

THE VISION OF THIS LAND



Studies of
VACHEL LINDSAY,
EDGAR LEE MASTERS,
AND CARL SANDBURG

EDITED BY JOHN E. HALLWAS AND DENNIS J. READER
An Essays in Literature Book

THE VISION
OF THIS LAND

John E. Hallwas, an Associate Professor at Western Illinois University, has previously published on these writers; *Dennis J. Reader*, also an Associate Professor, is the Director of the Western Illinois University Center for Regional Authors, a special library collection that includes a wide variety of material by and about Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg.

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Introduction

Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg came suddenly to national attention during the second decade of the century as they began to publish their mature poetry. The favorable response to poems placed in *Poetry* (by Lindsay and Sandburg) and *Reedy's Mirror* (by Masters) soon led to the publication of four remarkable books in as many years. Lindsay's *General William Booth Enters into Heaven and Other Poems* (1913) and *The Congo and Other Poems* (1914) brought to the public an idealistic—often visionary—sort of chant poetry which he called the Higher Vaudeville. Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) exposed the inner life of the American small town in free verse monologues that were, for this period, often devastatingly frank. And Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* (1916) expressed the brutality and raw energy of the big city in long, running free verse lines. These four volumes formed the poetic peak of what later came to be called the Chicago Renaissance.

Unfortunately, these early books by the three poets created such an impression that they tended to overshadow later volumes and prevent an open-minded assessment of each poet's development. At Lindsay's famous poetry recitations the audiences clamored for readings of "General Booth" and "The Congo" until the very year of his death; Masters wrote several books of poetry soon after *Spoon River Anthology* but eventually had to publish *The New Spoon River* to bolster a sagging reputation; and Sandburg's later books of poetry never achieved the acclaim of *Chicago Poems*—his status as an American folk hero being largely the product of his Lincoln biography and his performances as a folksinger. As a result, such poetry volumes as Lindsay's *Johnny Appleseed and Other Poems*, Masters' *Invisible Landscapes*, and Sandburg's *The People, Yes* are less well-known than they might have been.

A generation ago historian Walter Havighurst referred to Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg as "The Prairie Poets," and although this label was simply intended to indicate their location in the American heartland, it has a more profound significance than he realized. Because they were raised on the prairies of west-central Illinois during the twilight of the pioneer period, these three writers share some very important influences: the midwestern landscape itself, the pioneer history of Illinois, the developing myth of Abraham Lincoln (later rejected by Masters), the democratic idealism of William Jennings Bryan, the social consciousness of Governor John Peter Altgeld, and the Mississippi River fiction of Mark Twain. Hence, the position

of these poets in the American literary tradition is not to be determined by their participation in the Chicago Renaissance—which at best refers only to their rejection of the genteel tradition of American poetry—but by their significance as a group of poets from the same region of the Midwest whose works are deeply penetrated by similar ideals and values.

Taken together, the above influences made the poets expressive of the American heritage, and concerned about the development of American society. Hence, the following passage from Masters' "Give Us Back Our Country"—although it does not appear related to the "Mumbo-Jumbo" of the Higher Vaudeville poems, the revelations of the Spoon River epitaphs, or the brashness of the Chicago lyrics—effectively reveals the perspective that produced those works, and provides a keynote for the present collection of essays:

But let the vision of this land appear;
Let duty to the heritage that is ours
Come to the minds of leaders: then the people,
Waiting like winter fields for April time,
Will rise and shake their banners like the corn.

But overemphasis upon the famous early volumes of Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg, by readers and critics alike—to the point of ignoring their poetic development and misjudging their significance—is not the only reason why they failed to become figures of lasting prominence in twentieth-century literature. Consider for a moment the transparent relationship of the three to Walt Whitman: Masters was his admiring biographer; Sandburg emulated his poetic line, language, and voice (that of the "en-masse"); Lindsay continued the hope of the poet as "divine literatus," the new reformer or secular priest. These close intellectual and emotional ties to Whitman, and hence to a remote era, suggest why today in this country there is a general sense that events, and certainly attitudes, have passed them by.

As everyone recognizes, it is Missourian T. S. Eliot's wasteland and not Vachel Lindsay's golden Springfield that speaks most for twentieth-century America—and for twentieth-century American poetry in particular. Eliot recorded what he found in the new century while Lindsay quixotically sought to purify it. Like Whitman, if without his poetic genius, Lindsay was a public poet with a public program for social improvement, and his platform popularity, as Sandburg's, would have been envied by a Whitman who had always aspired to be an influential orator. Masters, as well, piles up the terms "vision" and "dream" and "light" so often in even *Spoon River Anthology*—a work usually regarded as a collection of complaints and cynicism—that he freely exposes his romantic, reformist, Whitmanesque heritage.

In a real sense, the long foreground of the American wasteland—so antithetical to the American Edenic garden—was officially announced by the massive contradiction of a civil war within a democracy. Nothing could ever again seem quite new about the New World after that event, and as the virgin continent began rapidly to fill up with men and machines, the purest sources of our native mythic ideals remained trapped somewhere behind the tall fence of 1861. After that year few serious American poets dared or desired to replace Whitman as celebrator of democracy's best potentials. This post-Civil War

period was remarkable for its continual corruption, a time of excessive materialism (Mark Twain's famous phrase was "the gilded age") that stretched virtually unbroken until the great depression of the 1930's. The correlative literary movements that dominated these decades were "realism," which portrayed the improbability of heroic achievement, and "naturalism," which proclaimed free will as impossible in a world controlled by external forces.

Among those few poets of substance who did desire to resurrect the American vision, most were born in what was still the nineteenth century—as were Masters, Sandburg, Lindsay, and Ohio-born Hart Crane. They included in their vision those mythic components recognizable from much earlier times, along with the attendant cultural heroes (who were also their own personal heroes): Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Whitman himself. The thematic thread runs, historically, from frontier self-reliance to democracy's radical individualism to the archetypal citizen in "Song of Myself" and finally to Lindsay's *The Litany of Washington Street*, Masters' *The New World*, and Sandburg's *The People, Yes*. In this mythic tradition America itself—the land itself—travels the long road from New World paradise to the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal, through the nostalgia of post-Civil War Local Color regionalism, and eventually to Sandburg's New Salem, Masters' beloved Spoon and Sangamon River valleys, and Lindsay's midwestern New Localism. While such a pastoral ideal is axiomatically unfriendly to technology and material progress, Sandburg at least—like Whitman and Hart Crane—pointedly includes in his celebration the magnetism and gross power of urban America.

Because they stand outside the main current of twentieth-century poetry, and relate to populist traditions rather than to personal and consciously intellectual values, these three authors are now relatively foreign to us. They have failed Whitman's own well-known measure of a poet's success, given at the end of his 1855 Preface: "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." Quite apart from the merits of their art—which is various—these three writers have fallen from favor because the role of the public poet has fallen from fashion.

But perhaps the cycle is slowly turning back; perhaps a new American conservation-consciousness can include preserving worthy traditions and ideals, can develop an awareness of "culture ecology" to parallel its awareness of ecology in nature. If so, these three writers may yet be praised for offering perspectives on the American landscape, character, and spirit that are essential to our self-understanding—our vision of this land.

The following essays, written expressly for this volume, attempt to legitimize Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg by examining the motives and methods behind their achievements. The beginning point is, appropriately enough, the land, as Blair Whitney in "The Garden of Illinois" reminds us that all three writers worshipped at the shrine of the Soil, that most ancient of American mythic faiths. It is this premise—the physical presence of America, and the opportunities and options that it offers—which is the source of their best imagery, memories, and hopes.

Vachel Lindsay's controversial career is given a contemporary review by Dennis McNerny in "Vachel Lindsay: A Reappraisal." He places the literary criticism of the past in perspective and then offers an evaluation of the poet that is seasoned by the passage of two generations. Marc Chénétier's "Vachel Lindsay's American Mythocracy and Some Unpublished Sources" demonstrates that, indeed, there are more sophisticated—and certainly more sympathetic—ways of comprehending Lindsay than as a chanting vaudevillian. In support of this, the essay provides a sampling from the extensive collections of unpublished manuscripts that exist around the nation.

Two relatively unknown aspects of Edgar Lee Masters' life are explored by Charles Burgess and Herb Russell. "Edgar Lee Masters: The Lawyer as Writer" is a penetrating, comprehensive study of a complicated man and his interrelated careers. "After *Spoon River*: Masters' Poetic Development 1916-1919" investigates the intriguing question of Masters' progress, and problems, as a writer immediately after his sensational rise to fame in 1915.

Charles Mayer's thorough-going essay, "*The People, Yes*: Sandburg's Dreambook for Today" demonstrates that a poet's vision, or any honest affirmative view of life, is neither simply achieved nor easily maintained. Using a very different approach, "Sandburg's Chromatic Vision in *Honey and Salt*," by Richard Crowder, analyses the writer's final book and, in the process, sheds light on the entire Sandburg, old and young. And Victor Hicken, in "Sandburg and the Lincoln Biography: A Personal View," gives an historian's account of the legendary Sandburg and his equally legendary life of Lincoln.


The volume closes with William White's checklist, "Lindsay/Masters/Sandburg: Criticism from 1950-1975." It has a dual purpose: to present a useful, year-by-year listing of secondary materials, and to encourage further study of these three authors.


J.E.H.
D.J.R.




Lindsay and his mother, 1920's.


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 The feathers of truth

 The life divine

 The heart of youth

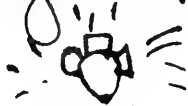
 The pen and ink file

 The brood of writing

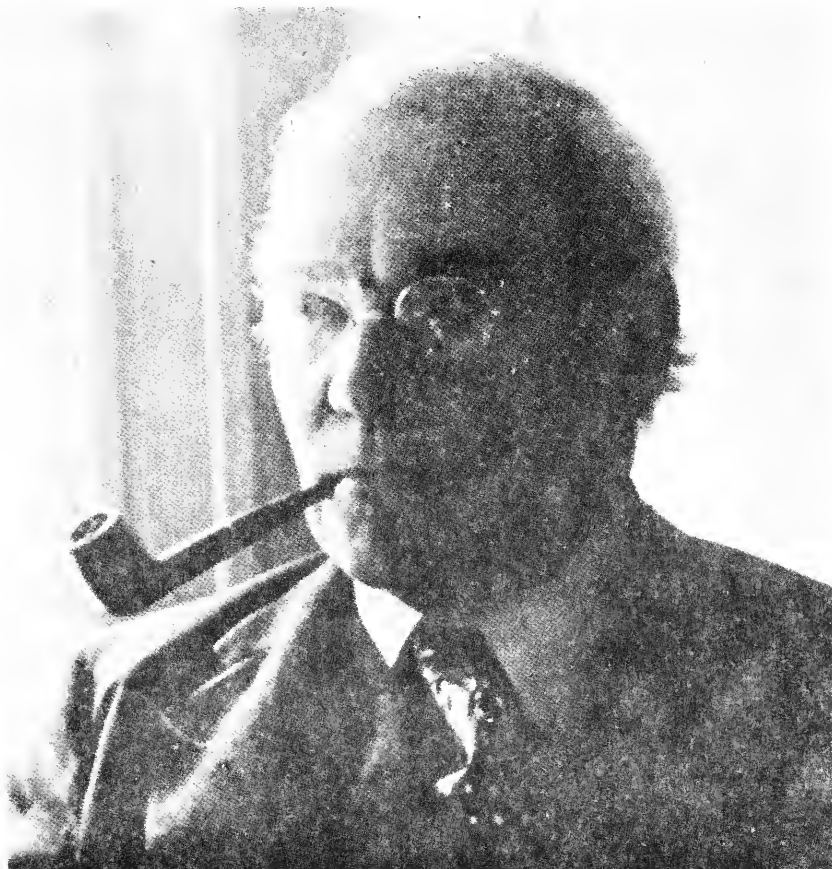
 The sun of morning

all these are yours

So let your heart shine.



Michael Bechel Durbay



Masters.

THE VISION OF THIS LAND

October 5th 1928

Dear Eva: I am enclosing the verses written this morning. Of course I kept it in mind to do this; but I didnt know just when you had to have them; and so between that and waiting for a good mood I didnt do them until now. I understand exactly how you feel. In the case of my father instead of time making his absence more endurable, I feel every day that I need him more and more; and the reflection that I shall never have him again at times makes me feel like some desperate creature that beats his head against the prison bars, which cannot be moved to open. Well, just to go on, for whatever it is about is all we can do; and our songs of hope and courage sometimes are hard to sing. Remember me to your brother.

Ever Your Friend,

E. H. M.

December 7 1931

Dear Mr. Wallack; You may have the manuscript of The New Spoon River, or of Mitch Miller for \$2,000. You do not need to mail any check in advance. I suggest that you come up here, and I will take you to the vault where you can examine the manuscripts. I havent the slightest idea whether you can be interested in them at this figure; but I am holding them at that now. And in time I shall shoot them up.

Truly Yours,

E. H. Masters

Nathan H. Wallack Esq.
409 Eleventh St., N.Y.



Sandburg.

THE CHICAGO DAILY NEWS

15 NORTH WELLS STREET

CHICAGO

March 1, 1927.

Dear Hazel:

Still toiling in the depths. Still baffled as to whether a Zebra is a black ~~Mule~~ with white stripes or a white Mule with black stripes. I worked hard one day on the ~~Zissie~~ sketch, but couldn't make it go. I will call you at the Shelton in New York, May 10th. If I don't get you, you will be safe in assuming that I am putting in nearly the whole day at Harcourt Brace & Co., who have excellent telephones; it is only a few minutes from the Shelton.

Faithful,

Carl

CONNEMARA FARM
FLAT ROCK, N. C.

Dear Hazel:

April 6, 1956

It is sorrow to hear you are having eye misery that requires an operation. I remember when I had films removed and lay for three weeks in darkness. Since then however there was never any slightest recurrence of the condition that then threatened blindness. Here is hoping that when you cross this bridge you will not have to cross anything like it again...About my getting to Fish Creek next August I hesitate about saying definitely that I can make it. It would mean at least four days of time and whether I can spare that much time from unfinished work is a problem...Prayers and deep good wishes.

Irs

Carl

The Garden of Illinois

BLAIR WHITNEY

"God help us make each state an Eden-flower." (Vachel Lindsay,
"Litany of the Heroes.")

Three Illinois poets, Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg, write of their native place as if it were an Eden. To them the prairies and small towns of central Illinois are places equal to man's "capacity for wonder," and their poems are often versions of the myth of America as Promised Land. In this Eden, natural beauty, human goodness, liberal politics, and the fine arts combine to fulfill America's best possibilities. Lindsay believes this ideal may be realized in the future, and he devotes much of his work to preaching a Gospel of Beauty that imagines it. Masters, on the other hand, writes of a former Paradise that has disappeared. Sandburg is neither as optimistic as Lindsay nor as pessimistic as Masters. His poems provide glimpses of the good life in the present.

All three poets know the beauty of central Illinois. The landscape here is not spectacular—no mountains, waterfalls, or oceans—but gentle, peaceful (although powerful, like the sea), fertile, green. The prairies roll westward to the horizon like the long Whitmanesque lines of Sandburg's "Prairie."

Have you seen a red sunset drip over one of my cornfields, the shore of night stars,
the wave lines of dawn up a wheat valley?
Have you heard my threshing crews yelling in the chaff of a strawpile and the
running wheat of the wagonboards, my cornhuskers, my harvest hands
hauling crops, singing dreams of women, worlds, horizons?¹

The powerful life force of these prairies, as well as their beauty, serves as solace to people and as a source of their strength. This is a theme in several poems by these three men. One of the epitaphs in Masters' *New Spoon River* is that of Angela Sanger, a woman whose strength returns in the spring.

And what were last year's failures, frosts and worms?
I would plant again for the joy of growing things;
Fight for the corn of life, for the blossoms of beauty.²

In his biography of Lindsay, which reveals as much about Masters as it does about Lindsay, Masters imagines young Vachel out for a buggy ride with his father and being inspired to poetry by what he saw.

