawn, out of chill, fear, or disgust at the modern world, by many of those who should and often do most benefit from it—and who should ideally promote it most warmly.

To that end, Lindsay's poetic program as public poet was devoted. The potential value of preserving his dream must not, of course, beguile us into begging the question of the intrinsic value of the poetry. Only faithful reading and criticism can decide that value. Nevertheless, in our TV-affluent times, it might be well to reconsider the force of that program as typified by lines from "On the Building of Springfield":

. . . . .  
Now let each child be joined as to a church  
To her perpetual hopes, each man ordained:  
Let every street be made a reverent aisle  
Where Music grows and Beauty is unchained.

. . . . .  
Let no man rule who holds his money dear.  
Let this, our city, be our luxury.

. . . . .  
We should build parks, that students from afar  
Would choose to starve in, rather than go home. . . .

Modernizing and democratizing the "Fireside Poets" of his youth with the atmospheres of jazz, Chautauquas, street music, and revivalism, Lindsay set out to preach the gospel of beauty. He sweated to make his countrymen hear the sweet song of "the Rachel-Jane" beside the raucous flivvers on "The Santa-Fé Trail." He starved presenting

himself to them as the troubadour *redivivus* with rhymes to be traded for bread. He exemplified the song as well as the bard with a lyricism which at its best, as in "The Chinese Nightingale," is orchestrated more effectively than Poe or Lanier ever did it. But most of all, Lindsay fought to take poetry out of the closet and into the open air. He sought to engage the public, to make poetry a participant not a spectator sport.

One difficulty for the post-metaphysical taste is the unabashed theatricality of Lindsay's verse. Yet after one has finished wincing at the bass drums and calliopes, he is invited to second thoughts. Even in the study, the stage directions can add effectively to the inward ear's sense of an intricate phonetics. And publicly it was, as it doubtless now could be, good theatre. Some 4,000,000 people paid admissions to be caught up in Lindsay's bardic net, to be engaged actively with the poet in performing his art. It was fun and entertainment, but it was also a socially shared and therefore culturally overt kind of poetry. That would not be at all a bad thing to have alive in our culture to reinforce the covert poetries. And as for TV, Lindsay, thou shouldst be with us at this hour!

Performance, of course, is notoriously ephemeral; and lyricism only cloyes. Does Lindsay have anything seriously to give us beyond them? Perhaps he does as a moralist ("The Leaden-Eyed"), though one would have to study the question out carefully to be sure that Lindsay's ideas are not as dated as those of his contemporary and fellow progressive Midwesterner, the great historian Parrington. Like Parrington, however, Lindsay lives as a notable satisfier of a major need of the American imagination. (It almost goes without saying that as lyricist, imagist, and impressionist



Lindsay was incomparably the finer artist.) He fulfilled his roles as bard and public poet by converting American historical experience into myth.

By "myth," I might say, I mean nothing more than a technique of meaning. The picture of a major symbolic act performed by some larger-than-life figure permits us to cluster our ideas around it, fuse them with our emotions, and translate the whole into that experience through the imagination which is one of the deepest forms of human meaning. Precisely that is what happens when "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" is read with full realization of the effects of the words of the poem. Subject to all intensities of color and music, whether one "believes" or not he registers the emotional life of Booth's movement, the sense of a simple but most vivid supernaturalism, and the full metaphysical pathos of evangelical fundamentalism. The meaning here is the experience of registering, and it is communicated through the myth. Of Lindsay's treatment of the Negro, I do not feel competent to judge. It was obviously sympathetic, obviously romantic, obviously patronizing: how accurately interpretive was it? But these are not altogether the questions one asks of myths. The Negroes of "The Congo" and of several "Sermons" have great human and imaginative vitality. So also Lindsay's Lincoln and Johnny Appleseed, in his multiple approaches to them. Less so, his John Brown. The power of myth is clearly the source of the success of "Bryan Bryan Bryan Bryan," "The Eagle That Is Forgotten," and "The Flower-Fed Buffaloes," to name a few.

The plea here is for reconsideration of Lindsay. And the only basis of such a plea must be his best verse and thought. His work was often marred by naivete, confusion,

vulgarity, even hypocrisy. His life ended in suicide. Some of the poems are more or less feeble or shallow or merely failures. But any poet is valuable only as of his best. It is glory to have written one enduring poem. Across the chasm, Lindsay might be taken simply as a potent symbol of the loss of American Innocence. Perhaps he was, with Sandburg, the last of the Whitmanian dreamers, or finally an index to the death of the innocent side—the side polar to Nazism—of romanticism, the last of the Shelleyans. Maybe we shall conclude that something like this is it and we must read the best of Lindsay with the full sympathy of the historical imagination. But it could be that he is at his best currently viable. If so, he might be really important. We need to reach across the chasm to him and consider Vachel Lindsay again and find him out.

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