Though the buffalo grass was gone when the poet was a boy, there remained the white blossoms of the may-apple in the woods and the Indian turnips, the brown-eyed Susans and horse mint by the roadsides and the beautiful stretches of green meadows under Illinois skies as blue and enchanting in the June days as any in the world.³

These prairies, however, are not merely picturesque and fertile. They are the true heartland of America, its vital center. "Heartland of America" is not a cliché to the three poets. They believe that the prairies of Illinois are invested with a special significance because of their location and history. Masters explains this in the opening pages of his Lindsay biography. La Salle saw this land; Marquette and Joliet canoed down its rivers; George Rogers Clark saved it in the Revolution. To these prairies, Masters writes, came men from Kentucky who brought with them the pioneer virtues and a rich store of folklore. Writing of the stories Lindsay might have read while he was growing up, Masters is really describing the stories he himself heard, for his native Petersburg is only a short distance from Lindsay's Springfield.

And as the Kentucky stocks predominated here there was much talk of Daniel Boone, and the log-cabin joys of that land, and of the fiddlers and the dancers, the racehorses and the hospitalities, the bluegrass and the wooded hills, and the romance of the Ohio River in the days of flatboats and of the beginning of steam. If the poet had no classical education . . . he was nevertheless blessed with the fresh and fragrant atmosphere of this rich localism.⁴

Sandburg also used much of this same material in his poetry, his prose, and his *American Songbag*.

These strong-willed Kentuckians, according to Masters, "made a garden of Illinois and Indiana,"⁵ but they did more than just turn the thick sod and clear the timber. They brought to Illinois the best American ideals and values. These virtues are summed up in Masters' poem "Lucinda Matlock," one of the most famous epitaphs in *Spoon River Anthology*. Lucinda Matlock and her husband Davis are portraits of Masters' own grandparents. Lucinda says of her life with Davis:

We were married and lived together for seventy years,
 Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,
 Eight of whom we lost
 Ere I had reached the age of sixty.
 I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
 I made the garden, and for holiday
 Rambled over the fields where sang the larks,
 And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,
 And many a flower and medicinal weed—
 Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys.
 At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,
 And passed to a sweet repose.⁶

Masters also describes his grandparents in *The Sangamon*, a book that is full of his love for the prairie and its people. Davis and Lucinda Masters, he recalls, lived like Adam and Eve before the fall, and they, in turn, inspired their neighbors:

they helped to make the other people like them, a people whose religious adorations were clear and sweet as the fields, and utterly alien to incense and ritual. The sky and the meadows inspired them with a goodness and worship so simple and beautiful that it hurts the heart to think it was ever lost.⁷

In his poem "Illinois Farmer," Sandburg expresses a similar admiration for this ideal man of the soil who experienced nature purely and directly. The old farmer dies and becomes a part of his farm.

The wind he listened to in the cornsilks and the tassels, the wind that combed
his red beard zero mornings when the snow lay white on the yellow ears in
the bushel basket at the corncrib,
The same wind will now blow over the place where his hands must dream of
Illinois corn. (*CP*, p. 88)

This view of the Illinois farmer as Adamic child of nature is, of course, a literary invention, since the average Illinois farmer of Sandburg's time was a capitalist whose hands probably dreamed not of Illinois corn but of the steering wheel of his tractor. Yet this myth is one of the most powerful in American intellectual and literary history, finding believers from Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur and Thomas Jefferson to the intellectual farmers of today's rural communes.

Masters believes that the day of the pioneer farmer is over, that the present generation is no longer capable of living a true, free life, close to the soil, out in the clear, fresh air. Lucinda Matlock assails her effete children:

What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you—
It takes life to love Life. (*SR*, p. 230)

Lindsay, however, still believed in the possibility of a Jeffersonian agrarian ideal. In "The Virginians Are Coming Again," he imagines a new generation of long-legged pioneers that will replace the degenerate Babbitts of the 1920's. These Virginians are true Americans who have absorbed the wisdom of Washington, Jefferson, and (an aboriginal American) Powhatan and will bring back "the old grand manner" of the pioneers.⁸ Masters looks backward, Lindsay forward. Sandburg sees in present-day Americans a strength born of the land. In "I Am the People, the Mob," he writes,

I am the seed ground. I am a prairie that will stand for much plowing. Terrible storms pass over me. I forget. Everything but Death comes to me and makes me work and give up what I have. And I forget. . . .
When I, the People, learn to remember, when I, the People, use the lessons of yesterday and no longer forget who robbed me last year, who played me for a fool—then there will be no speaker in all the world say the name: "The People," with any fleck of a sneer in his voice or any far-off smile of derision. (*CP*, p. 71)

When pioneers build towns in the garden of Illinois, their vision is still agrarian. In Masters' Petersburg and Lewistown, Lindsay's Springfield, and Sandburg's Galesburg, the corn fields came right up to the city limits and,

even after a century of growth, still do. Masters describes the process of building the ideal village in "New Salem Hill," a lesser known poem from his collection *Invisible Landscapes*. New Salem, Lincoln's village, is only two miles from Petersburg. Masters begins the poem by praising the founders of this little town. They were the "flower of Virginia," "earth people, original and free." These pioneers founded their log cabin settlement on the true "faith American" of independence, hard work (in the soil), and simple pleasures.

Here on this Hill to blossom burst
 A life all new, all pure American.
 In western soil this seed of our loveliest flower,
 Grown in Virginia first,
 And on this Hill re-sown, produced the men
 Made altogether of our original earth,
 Being close to a soil whose power
 Fed their diverging veins.⁹

Now, Masters writes, New Salem has vanished, and with it vanished the ideal of its founders.

It faded with New Salem Town.
 This Bethlehem of America, this shrine
 Of a vision vanished, a people passed away,
 Is loved because America here beholds
 With adoration a freedom and a day
 Which dawned and perished when it made the sign
 Of what the land should be, and by what moulds
 Its spirit needed fashioning.

Vachel Lindsay is more optimistic. He believes that the American, or Jeffersonian, or Virginian Ideal is not lost. In three poems grouped under the title "The Gospel of Beauty," Lindsay develops what he calls "my theory of American civilization." The first poem, "The Proud Farmer," is written in memory of his grandfather, just as Masters wrote the Matlock poems in praise of his grandparents. Lindsay's farmer is a kind of American knight, "a democrat well-nigh a king." His spirit is still present in the Illinois small town described in the second section of "The Gospel of Beauty." Those who, like Masters, regret the passing of the democratic ideal should instead

Turn to the little prairie towns,
 Your higher hope shall yet begin.
 On every side await you there
 Some gate where glory enters in.¹⁰

Finally, in the third poem, entitled "On the Building of Springfield," Lindsay imagines the full flowering of his democratic, agrarian ideal in his own hometown.

Some city on the breast of Illinois
 No wiser and no better at the start
 By faith shall rise redeemed, by faith shall rise
 Bearing the western glory in her heart.

The genius of the Maple, Elm and Oak,
 The secret hidden in each grain of corn,
 The glory that prairie angels sing
 At night when sons of Life and Love are born. (CP, p. 75)

Thus the Illinois small town is a "Bethlehem" with "prairie angels." Lindsay was an enthusiastic, albeit unorthodox, Christian who dreamed of redeeming the world with his Gospel of Beauty.¹¹

Although Sandburg was more realistic about his hometown, in his autobiography *Always the Young Strangers*, he writes, "this small town of Galesburg, as I look back at it, was a piece of the American Republic. Breeds and blood strains that figure in history were there for me, as a boy, to see and hear in their faces and their ways of talking and acting."¹² Galesburg, like the small towns of Lindsay and Masters, had been settled by pioneers and still retained the pioneer spirit, in spite of its large immigrant population. Sandburg's Chicago, on the other hand, is the modern, energetic, exciting, violent city that retains no trace of the Jeffersonian ideal.

Out of the prairie towns, out of the frontier came Abraham Lincoln. To Lindsay, Sandburg, and (in his early poems) Masters, Lincoln represents all their ideals made flesh. He is the historical proof of their thesis, the rich harvest of the garden of Illinois. In his *Spoon River* poem on William H. Herndon, Masters has Lincoln's law partner and biographer remember the man and what he represented.

And I saw a man arise from the soil like a fabled giant.
 And throw himself over a deathless destiny,
 Master of great armies, head of the republic,
 Bringing together into a dithyramb of recreative song
 The epic hopes of a people. . . . (SR, p. 223)

Sandburg's multi-volume biography is probably his best-known work, and he also wrote a number of poems on the meaning of Lincoln's life and work. In "Fire-Logs," Lincoln's prospective mother dreams of the special event, almost like the birth of a messiah.

Oh, dream, Nancy.
 Time now for a beautiful child.
 Time now for a tall man to come. (CP, p. 102)

In the section on Lincoln in *The People, Yes*, Sandburg tries to assess his greatness, using a series of quotations from his speeches. In this poem, Lincoln is a poet, an historian, a dreamer who could "gather/ the feel of the American dream/ and see its kindred over the earth" (CP, p. 523). Above all, he is of the people. In "The Long Shadow of Lincoln," Sandburg preaches a verse sermon on Lincoln's meaning to his country. The poem concludes with this stanza, which uses the familiar prairie language of earth, sun, and harvest:

The earth laughs, the sun laughs
 over every wise harvest of man,
 over man looking toward peace
 by the light of the hard old teaching:
 "We must disentrall ourselves." (CP, p. 637)

Lindsay's Lincoln is also a suffering humanitarian. He imagines him come back to life, walking the streets of Springfield during World War I. "The prairie-lawyer, master of us all" cannot sleep because of the war. "Too many peasants fight, they know not why,/ Too many homesteads in black terror weep." Lincoln, the idealist, waits for a "spirit-down" that will bring peace, justice, and equality to "Cornland, Alp, and Sea" (CP, p. 54). In other poems and in his prose, Lindsay longs for a generation of "Lincoln-hearted men" to create a utopia in Springfield, Illinois by following Lincoln's example.

The Lincoln of Lindsay, Sandburg, and Masters is not a real person. Even in his highly-praised biography, Sandburg romanticizes history, uncritically accepting the imaginary Ann Rutledge story, for example, just as Masters did. The three poets create a mythical Lincoln, larger than life, although such exaggerations are not really necessary. The actual, historical Lincoln did represent the best qualities of American civilization. That the Illinois village produced Abraham Lincoln is proof that the idealistic conceptions of these poets did have, at least at one time, some basis in fact.

But as New Salem Village sank into oblivion, serpents of several varieties crept into the garden of Illinois and poisoned the minds of Lincoln-hearted men. Carl Sandburg dramatizes this corruption in the poem "Knucks." In Lincoln's Springfield, the poet sees a pair of brass knuckles in the window of Fischman's second-hand store. Fischman, he learns, sells "a carload a month." The poet understands what hypocrisy this represents.

Mister Fischman is for Abe and the "malice to none" stuff.
 And the street car strikers and the strike-breakers,
 And the sluggers, gunmen, detectives, policemen,
 Judges, utility heads, newspapers, priests, lawyers,
 They are all for Abe and the "malice to none" stuff. (CP, p. 122)

Sandburg develops a similar theme in *The People, Yes*, the same poem in which he writes about what Lincoln means to America. Here again, Springfield has forgotten Lincoln's message.

In a winter sunset near Springfield, Illinois
 In the coming of a winter glooming,
 A Negro miner with headlamps and dinner bucket,
 A black man explained how it happens
 In some of the mines only white men are hired,
 Only white men can dig out the coal. (CP, p. 537)

Those who have corrupted the garden of Illinois come mostly from the East, especially from New England. These children of the Puritans lack the natural vigor and rich understanding of Virginians and Kentuckians. Instead their only interest is money. Wealth does not come from the soil, these men believe. It comes from factories, mills, banks, railroads, and coal mines ripped

out of the garden. Swollen by financial and industrial power, the village ruled by farmers becomes the city ruled by lawyers. Honesty, humility, and charity are replaced by duplicity, greed, and hypocrisy. In *The People, Yes*, Sandburg assails the money power. Although money cannot buy "love, personality, freedom, immortality, silence, peace," nevertheless to gain it men "steal, kill, swindle, walk as hypocrites and whited sepulchers." Whole nations are corrupted and wage wars for it, "truckloads of amputated arms and legs are hauled away" (*CP*, p. 543).

The best poetic treatment of this theme is Lindsay's "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan" (*CP*, pp. 96-105) written in 1919 when Lindsay was at the height of his poetic power and still optimistic about the future. In this poem, he describes Bryan's visit to Springfield during the 1896 campaign. Lindsay, Sandburg, and Masters all admired Bryan—at least until he turned "down and theological," as Masters put it—because Bryan was one of them, born in Illinois, a son of the prairie, a fighter for the poor farmer, an enemy of the moneyed East. He was a Lincoln-hearted man who if elected might restore the old pioneer spirit. Also, he was young, vigorous, and a mighty orator in the best American tradition. All of Lindsay's idealistic notions and all his hopes for the future are expressed in "Bryan" in a joyous, extravagant lyricism that gives the poem life long after Bryan's death. This excellent poem presents both the dream of an American garden on the prairie and the reasons why that dream is unrealistic, perhaps even foolish, yet still wonderful.

Lindsay imagines himself as a sixteen-year-old caught up the excitement of the campaign. Bryan comes to Springfield and is introduced to the crowd by John Peter Altgeld, the liberal governor who was himself much admired by all three poets. Bryan, however, is more than just the Populist-Democratic candidate against the hated Republican McKinley. Lindsay makes him a hero of mythic proportions in this wonderful stanza:

I brag and chant of Bryan, Bryan, Bryan,
 Candidate for president who sketched a silver Zion,
 The one American Poet who could sing outdoors,
 He brought in tides of wonder, of unprecedented splendor,
 Wild roses from the plains that made hearts tender,
 All the funny circus silks
 Of politics unfurled,
 Bartlett pears of romance that were honey at the cores,
 And torchlights down the street, to the end of the world.

Appropriately, the Western hero is accompanied by a retinue of Western beasts, some real, some invented.

Oh, the longhorns from Texas,
 The jay hawks from Kansas,
 The plop-eyed bungaroo and giant giassicus,
 The varmit, chipmunk, brigaboo,
 The horned-toad, prairie-dog and ballyhoo. . . .

Bryan is the champion of "prairie-schooner children" who charges in "smashing Plymouth Rock with his boulders from the West."

The sixteen-year-old and his pals are "fairy Democrats" in a Republican town. His girl wears "a brave prairie rose" even though her "gold chums"

reject her for refusing to wear the Eastern Gibson Girl fashion. To young Lindsay, Bryan represents all his hopes and dreams, but these dreams are destroyed by McKinley and Mark Hanna, the money men. When Bryan loses, more than the election is lost.

Election night at midnight:
 Boy Bryan's defeat.
 Defeat of western silver.
 Defeat of the wheat.
 Victory of letterfiles
 And plutocrats in miles
 With dollar signs upon their coats,
 Diamond watchchains on their vests
 And spats on their feet.
 Victory of custodians,
 Plymouth Rock,
 And all that inbred landlord stock.

In a futile attempt to stave off such defeats, all three poets were active in a variety of liberal, even radical causes.¹³ Sandburg was an organizer for the Social-Democratic party in Wisconsin. Masters, a lawyer, was an active Populist and president of the Jefferson Club of Chicago, an organization of Bryan supporters. Lindsay spoke often for various civic improvements in Springfield, lectured on Temperance, preached his Gospel of Beauty, and voted with the Left, for reasons he explains in his poem, "Why I Voted the Socialist Ticket." "I am unjust," he wrote, "but I can strive for justice" (*CP*, p. 301).

In spite of Bryan and the Populists, in spite of Debs and the Socialists, the serpents prospered, living off the rich harvest of the garden. The slimiest worms are the lawyers, who earn especially bitter criticism from Sandburg and Masters. Sandburg's poem "The Lawyers Know Too Much" reads like the work of a socialist organizer.

The work of a bricklayer goes to the blue.
 The knack of a mason outlasts a moon.
 The hands of a plasterer hold a room together.
 The land of a farmer wishes him back again.
 Singers of songs and dreamers of plays
 Build a house no wind blows over.
 The lawyers—tell me why a hearse horse
 snickers hauling a lawyer's bones. (*CP*, p. 189)

A voice on the subway in *The People, Yes* speaks the popular wisdom, "The Constitution tells how the government runs. It is a paper in Washington for the lawyers" (*CP*, p. 531). One of the bitterest epitaphs in *Spoon River Anthology* is that of John M. Church, a lawyer for the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad and also for a company that insured the greedy and negligent owners of a coal mine. Church confesses,

I pulled the wires with judge and jury,
 And the upper courts, to beat the claims
 Of the crippled, the widow and orphan,
 And made a fortune thereat.
 The bar association sang my praises
 In a high-flown resolution.

And the floral tributes were many—
 But the rats devoured my heart
 And a snake made a nest in my skull! (SR, p. 85)

Even more serious than the growth of industrialism and the supremacy of Eastern financial power over Western farmers was the threat of war. All three poets were opposed, in varying degrees, to World War I—Sandburg ultimately decided that America's entry was necessary—and all wrote anti-war poems. They agreed with young critic Randolph Bourne's statement, "The war—or American promise: one must choose. One cannot be interested in both."¹⁴ World War I was the fault of corrupt European princes; it was completely foreign to America's ideals. Masters believed that America's entry meant the end of the pioneer, Jeffersonian spirit in this country. The change had begun with the imperialistic Spanish-American War. There had been a brief period of hope just before 1914, but now that "happy day" was over.¹⁵ Sandburg's opposition is expressed in several bitter early poems. "A Million Young Workmen, 1915" is a good example.

A million young workmen straight and strong lay stiff on the grass and roads. . . .
 The kings are grinning, the kaiser and the czar—they are alive riding in
 leather-seated motor cars, and they have their women and roses for ease,
 and they eat fresh poached eggs for breakfast, new butter on toast, sitting
 in tall water-tight houses reading the news of war.
 I dreamed a million ghosts of the young workmen rose in their sheets all soaked
 in crimson . . . and yelled:
 God damn the grinning kings, God damn the kaiser and the czar. (CP, p. 141)

These three Populist poets were also deeply concerned about abuses of the factory system. As a socialist should, Sandburg wrote about the exploitation of workers. In "The Mayor of Gary," a typically ironic poem, Sandburg introduces His Honor:

And he wore cool cream pants, the Mayor of Gary, and white shoes, and a
 barber had fixed him up with a shampoo and a shave and he was easy and
 imperturbable though the government weather bureau thermometers said 96
 and children were soaking their heads at bubbling fountains on street corners.
 (CP, p. 161)

The mayor believes that the twelve-hour day and the seven-day week are not unjust because workers steal time on the job. But, Sandburg writes:

. . . I saw workmen wearing leather shoes scuffed with fire and cinders,
 and pitted with little holes from running molten steel.
 And some had bunches of specialized muscles around their shoulder blades
 hard as pig iron, muscles of their forearms were sheet steel and they looked
 to me like men who had been somewhere. (CP, p. 161)

Masters, always an enemy of the Puritan ethic, writes an epitaph for the owner of a canning factory who made a success through "thrift, industry, courage, honesty." Although Willis Beggs was himself a good person, he lived an empty life and did his country a disservice.

And all the while I could look out a window
 Upon an America perishing for life,
 Never to be attained
 By thrift, industry and courage
 Dedicated to the canning works!¹⁶

Lindsay's position on industrialism is perhaps the most extreme. Although he admired the products of an industrial age, and although he believed in progress, in "Factory Windows Are Always Broken," he is a neo-Luddite.

Factory windows are always broken.
 Other windows are let alone.
 No one throws through the chapel window
 The bitter, snarling, derisive stone.

Factory windows are always broken.
 Something or other is going wrong.
 Something is rotten—I think, in Denmark.
End of the factory-window song. (CP, p. 266)

As they watched the machine dig deeper into their rich prairie soil with each year, as they saw their idealistic dreams for a Jeffersonian America disappear along with the Populist party and the Illinois village, Lindsay and Masters grew increasingly bitter and strident in their attacks on the enemy. Although in his public appearances Lindsay kept on reciting his optimistic poems, and although he preached his old fashioned Gospel of Beauty to the generation of flivvers and flaming youth, he worried about his fading popularity. His utopian books and magazines did not sell well, and by 1931 he was virtually bankrupt. The world did not live up to his vision of it. On December 5, 1931 he committed suicide by drinking a bottle of Lysol. His last words reportedly were "They tried to get me; I got them first."¹⁷

Masters discusses the reasons for this suicide at length in his biography of Lindsay. Lindsay, he writes, was done in by all the forces they both railed against in their poetry. First of all, the East was now triumphant. "Centralization in government has placed all political power in Washington, and all money power in New York."¹⁸ This money power also controls the publishing industry. Like Spiro Agnew, Masters believes in an Eastern Establishment Media Conspiracy. "Tammany," he claims, "captured the political machine of poetry." William Marion Reedy of St. Louis, Masters' first editor, could have prevented "the strangulation of Lindsay," but Reedy died in 1920. Reedy, a champion of the West in literature, had been listened to in New York, but now, in 1935, the native American tradition in poetry is doomed. The genteel tradition has triumphed again and magazine editors have gone back "to the English tradition of Browning and Tennyson." These statements are dubious (Masters seems totally ignorant of William Carlos Williams, whose poetry refutes his charges), but Masters believed them.

Masters' bitterness at the failure of his hopes for a Jeffersonian America led him to commit the ultimate apostasy—he turned against Lincoln. Because Lincoln led the industrial North to victory over the agrarian South, Masters came to believe that Lincoln had been a spokesman for Eastern industrialism. Why then did Masters' friend Lindsay, who also hated the Eastern money power, admire Lincoln? Masters explains in his biography that "Lindsay's

idolatry of Lincoln was based upon the misconception that Lincoln was of the pioneer spirit."¹⁹ In "New Salem Hill," written the same year as the Lindsay biography, Masters writes that New Salem is not famous because Lincoln grew up there—instead, the reverse is true. People admire Lincoln because he came from New Salem. By growing up in frontier Illinois, Lincoln acquired a thin veneer of the pioneer virtues, which makes people confuse him with true pioneers and true Americans like Thomas Jefferson and William Jennings Bryan.

Carl Sandburg did not commit suicide, nor did he grow bitter and hateful. Perhaps because he was always more realistic than either Masters or Lindsay, perhaps simply because he became a success, the friend of movie stars and presidents, Sandburg retained his faith in America. Although he campaigned against the abuses of industrialism, he found among steelworkers and office girls people to be cherished like the dead pioneers of *Spoon River Anthology*. The son of Swedish immigrants, Sandburg also enjoyed and celebrated this country's new ethnic diversity. In his last years, living in rural semi-simplicity on his goat farm in North Carolina, Sandburg became an elder statesman and in that role was often asked his opinion of the nation's future. He always replied optimistically. After his death, President Lyndon Johnson called him "the bard of democracy" who "gave us the truest and most enduring vision of our greatness."²⁰

Masters, Sandburg, and Lindsay imagined the garden of Illinois as a place where America's promises might be fulfilled. In this garden, men and women could live the good life in beautiful surroundings. Whether such an Eden really existed on New Salem Hill in the 1830's or whether it could have been established in Springfield, Galesburg, Petersburg, or Chicago just before World War I is not important now. What is important are the poems in which the ideals of the poets are made real.

NOTES

¹ Carl Sandburg, *Complete Poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1950), p. 80. All quotations from Sandburg's poems are from this edition and will be cited in the text as *CP*.

² Edgar Lee Masters, *The New Spoon River* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), p. 231.

³ Edgar Lee Masters, *Vachel Lindsay: A Poet in America* (New York: Scribners, 1935), p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), p. 229. All quotations from this edition will be cited as *SR* in the text.

⁷ Edgar Lee Masters, *The Sangamon* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1941), p. 30.

⁸ Vachel Lindsay, *Selected Poems of Vachel Lindsay*, ed. Hazelton Spencer (New York: Macmillan, 1931), pp. 83-86.

⁹ Edgar Lee Masters, *Invisible Landscapes* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. 28.

¹⁰ Vachel Lindsay, *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p. 72. All further quotations from this edition will be cited in the text as *CP*.

¹¹ For a discussion of Lindsay's religion see Ann Massa, *Vachel Lindsay: Fieldworker for the American Dream* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 49-73.

¹² Carl Sandburg, *Always the Young Strangers* (New York: Harcourt, 1953), p. 280.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of their politics, see Michael Yatron, *America's Literary Revolt* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

¹⁴ Randolph Bourne, "A War Diary," in *War and the Intellectuals: Essays by Randolph S. Bourne, 1915-1919*, ed. Carl Resek (New York: Harper, 1964), p. 46.

¹⁵ Edgar Lee Masters, *Across Spoon River* (1936; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1969), p. 381.

¹⁶ Masters, *New Spoon River*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Masters, *Vachel Lindsay*, p. 361.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 366 ff.

¹⁹ Masters, *Vachel Lindsay*, p. 368. For a further discussion of Masters' hatred of Lincoln see Yatron, *America's Literary Revolt*, pp. 28-30.

²⁰ "Carl Sandburg, Poet and Biographer of Lincoln, Dies in South at 89," *New York Times*, 23 July 1967, p. 62.

Vachel Lindsay: A Reappraisal

DENNIS Q. McINERNY

It is difficult to be certain about such things, but my guess is that Vachel Lindsay is not read very much today. I would presume that most of his mature readers are college students, and they are most probably exposed to him in the small doses that survey courses provide. But even then they may not be getting more than a glimpse of the man, and that a distorted one. Such would be the case, for example, should they be enrolled in a course which is using a book called *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, edited by three of the most distinguished contemporary practitioners of American criticism, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and R. W. B. Lewis. This is in many ways an excellent work, but in treating Lindsay it does him two disservices. First, it takes the easy road of publishing three of his most well-known rather than three of his best poems. Second—perhaps the unforgivable sin of anthologizing—the three poems, none unduly long, are printed only in part (“General William Booth Enters into Heaven,” “The Congo,” and “Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan”). This kind of treatment seems to corroborate Peter Viereck’s claim that for the most part Lindsay has been dealt with by the literary establishment in a decidedly patronizing manner.¹ Yet I cite this particular anthology not because it is out of the way, but because it is typical. When literary historians and critics are not flatly antagonistic toward Lindsay they seem mostly baffled by him. I think there is an explanation for this. Lindsay’s militant, unself-conscious exuberance, the at times crude recklessness of his poetic expression, grates upon ears which have been trained to accept as “modern” poetry only the low-toned, carefully controlled cadences and/or sober intellectualism of poets like Frost, Eliot, and Stevens. And the tone of his poems disturbs us. We have come so to identify the ironic voice with the poetic voice that we are not prepared to accept as genuine a poet who is, for the most part, unabashedly lacking in irony. We doubt the sincerity of a poet who makes a deliberate point of wearing his sincerity on his sleeve.

It should come as no surprise to us that critics differ over the quality of Lindsay’s poetry; the surprise would be if it were otherwise. But it is worth more than a passing comment that there is disagreement among critics concerning the presence or absence in Lindsay of certain fundamental traits, the kind over which one would not think there would be much room for dispute. Different critics are reading him in radically different ways, to the

point where one is tempted to wonder just how many Vachel Lindsays there are. Thus, one critic will insist that Lindsay's optimism "was exactly the same brand as Emerson's and Whitman's,"² while another works under the assumption that Lindsay is not an optimist at all but rather a "pessimistic realist."³ One critic confidently asserts that Lindsay's sense of humor is the factor that will ultimately insure his artistic salvation;⁴ another states matter-of-factly that Lindsay was bereft of a sense of humor.⁵ For several critics imagination was a gift Lindsay possessed in abundance; there is at least one dissenting voice, however, which says that it was precisely a lack of imagination which rendered Lindsay's poetry essentially spiritless.⁶

The critical response to Lindsay's poetry was mixed right from the beginning. There was no dearth of people who had praise for him, some of it very high. Floyd Dell, the associate literary editor of the Chicago *Evening Post*, was one of the first to recognize Lindsay's talent. Reviewing *The Tramp's Excuse* in 1909 he said that "Nicholas Vachel Lindsay is something of an artist; after a fashion, a socialist; more certainly, a religious mystic; and for present purposes it must be added that he is indubitably a poet!"⁷ Harriet Monroe, who had a knack for recognizing good poets which bordered on genius, and who is sometimes looked upon as the "discoverer" of Lindsay, saw him as a "modern knight-errant"⁸ and asserted that he was "perhaps the most gifted poet we ever printed."⁹ She is referring, of course, to his appearances in *Poetry* magazine. "General William Booth Enters into Heaven" was published in the December, 1913 issue of *Poetry*, and there is no doubt some basis for regarding Miss Monroe as Lindsay's "discoverer"; certainly, his rapid emergence as a national figure can be conveniently dated from that year. However, to keep the record straight, we should be aware, as some have already pointed out, that Lindsay and his subsequent fame probably did as much, if not more, for *Poetry* as *Poetry* had done for him. With Lindsay on stage the New Poetry Movement was launched. The crimping respectability, not to say debilitating torpor, that had settled upon American poetry since the death of Walt Whitman was suddenly and dramatically dissipated. Though he differed from them in many important ways, it was Lindsay, by his simple not-to-be-ignored presence, who woke up the country to the new possibilities for poetry and paved the way for the acceptance of poets like Robinson, Frost, Eliot, Masters, and, yes, Ezra Pound. In a word, he ushered in 20th-century American poetry.

Lindsay's fellow Illinoian Edgar Lee Masters thought of him as a genuine, even superior poet. While freely admitting Lindsay's limitations, he saw in certain of his works unmistakable genius. Herbert S. Gorman, in a low-toned but favorable essay published in 1924, offered the opinion—not in currency at the time—that the "real" poet was the "quiet lyricist" and not the evangelistic, floor-stomping exhorter; he concluded that Lindsay, "when he is at his best, is art."¹⁰ I will want to return to Gorman's judgment, for it has much to commend it. No less a giant than William Butler Yeats had public praise for "General Booth," observing that it has "an earnest simplicity, a strange beauty."¹¹ When Lindsay visited England in 1920, where among other things he read at Oxford at the invitation of Robert Graves, it was said of him by the *Observer* that "he is easily the most important living American poet."¹² For

John Masfield he was simply "the best American poet."¹³ In 1931 Professor William Lyon Phelps of Yale University announced what he considered to be America's five great living poets. They were Stephen Vincent Benet, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Edwin Arlington Robinson. The following year Hazelton Spencer declared in a eulogistic essay that Lindsay was the country's "chief poetical interpreter since Whitman."¹⁴

There was a group of critics who had unqualified admiration for what Lindsay represented for them as a humanist, pre-eminent concerned citizen, and enthusiastic advocate of art; but they were obviously troubled by his poetry. In other words, they liked what he stood for as a totally dedicated disciple of Beauty more than what he had produced as a poet. Marianne Moore was of this mind, and so were people like W. R. Moses and Austin Warren. Moses and Warren suggested that Lindsay's poetry would have been better had he concentrated more of his attention on it and less on the array of eclectic philosophical-social concerns with which he constantly busied himself.

For those critics who were convinced that the wide-spread excitement generated by Lindsay's poetry was unjustified, there was a marked lack of ambivalence in their assessments of him. Ezra Pound, for whom Lindsay was "the plain man in gum overshoes" with "a touching belief in W. J. Bryan,"¹⁵ made it clear what he thought about the quality of Lindsay's poetry when he said, in 1915, that "one can write it by the hour as fast as one scribbles."¹⁶ If that was a bit on the cruel side, Conrad Aiken succeeded in being downright brutal. William Butler Yeats may have seen something to praise in "General Booth"; to Aiken it was "one of the most curiously over-estimated of contemporary poems . . . thin and trivial." And as for Lindsay's poetry as a whole, Aiken concluded that it was "imageless, its ideas childish; and as verse it is extraordinarily amateurish. One reads it, ultimately, only because Mr. Lindsay has a reputation, and because in queer corners he still has an influence. And one foresees no future for it whatever."¹⁷ After an onslaught like that, coming from a distinguished poet, one might feel that the last and damning word had been said. But others viewed him more moderately and presented more balanced accounts. Professor John T. Flanagan recognized several commendable qualities in Lindsay, but in the end felt that his poems "linger in the memory because of their stridency."¹⁸ Carl Van Doren and Henry Seidel Canby are generally kind but they cannot bring themselves to admit that Lindsay is a first-rate poet. Van Doren felt that Lindsay rejoices "in more things than his imagination can assimilate," and that is because his "poetical range is not very great."¹⁹ And Canby: "His vein was rich, but narrow."²⁰

From the samplings I have provided here one might conclude that the critical assessments of Lindsay are pretty much evenly divided. They are certainly divided, but not evenly. My impression of the criticism is that the balance is clearly tipped against Lindsay. Worth special note, I think, is the fact that no responsible critic praises Lindsay without reservation, including those who are generally in favor of him. Even when they are trying to be as forthrightly positive as they possibly can the little qualifiers creep in. The most loyal of his backers, among whom Harriet Monroe can be cited, display a hesitancy, a track-covering caution, when they set Lindsay apart for special

praise. They choose their words judiciously; we do not hear from them the unstudied outpourings of the devotee. The explanation for this goes beyond the fact that critics are conservative by the very nature of their business. The critics did not totally believe in Lindsay because they were never quite sure what they were dealing with in him. He remained an unknown quantity, even for those who claimed they understood him. The critical picture of Lindsay, then, is more negative than positive. Ann Massa overstates the case, but she at least puts emphasis where it belongs when she says that "for the most part Lindsay was assessed with vitriolic condescension."²¹

In the face of a consensus weighed against Lindsay, there is the temptation to succumb and, uncritically, conclude that he was little more than an aberration, one of those erratic and finally inconsequential meteorites which flash across the literary sky and disintegrate when they hit the rough atmosphere of criticism. That would be wrong, for Lindsay—flashy though he was—was not just an embarrassing mistake for which students of American literature must feel bound to apologize. There is another temptation, however, of the opposite kind: to assume that the fault-finding critics are in every respect wrong and to set out on a quixotic adventure to prove that Vachel Lindsay has been grossly underrated, that he was in fact one of the great poets of the 20th century. Vachel Lindsay was not one of the great poets of the 20th century. Neither, on the other hand, was he the failure as a poet that Conrad Aiken would lead us to believe. The truth, as usual, lies somewhere in between.

II

Vachel Lindsay's main problem as a poet, and as a writer in general, lay in the fact that for all his dedication to art as an abstraction, he was himself not enough the artist; he did not take poetic craftsmanship with the kind of seriousness which manifests itself in rigorous self-discipline. I have already alluded to the fact that several critics, recognizing this in Lindsay, explained it, in part at least, as the result of his spreading himself too thin. Marianne Moore deplored his lack of aesthetic rigor.²² Babette Deutsch maintained that he could not make up his mind whether to reform the world or be an artist, and "the struggle invalidates most of his poems."²³ This view is echoed by Austin Warren, who answers his question, "Why didn't he come off as a poet?" by saying that Lindsay was "torn between too many opposing forces, forces which he couldn't really comprehend, couldn't properly name, let alone resolve."²⁴

These assessments recognize that Lindsay's poetry suffered because he concerned himself with, and expended his energies upon, too many things besides poetry. Being a poet is a full-time job. But we should understand that Lindsay was not helplessly caught up in a web which was not of his own conscious making. He knew what he was about, and if he was not the kind of meticulous craftsman that we commonly expect the poet to be, it was because he had chosen to be otherwise. He was in aesthetic matters essentially an instrumentalist; poetry for him was a means, not an end. Archibald MacLeish's "simply be" notion of a poem, while it would have been quite comprehensible to Lindsay, would have been unacceptable. A poem had a burden of meaning to bear; it was an instrument by which he spread the good news about the Gospel

of Beauty. He was aware of the strong didactic bent in his poetry, and he was also aware that others felt that his didacticism was often heavy-handed and sometimes harmful. As early as 1911 Hamlin Garland had written to him and cautioned him to "be very careful not to write anything casually, and you must not permit the ethics of your message to at any time dominate your art."²⁵

I do not think we can conclude that Lindsay simply ignored such advice as being in no way applicable to him. We know that he revised some of his poems several times, and, Pound's comments notwithstanding, he did not churn them out with mechanistic facility, not all of them at any rate. Still, despite whatever resolutions he may have made to reform, there was something in him that prevented him from becoming the conscious artist who labors over his products with meticulous care until he has polished them to perfection. That just wasn't Lindsay. He had a world to save and time was wasting. Although I am not aware of his ever explicitly indicating as much, I have the impression that he would have regarded the notion that poetry is an end in itself as somewhat effete, if not decadent. He was raised in and remained generally loyal to an evangelical denomination (The Disciples of Christ) which had not a few things in common with 17th-century Puritanism; perhaps tucked away in his subconscious was the idea that if art is to be justified at all it is to the degree that it can be put to good use.

Be that as it may, the pragmatic overtones of Lindsay's aesthetic are very much in evidence and to ignore them is to miss the most important explanation why his poetry, as art, was not all that perhaps it could have been. Ann Massa, in her important book on this subject, provides a convincing argument for the contention that Lindsay was not an advocate of art for art's sake. "His artistic conscience," she explains, "told him to put matter and mass appeal before self-expression and aesthetics. Form was to follow function and social utility; and if erudition and abstract imagery seemed to the American public to smack of irrelevance and preciousness, he felt they should be allowed to lapse until, on the basis of a firmly established culture, they might elevate national sensibilities a stage further."²⁶ Add to this Austin Warren's helpful observation that Lindsay viewed the poet as a myth-maker instead of a verse-maker, which made people like Jefferson, Hamilton, and Lincoln as much poets for him as politicians, and we have a clearer idea of what he conceived his own role as poet to be. He was variously a crusader or a troubadour; in either case, by the sheer power of words or by their glittering attractiveness, he would win over his fellows to the cause of Beauty.

Lindsay's instrumentalist view of poetry derived from the arrangement of what could be called his philosophical priorities. What unquestionably came first for him was the need to establish among the American citizenry a lasting dedication to Beauty. His own quest for Beauty was, as indicated by the devotional language he uses in describing it, in many ways a religious quest; but it was not exclusively so. It was a poorly thought-out but passionately maintained admixture of the sacred and the secular, an admixture which contributed to the quest's charm but in the end provides the best clue to its general ineffectiveness. It was once said of him that he could not adequately handle his eclecticism,²⁷ and that is particularly true in this case. Lindsay had a way of mixing his categories so as to come up with syntheses which were

consistently weak and unimpressive. At any rate, the first order of business for him was to awaken the American people to a sense of the beauty in which, by the very fact of their being alive and in the world, they were immersed. Beauty, in other words, was a "given." But consciousness was all, for in effect beauty did not exist for those who were not aware of it. Further, the consciousness of beauty was not simply a pleasant addendum to one's life; it was absolutely critical. Beauty not only awakened man to the world around him but to his fullest self as well. Without it he was reduced to the prosaic level of a dull and deadening materialism.

Lindsay embarked upon his crusade for Beauty early in life. In 1897, when he was eighteen years old and a student at Hiram College in Ohio, he had firmly decided that he would dedicate himself to art, but not as a timorous, garrett-dwelling recluse. "I have a world to save," he wrote in his diary, "and must prepare, prepare, prepare. . . Behold, I shall be a Caesar in the world of art, conquering every sort, every language and people, and lead their kings captive before the men of Rome."²⁸ This might be regarded as little more than typical adolescent braggadocio, which in great part it no doubt was, but the important thing to note is that the attitude expressed here is one which Lindsay maintained for the whole of his life. In 1929, while on an eastern reading tour which was proving to be especially successful, he wrote to his wife Elizabeth: "Be ready for the success when it comes, when our sudden majority arrives over the U. S. A. as it did at the Christian Church in Springfield."²⁹ We are on the edge of Bryan's power. I mean it seriously. We are on the edge of Bryan's power. They are coming to us, dearest, for personal leadership in *citizenship* and *ideas*. They follow us as the Black-Shirts do Mussolini, with a slant almost political."³⁰

These two announcements, one made when Lindsay was eighteen, the other when he was fifty, reveal a great deal about the man. The slant of his writing was "almost political"; he, as poet, through the medium of his poetry, was going to lead his countrymen to a saving awareness of their responsibilities as citizens. They will come to him for his ideas, the ideas with which he had laden his poetry, and the culmination, the glorious denouement of the entire campaign, will be the establishment of an entirely new society, the utopia of his dreams since he was a boy, when all men will live together in harmony, their consciousness having been raised to a perfect and permanent apprehension of Beauty.

That Lindsay always conceived of his poetry as primarily a vehicle for social amelioration is made abundantly clear in many comments he made upon his work. In an introductory essay to his *Collected Poems* (published in 1925), which is significantly titled "Adventures While Preaching Hieroglyphic Sermons," he spends a good deal of time talking about the reading tours he had made throughout the country, during which he had been exposed to literally tens of thousands of people; he complains about what to him is a singularly depressing fact: most of the people who had listened to him had failed to get his message. They had come to be entertained by theatrical recitations of "General Booth" and "The Congo." Well, he was not an entertainer, and as far as "General Booth" and "The Congo" were concerned, his audiences could recite them themselves. In future recitations he advised his auditors to bring

along with them copies of *Collected Poems* so that they could carefully follow his reading; the people who will be dearest to his heart will be those who "want to know precisely my message."³¹ The use of the metaphor "preaching" to describe the recitation of his poetry and the promulgation of his message is not altogether facetious, and underscores the quasi-religious fervor with which Lindsay went about his tasks. He once wrote to his sister Olive that "reciting is to me a kind of love-making, a religious service."³² Lindsay, then, as poet, was the antithesis of the secluded craftsman who labors over each word of his work. Lindsay was a man with a public job to do, and his tool was poetry.

In stressing the instrumentalism which dominated Lindsay's attitude toward poetry I have perhaps left the impression that such an attitude caused him little or no trouble. That would be a false impression. He did show some ambivalence toward the matter, almost as if he were feeling guilty about his instrumentalist orientation in that it might, ironically, be undercutting the very goal he was attempting to achieve. There is no doubt that Lindsay did come to be embarrassed over the image he had attained as a declared proponent and insistent perpetrator of the "higher vaudeville." However, if he complained that his audiences were systematically missing his message, he himself cannot entirely escape the blame for this. He was every inch the showman, and his recitations sometimes approached bombastic heights of dramatization—not conducive to an atmosphere, one might conclude, where "messages" can be transmitted with unambiguous effectiveness. He was apparently aware that, given his penchant for showmanship, many people were not taking him seriously, not only as a poet but also—what was worse—as a responsible proponent of aestheticism or social philosophy. Thus we witness his strained attempts to convince his readers that he is indeed qualified to speak with authority on the subjects closest to his heart. He had read all of Poe by the time he was fourteen; he had been to college; he had been an art student in both Chicago and New York; he had spent hours, days, in the finest museums of the world; he was a student of ancient Egypt; he was a student of many other things. But these protestations, no matter how true, were painfully beside the point, and they were too late. The damage had already been done; whether he liked it or not—and he decidedly did not like it—Lindsay had been typed by many as a sincere but superficial versifier, an amusing chap perhaps but uncomfortably lacking in substance.

There is reason to believe that given his conception of himself as a "mis-represented stranger"³³ he underwent a kind of identity crisis as far as his role as a poet was concerned. In 1925 he admitted that he was "still surprised to be called a writer."³⁴ Alfred Kreymborg claims that Lindsay once told him that he had never called himself a poet.³⁵ At times he seems to have despaired of the effectiveness of poetry in that "the American people hate and abhor poetry."³⁶ He puzzles us by saying that the marginal directions he provides for the reading of his poetry are to be ignored. This is more than the playful irony we have come to expect of poets; it indicates a fundamental confusion on his part as to the quality of his work.

To the degree that Lindsay failed as a poet, and he failed more than he succeeded, it was precisely to the degree that he allowed the message to take precedence over the medium. Once again, however, it needs to be emphasized

that this was no accident; Lindsay knew quite well what he was doing. It has been Lindsay's misfortune to be known now, as he was known in his life, mainly by his more clamorous, not his best, poems. Off hand, I know of very few poetry anthologies which do not carry "General Booth" and "The Congo." Both have a fetching quality but they are not very good poems; they are not "memorable" in the best sense of the term. Concerning "The Congo," Austin Warren has shown, by a masterful bit of close criticism, why that poem does not work: it is seriously at war with itself.³⁷ Earlier I cited Herbert S. Gorman's judgment that Lindsay's better poems are the quieter ones. I concur with this judgment.

Lindsay's emotions were such that when he raised them to too high a pitch in his poetry they misserved him, which I suppose can be said of anyone's emotions as applied to anything. His emotionalism was a direct and inevitable result of his intense sincerity, his unmitigated earnestness, and his dauntless crusading spirit. But he knew how to be calm, and when he had good control over his emotions, when they were subservient to the "inner voice" and the "gleam" of which he speaks, then his poems have power, the best, most effective kind of power: subtle and unobtrusive. His quiet poems are in the final analysis more human, for they do not intimidate, do not attack, the reader; they invite him. Thus, poems like "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight" and "The Eagle That Is Forgotten," which, happily, are often anthologized, evince a dignity and presence which are impressive. If I were a prophet I would confidently proclaim that these poems, along with others such as "A Gospel of Beauty," "Alexander Campbell," and many of his lyrics, will be around long after "General Booth" and "The Congo" have been forgotten.

What Lindsay's quiet poems indicate is that he was quite capable of the kind of control which, had he exercised it consistently, would have made a vast difference in his poetry as a whole. His own best instincts, as demonstrated by his eventual discomfiture with "General Booth" and "The Congo," seemed to have been telling him the same thing. Unfortunately, he had many instincts, and too often he followed those lesser ones which told him that the rough, unpolished, barely-under-control products of his inventiveness were worth cherishing. For all the ways he mistrusted himself in other matters he did not sufficiently mistrust himself in this. He came to doubt much of his poetry too late, long after it had left his desk and had been published in books. It has been observed of him that he was a poor critic as far as his own work was concerned, and there is much truth to that. He lacked that priceless knack of which Yeats spoke, which allows a poet to be his own best judge, to know better than anyone else whether or not his poems were right. If there were in fact any guiding "angels" in Lindsay's head to tell him what was aesthetically right and wrong, on most occasions he could not hear them for all the commotion his emotions were making.

III

Vachel Lindsay's power was real enough, but it was diffuse, unconcentrated, with the result that much of what he produced, though tantalizing, is not enduringly compelling. Yet it is difficult to evade the uncomfortable feeling that that assessment of the man, while accurate, is not adequate. I said

earlier that Lindsay seems to foil all attempts to package him too neatly and conveniently brush him aside; he is larger than the sum of the critical assessments of his works. His importance for American literature, while obviously deriving primarily from his writings, is not limited to them, for he was more than what he wrote. I feel that the justification for our continued interest in him, our study of him, rests finally upon his typological import. Vachel Lindsay was a Representative Man in a way which is very special to American literature and culture. He was among the last, and certainly the most colorful, true believers of the American dream as that dream was interpreted in the Midwestern myth of the garden.

Henry Nash Smith, in his seminal book *Virgin Land*, demonstrates how the West, particularly the Middle West, became "one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society . . . a poetic idea . . . that defined the promise of American life."³⁸ Many of the settlers who moved into the newly opened territories in the 19th century were motivated by an ebullient optimism which had found its first tentative expression among the 17th-century New England Puritans and was given its fullest articulation in the 18th century by writers like Crèvecoeur and Jefferson. These settlers were inspired by the conviction, often millennial in tone, that they were a new people commencing a new era in human history. The old, the corrupt, the wrong-headedly civilized was behind them. Ahead of them lay a garden which was Edenic in its potentialities.

Lindsay's ancestors had been part of the westward migration, and they had believed in the dream; Lindsay, throughout his life, was acutely aware of this and very proud of it. Both sets of his grandparents were Kentuckians, and the Frazees, his maternal grandparents, eventually emigrated to Indiana.

But my great-grandfathers came
To the west with Daniel Boone,
And taught his babes to read,
And heard the redbird's tune. . . .³⁹

Thus he wrote in "My Fathers Came from Kentucky." His Grandfather Frazee, the "proud farmer" for whom he had special admiration, was to him a knight of the sprawling land, a kingly democrat who inspired his grandchildren until they felt connected "To all the lion-eyed who build the world—/ And lion-dreams begin to burn within."⁴⁰

By the time Lindsay was born, in 1879, the front-line migrations into Illinois were completed and the dream which had inspired those migrations had been dealt a severe blow by the disillusion that followed upon the Civil War. But though considerably less vital, it continued to exert its influence; within the circle of the Disciples, and the smaller circle of his family, especially in the person of his mother, one could say it continued to thrive. At any rate, it was a dream that Lindsay tenaciously—perhaps at times even desperately—clung to for the duration of his life, and if one wants to think of his life as tragic, the tragedy consisted in his congenital inability, or perhaps dogged unwillingness, to adjust to a world which was no longer hospitable to the dream. Some, although not defining Lindsay's failure to adjust to modernity in precisely these terms, have interpreted it as a sign of immaturity. Much as he admired

Lindsay in other respects, this was clearly the opinion of Masters; for him, Lindsay "never really grew up." He lived in a "cuckoo cloudland," dreaming "magical cities" and planning "great campaigns for the reclamation of the country."¹⁴ Of course, this judgment is sound only to the degree that you admit that the ideals to which Lindsay adhered were thoroughly wrong-headed, and the world he was fighting against was worth adjusting to. Depending upon one's point of view, Lindsay's "immaturity" may be his most admirable trait and his greatest claim to enduring fame.

Lindsay attempted to manifest in his own life that faith in the American dream which he felt had been bequeathed to him by his forefathers. When he set about preaching the Gospel of Beauty he was, in effect, expressing his faith in the dream, and in the capacity of the average American, for whom that dream had been considerably dimmed if not altogether eradicated, to once again acknowledge its centrality and commit himself to it. Harriet Monroe had once observed of him that he had "faith in beauty, in goodness (even human goodness, especially that of women), in the splendor of common things and common experiences."⁴² He was, in other words, the same kind of visionary democrat as were Jefferson, Emerson, and Whitman.

Ultimately, it is impossible to accurately assess Lindsay's attitude toward the American dream without acknowledging the importance of his religious views, for in many respects his religion went hand in hand with, and reinforced, his deep-set belief in the dream. Masters shows very little sympathy for those views, although some of his observations are extraordinarily penetrating. However, Masters on the subject of Lindsay's religion tells us more about Masters than it does about Lindsay. But it is not uncommon for critics to show themselves considerably less than objective on this subject. Although Lindsay's religious views were informed primarily by the evangelical doctrines of the Disciples of Christ, they were, taken together, a patch-work of theological eclecticism. For the most part, this eclecticism did not work in his favor; instead of enriching his religious sensibilities it tended rather to confuse them. I have already said that Lindsay was not a systematic thinker; to that I add the corollary that he was not a systematic believer. Lindsay simply lacked the capacity to assimilate and render into a coherent pattern the many theological tidbits which composed his superficial knowledge of various Christian denominations and world religions. One thing is clear, however: his religious views, such as they were, played a vital part in the formulation of his social philosophy. Indeed, Lindsay's religious views and his "politics" were inextricably intertwined.

Specifically, the millennialism which played an integral part in the beliefs of the Disciples of Christ (one recalls that the organ which Alexander Campbell edited for thirty-five years was called the *Millennial Harbinger*) became an important part of Lindsay's peculiar interpretation of the American dream. In *Collected Poems* he quotes Alexander Campbell, the founder of the Disciples of Christ: "The present material universe, yet unrevealed in all its area, in all its tenancies, in all its riches, beauty and grandeur, will be wholly regenerated."⁴³ Apart from citing its source, Lindsay offers this passage as a preface to one of his poems without commentary. Obviously, he uses it because he agrees with the soaring hope for a better world, for a better mankind, which it

bespeaks. While the regeneration which he envisioned was cosmic in scope, it was to have its genesis in America, more particularly in the Middle West, more particularly still in Springfield, Illinois. Thus we see combined in him his faith as a Disciple of Christ and his faith as an advocate of the American dream. Springfield's future was shining; he saw it as becoming an ideal city, an edifying exemplar highly suggestive of John Winthrop's "city upon a hill."

Whatever diverse ramifications Lindsay's guiding ideology may have had, however intimately it may have been associated with his specifically religious views, it was, at bottom, a direct outgrowth of his profound and thorough Americanism. His dream was first and foremost the *American* dream. Naive though one may want to consider it, there was nothing disingenuous about his love for his country; further, it was a love based upon an impressive amount of broad, first-hand knowledge. "I prefer the American flag to the cross," he once said. "Patriotism like love is a most imperfect passion, and surely I have it, with all its imperfections. The fact that it is generally tied up with war has almost spoiled it for me, but just the same I have seen this land as a whole, and as a peaceful splendor, and it really means a very great deal to me. I seem to have a kind of heartache for every state in the union, no matter how silly that may seem."⁴⁴ But the America Lindsay was in love with was more the America that *was* rather than the one which was *coming to be*. As already indicated, it was rural America, small-town America—as can be seen by his promotion of the "New Localism"—which for him contained the germs for the full flowering of the ideals expressed by heroes like Jefferson. And his contemporary American heroes—Robert Frost, Woodrow Wilson, Henry Ford, Gene Tunney, Charles Lindbergh—were in effect modern versions of the rugged individualist of the early frontier. They did as they pleased; the "supremacy" of each, according to Lindsay, consisted in his ability "*to be above every single piece of machinery without shrieking against it. And yet to be completely effective as a traditional American.*"⁴⁵

Lindsay looked back nostalgically to what he saw as "the nobler days of America's innocence,"⁴⁶ before the machine became a dominant and deadening factor in national life, before the citizenry at large became tragically desensitized to their capabilities as perceivers and creators of the beautiful. It is difficult to locate in Lindsay's life where precisely the turning point came, but the unbounded optimism that carried him easily through his first thirty-five years began to give way to a pessimism which was in fact at times near despair. It would be superficial to explain this transition as simply a by-product of his growing older and losing his youthful, untested idealism, although that was certainly part of it. But it had also to do with Springfield's practice of regarding its native son as a hair-brained eccentric—more to be pitied than praised. He referred pointedly to "the usual Middle West crucifixion of the artist"⁴⁷ to which his home town had subjected him. Closely connected with this was the broader rejection which he felt he had experienced at the hands of the audiences which failed to grasp his message. There was, then, a considerable amount of the purely personal which formed the foundation for his eventual pessimism. More important, however, was the state of American culture at large, which he felt was growing more and more antipathetic toward the dream.

Vachel Lindsay died thinking that he was a failure, and in a way he was correct. He had not been the poet which he could have been, but more fundamentally, and more importantly as far as he personally was concerned, he had not succeeded in his noble intent of turning the tide of modernity and convincing his countrymen to commit themselves to a Jeffersonian model for society. Lindsay took upon himself no less a task than attempting to stem the tide of the rapidly changing mores of an entire nation, and the assumption of such a task was in itself an invitation to defeat. But if Lindsay failed it was by way of excess; he cannot be accused of meanness of spirit. To him Beauty was an absolute to which he had dedicated himself without reserve. He regarded his poetry as a means, not an end, an instrument with which he endeavored to make mankind at large aware of the centrality of Beauty—for man, in submitting to the beautiful, becomes fully conscious of himself as an integral part of the totality of creation.

NOTES

¹ Peter Viereck, "The Crack-Up of American Optimism: Vachel Lindsay, the Dante of the Fundamentalists," *Modern Age*, 4 (1960), 269.

² Hazelton Spencer, "The Life and Death of a Bard," *American Mercury*, April 1932, p. 461.

³ Ann Massa, *Vachel Lindsay: Fieldworker for the American Dream* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970), p. 19.

⁴ Herbert S. Gorman, "Vachel Lindsay: Evangelist of Poetry," *North American Review*, 219 (1924), 125.

⁵ Henry Morton Robinson, "The Ordeal of Vachel Lindsay: A Critical Reconstruction," in *Profile of Vachel Lindsay*, ed. John T. Flanagan (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1970), p. 49.

⁶ Conrad Aiken, "Vachel Lindsay," in *Profile of Vachel Lindsay*, p. 5.

⁷ As quoted in Eleanor Ruggles, *The West-Going Heart: A Life of Vachel Lindsay* (New York: Norton, 1959), p. 156.

⁸ Harriet Monroe, "Vachel Lindsay," in *Profile of Vachel Lindsay*, p. 8.

⁹ As quoted in Robert F. Sayre, "Vachel Lindsay," Introduction to *Adventures, Rhymes and Designs*, by Vachel Lindsay (New York: Eakins Press, 1968), p. 7.

¹⁰ Gorman, p. 128.

¹¹ As quoted in Harriet Monroe, Introduction to *The Congo and Other Poems*, by Vachel Lindsay (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. vii.

¹² As quoted in Ruggles, p. 276.

¹³ As quoted in Ruggles, p. 285.

¹⁴ Spencer, p. 455.

¹⁵ As quoted in Massa, p. 230.

¹⁶ As quoted in Massa, p. 12.

¹⁷ Aiken, p. 5.

¹⁸ John T. Flanagan, "Vachel Lindsay: An Appraisal," in *Profile of Vachel Lindsay*, p. 118.

¹⁹ Carl Van Doren, "Salvation With Jazz," in *Profile of Vachel Lindsay*, p. 31.

²⁰ Henry Seidel Canby, "Vachel Lindsay," in *Profile of Vachel Lindsay*, p. 33.

- 21 Massa, p. 12.
- 22 Marianne Moore, "An Eagle in the Ring," *Dial*, 75 (1923), 498.
- 23 Babette Deutsch, *Poetry in Our Time* (New York: Holt, 1952), p. 44.
- 24 Austin Warren, "The Case of Vachel Lindsay," *Accent*, 6 (1960), 230.
- 25 As quoted in Ruggles, p. 170.
- 26 Massa, p. 225.
- 27 W. R. Moses, "Vachel Lindsay: Ferment of the Poet's Mind," in *Profile of Vachel Lindsay*, p. 79.
- 28 As quoted in Mark Harris, Introduction to *Selected Poems of Vachel Lindsay* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. xiv.
- 29 He refers here to the enthusiastic response he had received on November 18, 1929 to a reading of his poems in the First Christian Church in Springfield. He interpreted this as a long-delayed acknowledgment by his home town that he was in fact a poet of consequence.
- 30 As quoted in Ruggles, p. 398.
- 31 Vachel Lindsay, *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), p. xxx.
- 32 As quoted in Ruggles, p. 243.
- 33 Lindsay, *Collected Poems*, p. 3.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 35 Alfred Kreymborg, "Exit Vachel Lindsay—Enter Ernest Hemingway," *Literary Review*, 2 (Winter 1957-58), 210.
- 36 As quoted in Massa, p. 226.
- 37 Warren, p. 234 ff.
- 38 Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (New York: Vintage, 1950), p. 138.
- 39 Lindsay, *Collected Poems*, p. 302.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 41 Edgar Lee Masters, *Vachel Lindsay: A Poet in America* (New York: Scribners, 1935), p. 352.
- 42 Harriet Monroe, "Vachel Lindsay," in *Profile of Vachel Lindsay*, p. 8.
- 43 Lindsay, *Collected Poems*, p. 352.
- 44 As quoted in Masters, p. 346.
- 45 As quoted in Ruggles, p. 390.
- 46 Lindsay, *Collected Poems*, p. 90.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. xx.

Vachel Lindsay's American Mythocracy and Some Unpublished Sources

MARC CHÉNETIER

Misconceptions die hard. Sixty-three years after Vachel Lindsay's rise to fame, the established image remains of the jingle man, of the exotic reciter and jazz fan. But I think it can be proved—and will be in the coming years—that, deep inside, Lindsay's personality and endeavors corresponded to none of the stereotypes along which people nowadays think of him: Vachel Lindsay *hated* Jazz, was *not* "loud," was *no* great specialist of things African, spent most of his life doing something *else* than begging and tramping. On the other hand, whatever mattered in Lindsay has been misunderstood and carefully left out: his discoveries—a number of landmarks touching the movies, semiotics in general, the interdependence of the arts, and the spatialization of poetry—have been ignored, and his relevance to our times is hardly ever mentioned. The image of the passeistic populist grows stale under the pen of such scholars as deem it worth their while to even mention the man.

Yet Vachel Lindsay was a very important—if not "great"—American poet, who explored in his lifetime trails hardly open to the American unconscious, suggested new molds for the national image, and discovered ways for the American people to find a national soul. In the last ten years, men like Marshall McLuhan, R. Barthes and Herbert Marcuse have refined and popularized ideas for which Lindsay should be known; early researchers in the field of semiotics and the nature of the imagination have been rediscovered and recognized; studies in myth and national ideas have made headway; popular culture has emerged as an essential field of investigation. Still, meaningful reference to Lindsay is nowhere to be found. I suggest that America might have something to gain by turning to the thought of its admirer and becoming acquainted with his ineffable, disputable, but endearing *vision*: "I do see an America no one else sees, and I am sure I will never write it down. . . . It is a land I revel in, but not as people dream."¹

From the Conestoga wagons which Lindsay saw going West, while young, to the prairie schooners he saw coming back East thirty years later, both the physical and mythical realities of the country were part of his heritage. Vachel Lindsay's vision of his land is first of all tightly linked with the mythology of the frontier; but his conception of America strangely partakes of the masculine and the feminine at the same time. To the "virile," harsh, impressively wide and breath-taking topography of frontier America, Lindsay adds an essentially

feminine soul dimension, which blends into the masculine frontier mythology in a way which he himself compares to the softening of warlike instincts by the leadership of a Joan of Arc.² Thus America, to Lindsay, is "she":

Surely the face of America is forever following the West-going sun, and we are committed for all time to the west-going dream, and the deepest meaning of the west-going dream in all history since the tribes left the mountains of Central Asia.

Whatever that vague west-going yearning may be in the heart of mankind, we seek the last chance to fulfill it, and our Goddess of Liberty, our Columbia, our daughter of Columbus, must be a west-going soul.³

It is this feminine soul of the nation whose cause he constantly espoused—like a knight errant in service to his beloved.

It is, then, not surprising that Lindsay expresses a desire for contact with the United States time and again in his notebooks. He asks A. Joseph Armstrong, the organizer of his reciting tours, to "give him as complete a geographical education as possible,"⁴ and after many years, with thousands of miles covered on the lecture circuit, after having been all but worn out by the Pullman Car, he confesses, "[Armstrong] has delivered a car-window map of the USA and Canada to me, has sent me into every state in the union and most of the provinces of Canada—and given me a geographical education I can meditate on for twenty years."⁵

Ten years later, in 1932, on the morrow of Vachel Lindsay's death, Hazelton Spencer was already writing: "With the possible exception of Mark Twain, no American writer of importance ever geographically experienced the United States so thoroughly as Lindsay did."⁶ But a sentimental education it was: Lindsay never ceases to proclaim his love and physical longing for the land, a "hunger"⁷ or "lust" that will even long fight in his heart the presence of any woman, as if the reality of the land were some sort of a mistress, jealously monopolizing his feelings and energy:

I see this whole land as a unit. I have traveled over it so much. . . . I seem to have a kind of heartache for every state in the union, no matter how silly that may seem. I love the United States and in spite of all the struggle of this tour I love the land that I have passed over. Every morning from the train has been lovely.⁸

His thirst is extended to whatever representations of the beloved object are available: the contemplation of a map answers Lindsay's perpetual, ingrained veneration for the pictorial renderings of a variety of beloved women's faces, miniatures or photographs. "I love to draw the map of the USA."⁹ To his early, and possibly most important, love, Sara Teasdale, he imparts his doubts concerning the honesty of a mixed passion, apt to nourish touchy jealousies:

My only real fear in loving you . . . is that I would be so far from that embrace with the green earth which is my natural goal. I have been thinking of it a lot lately. If I have a destiny it is to give voice to the six feet of black earth beneath us. . . .¹⁰

To Vachel Lindsay, this means discovering "the soul of the USA," finding out the interior signs of its greatness, isolating the constituent elements of the

beloved, to give them an orientation, an organization, to make sense out of them on a plane wider than the simple overwhelming yearning to touch and sing the object of his deepest desires. The reality of America must also be signified, transcribed into symbols and pictures and words that will make its essence operative: "You cannot take western scenery in the raw without being made restless. It cannot be gulped wholesale. No matter how beautiful it must have the association of a saint, an artist, a tribe, a family, a hero, a genius achievement, or it is one more movie or newsreel, twitching and turned too fast."¹¹

Magnificence and the "grand manner" must be brought about if social America is to survive, in the same way as a soul must be discovered in geographical America if it is not to smother its occupants: "I picture a type of vigorous Americanism born from our six feet deep black soil—a passionate and hardy race—able to conquer and master our tremendous physical resources without being smothered by them. . . . I am not dreaming of a Millennium—but of a magnificent and passionate ripened earth—with enough saints to keep it sweet."¹² Signs and symbols must be found to help the people articulate their longing and place it on a special field called Art, Beauty, or Poetry, so that its orientation can give to social coexistence a meaning more positive and constructive than mere individualistic safety from others. The all-embracing glance cast by Lindsay on his country does not exclude selection of a number of symbolic series which he proposes to his people for the enrichment of its imagination and the enlightenment of such as may grope amidst forces they do not understand. "Great" or "grand" landscapes are answered, in his cosmogony, by great myths and grand characters, all articulated around basic series of what he calls "American Hieroglyphs." Lack of space does not allow here a refined definition of the latter; we might perhaps call them, with Lindsay's help, the "minute cells" of American pictorial thought, imaged particles of the collective unconscious.

In such a system, to stick to simple things, the log-cabin "means" pioneer, but also "means" Lincoln and thereby, in Lindsay's view, a type of Franciscan sainthood; a plumed hat stands for Virginian tradition, and the Mohawk epitomizes the fundamental "Indian-ness" of every American citizen. Whatever they be, these "signs" must be made the very stuff of the artist's work, so that, by and by, a conscience of the basic constituent elements of America and of their nature is developed in all people. Civics can relay this type of formation and religiously extend to the whole social body the disseminated efforts of poets whose power is exercised only at the highest level of communication. What they discover and explore must be relayed and made available to all by social institutions: such is the schematic way to national identity.

The grandeur of humble things can only be grasped when the whole environment is given precisely defined direction. Suffice it to say, for the time being, that the developing soul of the nation is to be the product of the interaction of its traditionally "unartistic parts": the village and its people, the daily but holy activities of the working man, the fancies of childhood, and the aspirations of youth, the doings of past Americans. As Lindsay writes, "Unseen fires from buried breasts/ Rise into the living hearts of us./ No other soil is haunted thus."¹³

Here again, he is eminently relevant and modern, envisioning the cultural life of the country as a network of interwoven relational patterns touching all fields of social, spiritual, and mythological life. This vision of a culture redeemed he wishes to propagate over the whole United States, to replace a cultural model that is, in his lifetime, in the process of destroying the soul of the country: "Art must be offered to America as a substitute for the society craze just beginning. . . . Rewrite the power of the platitude into platitudes in pictures."¹⁴ Should America consent to falling prey to a sort of socio-cultural schizophrenia, with aesthetics on the one hand, and politics and economics on the other, it is sure to fail or become monstrous. The soul of the USA cannot be saved outside of a unity of purpose and means, an integrated discourse taking into consideration all aspects of man. Fifty years before Marcuse, the one-dimensionality of contemporary American culture is thus denounced: "America must be magnificent, she has no other chance. She will be magnificent, or a merely ostentatious gaudy failure—according to the sort of interest her people take in the matter. She cannot remain indifferent. She must choose between Gold and Gilt."¹⁵ "Gold" obviously represents in part for Vachel Lindsay the soul of the natural, traditional, and agrarian America.¹⁶ Whatever may come to regenerate the United States will come from the sublime body and soul of the land. Lindsay opposes it to the efforts of the commercially-inclined and industrial-minded to plunder the country and remain indifferent to the beauty that constitutes its real worth. The only war Lindsay supports is that against Babbitt or "Gilt."

But misunderstanding of Lindsay's purpose brought him much criticism. A number of things Ezra Pound reproached Lindsay with were ill-grounded: a hasty assimilation of his geographical origins with the caricature of the midwestern "hick" took him far away from the real picture of a man who had the courage not to deny his origins. That Lindsay should have assumed his "native grounds" got him but spite from an elitist intelligentsia who fled what it could not endure and sneered from afar instead of fighting what disfigured its image of America. It is part of the "resume" of a man who favored popular poetry that he should have been the target of the literary establishment's ridicule. "Once Amy Lowell took two pages of the New York Times to write me up as a crude middle westerner of the middle class, whatever that may mean," Lindsay humorously wrote to Harriet Monroe.¹⁷ Even his long-standing friend Louis Untermeyer made sure, when he wrote articles on Vachel Lindsay, that the Midwesterner was carefully taken out of the picture or methodically criticized so that *the rest* (?) could be taken seriously. Lindsay, on the contrary, wanted the Middle West to be part and parcel of his reputation. His people, his land, his town, he felt deserved recognition. Whatever, therefore, made the Midwest ridiculous to most—and primarily the Babbitt-like part of the community—had to be his target: Babbitt was a tree hiding a forest of good people, and he had to be cut down.

But other aspects of American life were also under his attack and may have alienated his critics: Lindsay did not only defend the Middle West but also kept proclaiming its superiority over the East Coast—symbolized in his eyes by business, snobbery, and European trends—which he held responsible for most of the evils that besieged America. At the core of midwestern Babbity,

Lindsay finds an eastern "rollertop desk" mentality, without which the Midwest could blossom. "Babbitry is simply the state of mind of the small American businessman of Main Street. The men who are his bosses are not the Babbitts. And neither are the laboring men and the farmers"¹⁸ he writes in defense of his "constituency." And in a letter of resignation from the Rotary Club—he had been persuaded to join in the wake of his first days of celebrity, in an attempt to reach the community leaders and make them share his vision—he makes clear the link that, for him, exists between Babbitry and business activities: "I do not like the Rotary scheme. It is exclusively business men and seems to me an effort to draw a line of hatred between business men and working people, instead of talking with them out of business hours and getting acquainted."¹⁹

Industrial and commercial America, based on money and profit-making, Lindsay despises with all his might, and he is not willing to make concessions. The "War Bulletins" he had published in the early years of the century called for no mercy, and he tramped and begged when faced with the possibility of otherwise giving in to "the enemy." Therein also lies the reason why he should all his life have been a warm admirer of Oriental Arts and a decrier of Roman civilization: "Rome was the Rotary Club of the world—the Kiwanis Club of Antiquity—the abominable Optimists and Lions Club of the Mediterranean. . . . Justice was not the Roman instinct but Order—and even a wasps' nest has order—mathematical system."²⁰ Likewise, furious at being commercially appraised by his publisher, he scorns the "Mc Million Company." Time and again, in the face of potential success, but at the cost of a great compromise, he comes back only to attack, ready to die to "purify," in his own terms, the midwestern scene from all traces of commercialism and money measurements:

Let us enter the great offices and shut the desk lids and cut the telephone wires. Let us see that the skyscrapers are empty and locked, and the keys thrown into the river. Let us break up the cities. Let us send men on a great migration: set free, purged of the commerce-made manners and fat prosperity of America; ragged with the beggar's pride, starving with the crusader's fervor. Better to die of plague on the highroad seeing the angels, than live on iron streets playing checkers with dollars ever and ever.²¹

Contrary to common opinion, Lindsay's early war-cries never died off to make room for the other avenues of inspiration wished upon him by such as could not stand the young Midwesterner's image. As a matter of fact, the double and simultaneous battle—on the one hand, to defend the Midwest in the face of attacks and derision, to propose it as a potentially viable model of civilization, and on the other, to rejuvenate it from the inside through relentless attacks on its establishment, so that the potential "model" actually could become one—only increased in violence with the years. In a way, Camus later echoed Lindsay when he uttered his famed cry from the heart: "I wish I could love honor and still love my country." Lindsay nourished very much the same feelings toward his home town, his home state, his home region and his home country. What defects or sins he fought in them he fought "for their own good," in order to redeem them and make admiration from the outside world possible for them.

Dedication to local improvement, to the discovery of a place's soul, to the development of a place's imagination of itself, to the furtherance of "magnificence" and the promotion of "style," will be Lindsay's brand of patriotism, even if they imply that stands be firmly taken against unbearable aspects of the establishment. Vachel Lindsay's career is almost entirely predicated on the proposition that America has been painted the wrong colors and must be scraped, drilled, pickled, and scoured, that its modern noises have hushed the Arcadian flutes of its soul and must be held in abeyance, disciplined, controlled. The soul of the nation has been smothered and must be brought back to life and view. Such is everyone's task, under the spiritual aegis of the poet, bent on the rejuvenation and redemption of his land.

Oh slogan-slaughtered country,
That hides your secret mind,
Where the billboards drive the shrewd men from the street,
Where the wisest college presidents must kneel to racketeers
Till the long held up endowment is complete.
Oh, slogan-slaughtered nation, whose secret voice is hid
With rackets that will never reach the stars.²²

Whence the "New Nationalism," the "New Localism," and the "New Americanism" that Lindsay, in succession or simultaneously, hopes for and preaches. From "Village Improvement" to "Democratic Magnificence," the same idea is at work:

One of the most terrible things in the United States is that the only way out is up. The only way to get anywhere is to conquer the whole country, and no one corner yields till every corner yields. When you try to get local and neighborly they make an ass of you. . . . Yet I believe that to every soul in America there is some one corner where he is predestined to make a local stand, as a final step, and, if he cannot survive the discipline he is not an American. . . . Until we get states' rights in Art, after one hundred years battle, this will not be Thomas Jefferson country and the artists will be unfulfilled.

I consider that I belong forever to Illinois whether I like it or not, and it is my inevitable destiny.²³

The reason why Vachel Lindsay should have chosen Springfield and Illinois for the center of his endeavors is at least double: of course Illinois and Springfield are *home* in the deepest meaning of the term, and Lindsay knows them well; but there is also the fact that he fancies Illinois to be some sort of compromise between two life styles, two populations, two parts of America, two civilizations and even two worlds: "I have pictured the two ancient North and South streams of pilgrimage which made Illinois, and therefore, Springfield; the Johnny Appleseed Highway from Massachusetts, the Elizabethan Pocahontas or Daniel Boone Highway from Virginia."²⁴ The best of both parts of the USA has come West—the best, because their representatives are pioneers, explorers, visionaries. From Boston comes not the Brahmin, but a Swedenborgian; from Virginia come symbols of magnificence, grandeur and hardihood. To Lindsay, somehow, the Middle West is west of "machine-made America," "west of the Old South" and "East of the cowboy." He finds in such a place his own answer to the tearing apart of

the nation, a way to reconcile both halves torn asunder by a Mason and Dixon Line that runs through his own family, through "his own heart."²⁵ "I know myself well enough now to know I am an incurable Midwesterner with a Southern slant" he writes to Kermit Roosevelt in 1928.²⁶ But Chicago and Springfield are far North indeed. A compromise seems necessary and allows some harmonious blend of Anglo-Saxon thought and the customs and civilizations of the South and East, among which Egypt takes paramount meaning because of its direct counterpart (Cairo, Niles, and Little Egypt) in the heart of Illinois. From the vivification of the sound soil of the Midwest by a soul come from the past of wise mankind, unperverted by commerce and business civilization, a new and truly original American civilization will be reborn and developed.

There is unfortunately far too much to say on the details of Lindsay's midwestern vision, but a central comment on his work as a whole might be offered: Sangamon County and Springfield are, in a way, his Yoknapatawpha and Jefferson, reduced to their American contents. It is not that the *Golden Book of Springfield* pretends to be a strictly midwestern prophecy, but that, to Lindsay, the right conditions for founding a similar kind of Pilgrim City are only gathered in the Midwest, where the principles and essence of early American Democracy have been preserved and left untouched by moneyed interests: "It is not a peasant—a middle-class Democracy. It is a *pioneer* democracy, a democracy of pioneers—of those who agree to be practically equal as long as they are efficient explorers."²⁷ Whatever is not in the Midwest has been perverted in some way (the East by business, the South by racial prejudice, the West Coast by gold and sophistication), and Lindsay, *far from considering* the Midwest as the ideal place he has in mind, simply considers that it offers the best ground to build his *visionary*—and still certainly not "Utopian"—city on. The Midwest is the place where he can live in spite of present conditions and keep hope:

Now since for a hundred years yet America *must* be materialist, let it be a concentrated consecrated materialism—something pure and sweet and sane, so that when the spiritualization of American life comes, it will be a healthful reaction from a healthful materialism rather than a morbid distorted reaction from a perverse materialism.²⁸

A letter he sends to Armstrong twenty years after this last remark illustrates that point; it is an explanation of the reasons why the Middle West should be taken as a *basis* to start from, keeping in mind that the schools and community he mentions owe their value as a potential starting point to their being close to the land. Localism offers sound roots and good earth, which both have to be preserved. The fertilization and careful, expert growth can come later:

[Eastern schools] are not as completely the flower of America as are the co-educational religious western schools, which grow up out of the ground as naturally as the blue grass and the Indian corn and the violets. . . . I believe profoundly in our agricultural and middle west civilization and think it is the natural America, and the America with the oldest and most normal history. I greatly mistrust Industrial America, radical or conservative. . . . I am keenly aware of how I differ from everything East of the Mississippi River or Springfield, in Europe or in America.²⁹

The transformation will take place if the poet is able to communicate to the community the magic that he extracts from the land, if he distills into words and images the splendor of the country, turns it into civic magnificence and infuses the people with it. The magic of the country will take the place of whatever middle-class mentality has historically distorted it to be.

Even the great men who have tried their "sainthood" at politics (Lincoln, Altgeld, Bryan, the cohorts of Lindsay's midwestern and local heroes) have had their message hushed. The poet's task also consists in giving a voice to the magnificence and grand style of these men. Aesthetics and myth extend politics as a source of action and inspiration and finally replace it totally. Imagination as redemption of reality, fancy as the only sort of reality worth our while, images and pictures as the only path to the heart of truth. The object of Vachel Lindsay's poetic action becomes itself a poet: Springfield has to have its fancy shaped by the poet in order to shape the world's imagination in its turn and become America's Mecca, the Pilgrim City of the Year 2000.

Readers of Lindsay will find that the state of Virginia bears directly upon the Middle West, for he finds in the one something that can be made greater by the other. On the *tabula rasa* of the Midwest, Lindsay wants to build with incense and splendor, come through time and space from the magnificent days of pre-colonial and colonial America. "The Midwesterner is in line with our simple democratic traditions and gets his education from the four seasons and the book of God and the open sky," he writes.³⁰ The Midwest is thereby protected against the commercial and political evils that have destroyed tradition on the East Coast. Natural beauty and wholesomeness breeds resistance to what germs of destructive industrialism might come to infect its spirit: "these villages are the fortunate islands in the wild sea of commerce."³¹ On the as yet unspoiled land where he was born, Lindsay wants to restore the grandeur of the land whence his forefathers came: "Virginia"—that is, an idea of the old South, of the agrarian South—as opposed to a merchant, then industrial, North. Really come from Kentucky, Lindsay's forebears represent in his mind the grandeur contained in his Spanish and Indian ancestry, and "Virginia" is the geometrical locus of grandee behavior, Indian bravery and style, early frontier gusto and the rise of democratic traditions in what he calls "the grand manner." He states, "I have what may be called an entirely romantic feeling in regard to the Virginia tradition."³² The main idea behind *The Litany of Washington Street*, which takes up, late in Lindsay's career (1929) the American fraction of his much earlier *Litany of Heroes*, could be described thus: the three original saints of American democracy, namely Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson, had style, what the youth of today might brand "class." Their mere attitudes osmotically *signified* the grandeur of America; their grandeur was a policy in itself, symbolic of the prolongation into Anglo-Saxon colonies of the greatest native traditions of the soil. Washington was, at bottom, an Indian. The debate on his political astuteness and actual intelligence is irrelevant: his gait and military tactics were Indian. The legitimacy of his power was grounded in style, in the blend of attitude and environment that was typically his. Hamilton and Jefferson were both aristocrats, not by title or blasphemous heritage, but by their coinciding with the nobility of the country. The plumed bonnet shows in the feathered hat. Whatever the divergences between their respective views, there was nothing

in their attitudes one could not respect. Lindsay's mind and heart go to Jefferson, the real soul of America, but Hamiltonians of the colonial period had an honest right to their views, he concedes. What matters is what they had in common as far as grandeur went—human translations, both, of the physical power of the land.

The American grand manner . . . is thoroughly established in statesmanship, and it has been so since the days of Washington. Our problem of men of letters is to transfer to the field of writing that same grand manner, so thoroughly established in our politics, and add that particular limberness which the British for the most part assume is our sole characteristic and right to place in the writing world. . . . If one does not have the west-going heart in America, the thousand little nations which are the countries of Europe pull him away. . . .³³

This, again, is not strictly a matter of politics. Aesthetics and mythology are the governing problems Lindsay is interested in. His idea, he himself suggests, is "to work out the aesthetic equivalent of Hamilton, Jefferson and Washington."³⁴ This he finds, in part, in other great American figures as well. Thus, for him, Jackson and Lincoln obviously belong to the Virginia tradition. "A Democratic Aristocracy of Style" might sum up what he is after. The idea is to counterbalance Babbitt's reactionary views, Babbitt's spiritual slovenliness, and Babbitt's lack of taste. The "Gospel of Beauty" had similar aims. As Lindsay puts it, "[*The Litany of Washington Street*] is intended, among other things, to cut Main Street at right angles."³⁵ Although aesthetics matter more than social commitment *per se*, he sets great store by the direct effects the "grand manner" can have. In 1926, he notes:

All men are created equal in the right to life, liberty and the grand manner. The world for a long time has confused the grand style and the caste system. Lincoln came to prove that the grand style had nothing to do with the caste system, that one can be magnificent and prophetic and democratic.³⁶

The sociologically confused democratic rush epitomized by the only candidate to the Presidency in American history ever to run without a platform—Andrew Jackson—is, to Lindsay, pure, unadulterated "political" power. Lindsay believes in the domination of the power structure by ideological figures alien to the world of "politics" *stricto sensu*. Thus, the murder of Lincoln is seen as a crucifixion and matters mythologically, down at the bottom of what makes a nation tick *as nation*. Likewise, the murder of "respectable McKinley," "who climbed every greasy pole," has less "political" importance than the mere *defeat* of Bryan who speaks for the land and has the "grand manner."

In 1928, with Hoover in the offing, and thus Babbitt on his way back to the White House, Lindsay publishes "The Virginians Are Coming Again," a poem the importance of which, both in terms of themes and in terms of technical and aesthetic worth, has been consistently underrated. He deplores his not being able to have a number of his *Litany* essays taken into consideration by politicians, but is sure his poem counts enough for a coincidence of dates to matter: "My new poem appears in the *American Mercury* on the day the Democratic Convention opens at Houston, Texas. That poem is not rhetoric. I mean every line of it."³⁷ The poem states:

Babbitt, your tribe is passing away.
 This is the end of your infamous day.
 The Virginians are coming again.
 With your neat little safety-vault boxes,
 With your faces like geese and foxes,
 You
 Short-legged, short-armed, short-minded men,
 Your short-sighted days are over. . . .³⁸

What is, then, the relevance of a poet for whom all vision must be answered by prophecy and utterance; what can we say for the courage and lucidity of a poet who, clearly perceiving the evolution of his country and the possibilities to influence it, dared commit himself to the huge task and was naturally destroyed by it. Neither his attempts to speak to his country's language³⁹ nor his attempts at demonstrating that the establishment did not respect the historical references it gave itself, really worked. If something worked in Vachel Lindsay's career, if there is something in his works that will renew his fame and make it grow and last, it is the nature of the poetics he decided to use as the only means suited to his vision. If something remains that the United States could use on the verge of a bicentennial which sets off dramatically the lack of imagination and spiritual dullness of its leaders, it is Lindsay's theory of poetic statesmanship and prophecy.

I hope to have made clear by now that Lindsay's concern is with aesthetics over politics, that to mention his political and social thought with no reference to his overall aesthetic views is a doomed enterprise. Lindsay never mentions a desire of any kind to change the institutions of his beloved country or even to modify them; what is to be corrected is the *vision* of America, not her institutions. Fantastic glasses would make her see her real tradition and tear her away from the claws that are slowly smothering her. The poet as Lindsay sees him is the person who makes that vision accessible to all, vicariously or directly as the case may be: seer and/or maker of eye-glasses, the poet must be the real statesman.

Moreover, the Lindsayan theory of statesmanship works both ways: politicians can be taught and encouraged to adhere to and practice the principles of splendor and artistic rule that the Founding Fathers devised. Hence, because Theodore Roosevelt befriends a number of artists and acts with gusto, breeds legends and uses them to move the nation, Lindsay can have respect and cordial thoughts for him. As the first American critic ever of the motion pictures as an art, Lindsay feels free to speak metaphorically of the artistic duties of the politician:

My general proposition is that the United States [is] a great movie. . . . Let us say to the Lords of the Land, "We think in pictures if we think at all." And those who would regulate and rule the thinking of our democracy must learn to think in subtlest movie terms. For it is the razor-edged thought that finally wins.⁴⁰

Government as an art comes to existence when it is Government by art; half-artist, half-priest of the cult of Beauty, the statesman can actually rule; otherwise he cannot even reign over the minds of the people or the soul of the country. In his usual indirect personal way, Vachel Lindsay thus defines charismatic power. Only as a direct consequence of this theory does he suggest

that the best statesman must and should be a poet. After all, "the true sovereigns of a country are those who dominate its mind" as Channing and modern-day advertisers, ideologues and propagandists unanimously confess. Any real change in the pattern of American life will, for Lindsay, come from the action of statesmen poets.

Not that Lindsay is desirous to submit his people's imagination to the "hidden persuasion" of *his* art in particular, or to give it a more precise direction than the harmonious triumph of the beauty of the land, the beauty of the people it bears and the beauty of their devotion to the rest of the world. Lindsay does not even picture himself as indispensable to that great endeavor: any poet will do; he doesn't have to think what Lindsay thinks; he doesn't even have to be "distinguished." However, such poets do have to be devoted to improving the America of their own time:

Their first task is not to beat Homer nor yet Whitman—but to put song into the hearts of their neighbors. America is full of critics who are making haste to discover that these people will not send their songs ringing down the corridor of time. But the real test of the democracy is whether their music is all-conquering for beauty in the local corridors of the Public School and the City Hall. The true ambition of the American Poet is not to serve this day or this month . . . his ambition should be to serve well the next sixty years—and if his songs live with him—as a part of his natural voice—he should be well content that his songs should be buried with him, as most good preacher's sermons are—and as the speeches of most statesmen are.⁴¹

Even isolated poets can begin to change the reality they live in; but Lindsay keeps dreaming of a unification of the efforts of all American poets:

Each poet is now isolated and if possible surrounded by a separate court of fat lady flatterers and they are kept strictly parlor poets *because* it was discovered they had almost become fearless statesmen 1912-1918 and that would never do. Between elections and on non-partizan issues every one of the twenty from Robinson to Robinson Jeffers is entitled to his full place as a citizen. And all these noble men who were once friends have been flattered into snuffing at one another so that no message of the whole group would have direct impact upon the people.⁴²

And to save the nation the artists have to seize power, somehow. Either the means to take hold of the country's imagination—access to the media and to the major occasions when the people, gathered, will listen—must be made available to them, or power must be arrived at by more familiar means. Lindsay once said, "I am through with all politics except that of putting artists in office by any decent means."⁴³ Only when some of them are elected can work begin on the very stuff the nation is made of.

As the foregoing discussion shows, Lindsay felt that the United States did not live up to its historical standards. He witnessed the beginning of a deep crisis, and tried to stem the national schism between soil and soul with what means he had. It is evident that he had a higher conscience about his national duty than any other poet since Whitman; that he discovered and explored more of the American consciousness than is usually deemed the case; and that his relevance to our time—greater than can be fully explained here—can be appreciated both by the man in the street and the researcher in poetic theory.

NOTES

Appreciation is extended to all those persons, collections, and libraries who kindly allowed use of unpublished Vachel Lindsay material. General permission from the Lindsay Estate has been granted by Nicholas Cave Lindsay.

¹ Letter to Stephen Graham, 9 Feb. 1921, microfilm, Humanities Research Center, Univ. of Texas at Austin.

² See *The Litany of Washington Street* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

³ From an unpublished manuscript by Vachel Lindsay entitled "The Greatest Movies Now Running," II, 195, in Box 14 of the Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Collection in the Clifton Waller Barrett Library of the University of Virginia Library. Hereafter this collection will be cited as Univ. of Virginia Library.

⁴ Letter to Witter Bynner, 1 Feb. 1923, Harvard Univ. Library.

⁵ Letter to Harriet Moody, 22 Dec. 1922, Univ. of Virginia Library.

⁶ Quoted in Eleanor Ruggles, *The West-Going Heart* (New York: Norton, 1959), p. 269.

⁷ Letter to Harriet Moody, 2 April 1925, Univ. of Virginia Library.

⁸ Quoted by Edgar Lee Masters, *American Mercury*, July 1933, p. 304.

⁹ Letter to Moody, 2 April 1925.

¹⁰ Letter to Sara Teasdale, 27 April 1914, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Used with permission of Margaret Carpenter.

¹¹ "Lumberjack Philosophy," *Spokane Chronicle*, 9 Jan. 1929.

¹² Letter to Professor Paul, 19 Feb. 1912, Univ. of Virginia Library.

¹³ "Sons of the Middle West," TMS Poems 1905-1930, Box 15, Univ. of Virginia Library.

¹⁴ "Disciples" Notebook, Box 20, Univ. of Virginia Library, p. 16.

¹⁵ "English Trip" Notebook, 1906, Box 20, Univ. of Virginia Library.

¹⁶ See Michael Yatron, *America's Literary Revolt* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

¹⁷ Letter to Harriet Monroe, 18 June 1926, Univ. of Chicago.

¹⁸ Quoted in Yatron, p. 90.

¹⁹ Letter to "Roy," 24 Feb. 1920, Vachel Lindsay Home, Springfield. Used with permission of the Vachel Lindsay Association.

²⁰ Date-book 1922, Box 23, Univ. of Virginia Library.

²¹ "A Sermon for Strangers," in his *War Bulletin No. III* (Springfield, Ill.: n.p., 1909).

²² "The United States of America Dance," Miscellaneous Unpublished Poems, Univ. of Virginia Library.

²³ Letter to John Weatherwax, 21 March 1928, Univ. of Virginia Library.

²⁴ "Springfield as an International Dream" (1926), Box 16, Univ. of Virginia Library.

²⁵ "Adventures While Singing These Songs," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p. 10.

²⁶ Letter to Kermit Roosevelt, 24 Aug. 1928, Univ. of Virginia Library.

²⁷ Date-book 1922, Box 23, Univ. of Virginia Library.

²⁸ "Art Institute" Notebook, 1901, Box 20, Univ. of Virginia Library, pp. 119-20.

²⁹ Letter to A. Joseph Armstrong, 10 Oct. 1921, Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University.

³⁰ *The Village Magazine* (Springfield, Ill.: Jeffersons Printing Co., 1910), p. 75.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

32 Letter to Erich Possett, 19 June 1928, Univ. of Chicago.

33 Letter to John Drinkwater, 16 Feb. 1925, Univ. of Virginia Library.

34 Notebook 49, 1926, Box 24, Univ. of Virginia Library.

35 Letter (not sent) to Joseph Anthony, 3 April 1928, Univ. of Virginia Library.

36 "Springfield As an International Dream," Box 16, Univ. of Virginia Library.

37 Letter to Possett, 19 June 1928.

38 *Every Soul Is a Circus* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 39.

39 "Things go at a hotter clip every minute. Of course, there is poetry in this. But can I respond to it? And ought I? Can I stride the steam engine and go puffing over the praries [sic]?" Letter to Susan Wilcox, 1 May 1905, Vachel Lindsay Home. These questions are as close to an interrogation on the worth of Futurism as Vachel Lindsay ever got. However they indicate the type of concession that was made in the course of the production of such poems as "The Santa Fé Trail" or "The Kallyope Yell."

40 "The Greatest Movies Now Running," II, 90 and 130.

41 Date-book No. 10, 1916, Box 23, Univ. of Virginia Library.

42 Letter to Pierce Cummings, 5 Aug. 1927. Univ. of Virginia Library.

43 Date-book No. 4, 1921, Box 23, Univ. of Virginia Library.

Edgar Lee Masters: The Lawyer as Writer

CHARLES E. BURGESS

Recalling in old age his years of practicing law before *Spoon River Anthology* gave him a name as a poet, Edgar Lee Masters compared himself to writers like Lamb and Trollope "who kept at grinding tasks and at literary creation too."¹ The comparison was appropriate, for his literary production was constant even at times when his practice was most demanding: "for many years I had practiced concentration. . . . I could write, and turn to answer the telephone to talk about a case, and turn back and finish the poem."² The drudgery of Masters' lawyrship, however, gave him more than a livelihood. The law and its practice by himself and others of his circle of experience was a fundamental influence upon his literary works. In his canon, in fact, the law is perhaps second only in weight of influence to the locale of his boyhood and young manhood in central Illinois. Masters himself said of the time when he wrote *Spoon River*, that he was "drawing upon a fund of stories which had been accumulating for twenty years in the country and in the practice of law in Chicago."³

Masters was a lawyer for a quarter-century before writing *Spoon River* in 1914 and 1915, but the success and notoriety of the book led him gradually to abandon his practice during the next decade. He was the author of 12 obscure books and several pamphlets before *Spoon River*, and afterwards, his literary production accelerated. The law contributed not only source material for much of this work, but also the inquiring turn of mind and self-discipline that enabled him to bring forth steadily a vast amount of poetry and prose.

I

Preliminary to a discussion of Masters' works, the following biographical survey—emphasizing his experience with the law—will identify many of the events, personalities, and attitudes which bear a direct relationship to his literary output.

First of all, the environment of his youth included considerable exposure to lawyers and the law in county seat locations. Masters drew extensively upon the career of his father, Hardin Wallace Masters (1845-1925), whose practice over 55 years ranged from crude courtrooms in frontier Kansas to the ornate chambers of the Illinois Supreme Court.⁴ The elder Masters also was a regional force in Democratic politics, and a holder of numerous county,

municipal, and civic offices. The son's funeral tribute to the father included these impassioned assessments of the lawyer and the man:

He hated injustice: he had a genius for being the intercessor, and without reward and sometimes without gratitude he gave his time and his money to people trapped in the fate of circumstances. . . . He was a rare combination of play boy, strong man, story-teller, hard liver, keen lawyer, democrat, stroller, talker and laughter through this world, hopeful that democracy would finally win, that life would work out well enough if not for the best. . . .⁵

Hardin Wallace Masters is the only known attorney among Edgar Lee Masters' direct forebears, but the grandfather of the poet was not unacquainted with legal matters. Squire Davis Masters (1812-1904), a farmer, was at various times an Illinois state legislator, a justice of the peace who once presided at a case in which Abraham Lincoln participated, and guardian to some of the unfortunates in the Sandridge community north of Petersburg.⁶ The grandfather's real influence was in the self-reliant agrarian political outlook of his southern origins. This was passed on to his son and grandson, along with a humanistic sense of justice and individual responsibility. The poet's last tribute to his Tennessee-born grandfather noted the qualities which made him a life-long model to his descendants as they contended with more complex milieus:

He was a Jeffersonian Democrat, and a devoted adherent to the causes of Jackson. . . . His nature was a touching blend of simple piety and human love, good will, courage, hopefulness, prudent judgment in the business affairs of farming, industry, fair dealing with everyone.⁷

In the villages of Masters' youth, Petersburg and Lewistown, the epic careers of the lawyers of the Lincoln period in the 1840's and 1850's were well-remembered. These communities, particularly Lewistown where Hardin Masters resided from 1880 to 1906, provided scenes of spirited litigation and contacts with colorful, contentious representatives of the bar in Edgar Lee Masters' youth. He followed the struggles not only through his apprenticeship in his father's office, but also as interim editor of one of Lewistown's several partisan newspapers.

Masters' direct contact with legal work began at age 17, in 1885. During the next six years at intervals he was "helping my father in his law office" and, at his parent's insistence, reading from elementary law volumes by Blackstone, Chitty, Greenleaf, and Bentham.⁸ After a year of college preparatory classes (unrelated to law) and an unpleasant few months as a rural schoolteacher, Masters reconciled himself to law as a career. He crammed with the son of a scholarly Lewistown attorney and passed the bar examination in Springfield in May, 1891. His rank was first in a class of 60 aspirants, according to his account.⁹ Later that summer he tried unsuccessfully to establish himself with two law firms in Minneapolis but returned to Lewistown to accept a \$5-a-week partnership with his father. During the next year he seems to have performed principally such minor legal chores as abstracting court records.

Hoping for a newspaper job, Masters moved to Chicago on July 20, 1892, carrying letters of introduction from his father to two railroad corporation

attorneys with whom Hardin Masters was acquainted.¹⁰ One of the attorneys and a judge helped Edgar Lee Masters get a post as collector and justice court lawyer for the Edison Company, controlled by magnate Samuel Insull. Then on May 1, 1893, Masters became a member of a new firm. One partner was Ernest McGaffey, an attorney of inconsistent performance but a poet of some skill whose contacts with publishers would be helpful to Masters.¹¹ The other was Kickham Scanlan, who had close ties with Chicago's Irish community and the city's political power structure, labor interests, and established legal firms. Scanlan later was a circuit and appellate judge.

McGaffey was first to leave the partnership, apparently in 1896 after carelessly allowing a railroad case to be lost through inattention to the statute of limitations. The combination of Masters and Scanlan proved prosperous but not always congenial, and they parted early in 1903 after a disagreement as to Masters' handling of a labor arbitration.¹² The busiest and most publicly-known period of Masters' practice started in April, 1903, when his troubled partnership with famed criminal defense attorney Clarence S. Darrow began. During the next eight years, Masters conceded, Darrow "gave me free hand to run the office according to my judgment." In fact, Darrow was absent frequently on lecture tours and major cases, including a two-year period in 1907 and 1908 for trials in the bitter Western Federation of Miners dispute. The association ended abruptly in the spring of 1911 when Masters and the firm's junior partner, Francis S. Wilson (later an Illinois Supreme Court justice), opposed Darrow's decision to go to California to defend the McNamara brothers in the dynamiting of the *Times* building in Los Angeles. Masters' bitterness toward Darrow was heightened later when Darrow was a legal participant in the separation and divorce controversies between Masters and his first wife.¹³

Masters appears to have made good choices in partners as far as advancing his own career was concerned, but his sensitivities and abrasive temperament made sustaining any such relationship difficult: "As a lawyer I had few intimate friends; those who were my equals differed from me in politics and in philosophies of life. . . . I have always played a lone hand as a lawyer and a writer. . . ."14

After the split, Masters had no more partners but maintained a busy practice, chiefly civil. He lobbied without success for appointment as a federal judge in 1913 and 1914. Then came *Spoon River*. After writing it, he was involved in several major cases, but his increasing emphasis on literary production, his domestic turmoil, and his footloose condition combined to reduce his practice. As late as 1923 he maintained an office in Chicago, but in the fall of that year he moved permanently to New York, where he seems not to have attempted any more legal work. Masters' frustrations in the period of his divorce litigation and declining practice are portrayed directly in his 1924 novel *Mirage*, which tells of long days of idle reading and brooding in a law office after the book's protagonist experienced similar career-shattering incidents.¹⁵

II

Masters' legal career had an enormous impact upon his writing. This is in spite of the fact that his attitude about the law was at best ambivalent, even in

his years of greatest success in the field. It was only after a protracted contest of wills with his father that he even agreed in 1891 to seek an attorney's license. Then, with fatalistic determination, he began "pursuing my law studies with the same concentration which I had given to Greek and to literature."¹⁶ The struggle and resolution are reflected in verses of his early period, particularly in the last lines of "Farewell Muses," the closing poem in his first volume, *A Book of Verses*. The 1898 collection consists principally of poems he composed for newspaper publication before coming to Chicago. The lines appear to be a recognition of the limits of his achievement in poetry at the time, and of the need for putting it aside for practical necessities:

But all spent sheaves,
My Muse retrieves,
She fashions and weaves
 With wheatless straw.
Whilst ye were thieves
Of my days and eves—
So my bosom heaves
 For Themis—the law!¹⁷

Masters had a long creative distance to go before he could capture inardonically effective verse the essence of an individual, as he did throughout *Spoon River*. An early attempt was "An Ancient Jurist" in *A Book of Verses*, probably drawn from his experiences before the urban bench:

There was a jurist in the days of old
Whom grace of Fate made judge, it was a pity!
Some said that he was learned in Coke and Chitty,
And therefore had a right to roar and scold
And babble in a manner manifold.¹⁸

Understandably, then, it was as an essayist, not as a poet, that Masters first won a measure of literary notoriety. His scholarship in legal, economic, and political fields was spurred in part by the cases he was encountering, but more so by the great events and controversies of the period. The populist bias and humanitarian sentiments he had inherited from his father and grandfather now matured into a political philosophy which he really never abandoned throughout the rest of his life. Masters recalled the most significant direction-making influences in this way:

The agrarian movement under Bryan started me toward a third period, a third pattern in my life. All my studies, Shelleyan, philosophical and scientific, became living flame in 1896. But it was not until 1898 and 1900 that another whorl of my growth appeared. When I saw imperialism take the Republic I drew my sword for a fight. It was then that I took to vast studies again, determined to rout this anachronism, and to do it with such learning that I could not be gainsaid.¹⁹

The decade of the 1890's was indeed a momentous time in legal circles in Chicago and the state, with lawyers and governmental officials ranged on various sides of the issues. Masters' practice and social contacts made him acquainted with the principal figures in many of the controversies. He argued cases before Judge Joseph E. Gary, who had sentenced to death five anarchists arrested after a bomb exploded in Haymarket Square on May 4,

1886. Masters collaborated in drawing up bar association by-laws with ex-Governor John Peter Altgeld, whose career was ruined when he pardoned other anarchists who were sentenced to prison terms after the same trial (the thrower of the bomb was never identified). Altgeld also had opposed the intervention of federal troops in the bloody Pullman strike of 1894, and Darrow had represented Eugene Debs, who had sought to organize the Pullman workers into a union to win decent pay and hours. Then there was Scanlan, whose relatives were cogs in the political machine through which such Chicago aldermen as Bathhouse John Coughlin and Michael (Hinky Dink) Kenna reaped the favors offered by such entrepreneurs as Insull and street railroad promoter Charles T. Yerkes. Figures of national import, too, came into Masters' life. As a guest of his father, a delegate to the 1896 Democratic convention in Chicago, Masters saw William Jennings Bryan at the young Nebraskan's greatest moment, the delivery of the "Cross of Gold" speech. The appeal made Bryan almost a literal god to young men of populist-progressive leanings, like Masters. The image tarnished, and Bryan's fundamentalistic stands on religion and alcohol eventually finished him with Masters. Bryan, in Masters' eyes, was a traitor to his own cause: "We thus gave ourselves to him, and then he left us—not immediately, but gradually, for the germ of his defection was in him from the first."²⁰

To Masters' disgust, McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt triumphed over Bryan's presidential efforts, as the nation embarked on imperialistic acquisitions of territory. Masters lacked the prestige to make his opposition felt directly. His own tentative efforts to seek political office (in the Illinois General Assembly) were curbed "when I consulted the reform leaders, those who were talking about purging the legislature of corruption, I found these pretenders wanted men more complaisant than I was, and I was turned away here."²¹ His recourse was to turn pamphleteer to expound his beliefs, not only in prose but also in poetry and dramatic works as well.

After 1898 Masters wrote many essays on contemporary questions, including judicial matters. The earliest were published in such radical organs as the *Chicago Chronicle* and *Tom Watson's Magazine*, or as pamphlets. Masters' contention that forcible acquisition of foreign territory violated constitutional principles was a theme running through many essays. Some were based on briefs Masters had prepared for his arguments in cases where labor interests or free speech questions were at stake. After his meeting in 1906 with William Marion Reedy, publisher of a weekly St. Louis magazine, Masters contributed many essays on legal and political matters and personalities to *Reedy's Mirror* (Reedy would publish *Spoon River* serially from May 29, 1914, to January 15, 1915). In later years Masters wrote other polemic essays for such magazines as *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *American Mercury* and *New Republic*.

Except for an early collection, *The New Star Chamber and Other Essays*, the essays have not been gathered, but some, like those on Altgeld and Bryan, have become standard references. Masters' essays are an exhaustive canon in their own right, and have been studied in depth by Lois Hartley and Michael Yatron.²² If there can be any general summary of the attitude conveyed by these essays, it might be this from Masters' "Observations on Democracy":

It follows from what has been said that the components of democracy are the free city, the free township, the free county and the free state, co-operating in a synthetic process to the national government. This is the ideal of democracy. There can be no republic without it.²³

Masters also wrote at least two formal essays on the law which have escaped scholarly attention. They appeared in the *Illinois Law Review*, an organ of Northwestern University, in 1910 and 1912.²⁴ Like the articles he wrote for popular consumption, these essays reflect several qualities of his legal career: his tendency to feel affronted personally by adverse decisions, his resistance to judicial innovations infringing upon individual rights, and his doggedly logical building of arguments upon conservative interpretations of state and national constitutions—even in radical causes!

In the first article Masters attacks the increasing tendency of appellate and state supreme court justices to make judgments on questions which, in his view, should be decided by juries. The trend constituted an usurpation of the function of trial courts, Masters contended. The second article is drawn from the resources of Masters' own practice, particularly the bitter litigation following the Kellogg factory strike of 1903. He vehemently protests recent decisions by the state supreme court placing prohibitions or restrictions on the rights of accused persons to sue for liberty or a hearing. He urges a judiciary that can, in the face of powerful industrial and popular pressures, act with understanding of the past and future and "with courage and equanimity enough to keep . . . above the fears and prejudices of the moment."²⁵

The real importance of the essays and the studies that went into them, as Masters himself realized later, was in his growth of understanding of motives and behavior—which gave verisimilitude to *Spoon River* and other poetical works: he said the scholarship "laid the foundation for many things in *Spoon River Anthology*, for *Domesday Book*, and for many poems of people. Little as they [the studies and essays] seemed to bear upon the art of poetry, they had their use at last and their influence for what turned out to be my real medium."²⁶

In the earliest period of his pamphleteering, Masters' interest in questions of constitutional law resulted not only in essays but also in the play *Maximilian*. It was published by the same Boston firm that had prepared editions of McGaffey's poems. The plot is drawn from the French attempt to conquer Mexico in the 1860's, but the parallel with the contemporary American adventures in the Caribbean and Philippines was obvious.²⁷

There were poems, too, with a new strength of didactic purpose in Masters' protests against the foreign acquisitions and of inroads upon individual rights by judicial rulings. In a 1905 collection was the poem "Banner of Men Who Were Free," employing an image he would return to more effectively in *Spoon River*:

Flag of a noble race, no longer our flag in truth,
 Borne by a hostile hand in a cause of shame,
 Give us the banner that flapped in the eyes of the nation's youth
 And sent a thrill through the world of its faultless fame!²⁸

Looking forward for a moment, we can find the same symbol vividly and

concisely used in *Spoon River* in the words of a soldier, "Harry Wilmans," who enlisted to subdue the Filipinos in response to a flag-invoking speech by the Sunday School superintendent. The campaign was a thing of degradation and horror, with

. . . days of loathing and nights of fear
 To the hour of the charge through the steaming swamp,
 Following the flag,
 Till I fell with a scream, shot through the guts.
 Now there's a flag over me in Spoon River!
 A flag! A flag!²⁹

The 1905 collection also contained verses concerning the plight of the individual in conflict with powerful interests supported by the judicial structure. He presented Christ as such an individualist in "The Ballad of Jesus of Nazareth"—as a man who "smote the lawyer's lore" which oppressed wretched and burdened men:

Therefore when that the hour was come
 For him to die, they blent
 Of many things a lying charge.
 But at last the argument
 They killed him with was that he stirred
 The people's discontent.³⁰

There were two more privately-printed books of poetry that came before *Spoon River*. They were published at a time when Masters was disenchanted with politics and deeply involved in a love affair. They contain little reference to his career, except in lines showing world-weariness with prospects for any progress in justice, and a desire to retreat into a sensual nirvana:

The rocking world went spinning on;
 The game was lost, the game was won,
 The tale was told, the tale begun.

 And tyranny did thrive; the crust
 Was wet with tears and grimed with dust,
 The unjust flourished with the just.

 The rocking world—ah giant fate!
 What is the broad way, what the straight?
 Love me and walk through heaven's gate.³¹

Masters' romantic entanglements, rather than his experiences at law, also dominate the recognizable biographical material in six plays he wrote during this period. He was hoping for a financial windfall that would allow him to devote more time to poetry. However, not one of the plays—*Althea* (1907), *The Trifler* (1908), *The Leaves of the Tree* (1909), *Eileen* (1910), *The Locket* (1910), and *The Bread of Idleness* (1911)—ever was produced.

None of the principal characters in any of the plays is a lawyer, and the dramas are largely social in content. However, Masters' legal experience is reflected in several ways—in some of the machinery of the main plots and subplots, in a few secondary characters who are lawyers or involved in legal struggles, and in the names of some characters. (The latter aspect foresaw the

occasionally malicious strategy of emotion-provoking nomenclature that Masters would use with decisive effect in the two *Spoon River* volumes.) The legal references in the plays include the efforts of a dying publisher to get his wife to sign a will agreement to forego future marriage, as one element of the plot of *Althea*. A factory strike and labor negotiations are part of the story line of *The Bread of Idleness*, and a subplot in *The Leaves of the Tree* tells of the efforts of a maimed worker to win compensation from a railroad. Also, efforts by women to achieve independent livelihood in the face of legal obstacles in a male-dominated society crop up in several of the plays (Masters' mistress, Tennessee Mitchell, was a piano tuner and music teacher). And the names Masters invented with real lawyers in mind may include Albert Barton, a secondary character in *Althea*. Barton, an attorney, woos a coolly respectable woman named Helen Goodrich, and his name could have been drawn from that of a prominent Chicago judge, John Barton Payne, in whose social circle Masters met his first wife, Helen Jenkins. Likewise, the principal male character in *The Trifler* is a banker named Laflin Leland, whose given name may have been suggested by Masters' acquaintance with Luther Laflin Mills, a well-known orator in Chicago and senior partner in the law firm in which Scanlan and McGaffey served before their partnership with Masters.

Turning to his fiction, the law and the machinations of attorneys gave Masters essential material for the six novels he wrote in the 1920's and for another written in 1937. There are four largely autobiographical novels—*Mitch Miller* (1920), *Skeeters Kirby* (1923), *Mirage* (1924), and *Kit O'Brien* (1927)—in which many incidents and characters reflect the legal careers and personal lives of Masters and his father. An historical novel, *Children of the Market Place* (1922), has Illinois attorney Stephen Douglas as its central character. *The Tide of Time* (1937) is a biography in fiction of Hardin Wallace Masters' youth and public career, into which some of his son's experiences were interpolated. The novel lacks only the pathos of the elder Masters' turbulent domestic life, and that is supplied vividly in *The Nuptial Flight* (1923), the only one of the novels in which the principal character is not an attorney. Instead, he is a country newspaper editor, but with a purple prose style similar to the stump speeches of a small-town lawyer.

For a number of other works Masters drew heavily either on the circumstances of his practice or on his concepts of law. Two of the five biographies Masters wrote between 1927 and 1938 are about lawyers—the commissioned biography about his prosperous contemporary in Chicago, Levy Mayer, and *Lincoln: The Man*, a debunking work in which Masters used every constitutional law argument he could muster. Masters also found room for arguments in favor of Jeffersonian principles in biographies of three literary figures: Whitman, Vachel Lindsay, and Mark Twain. The action in Masters' verse novel, *Domesday Book* (1920), and its sequel, *The Fate of the Jury* (1929), revolves around a figure in the judicial structure, a coroner. And his long verse plays or book-length poems of the 1920's and 1930's, including *Lee* (1926), *Jack Kelso* (1928), *Godbey* (1931), *Richmond* (1934), and *The New World* (1937), restate his agrarian bias and quarrel with constitutional liberalism.

His verse collections after *Spoon River* totaled fifteen, containing much the same material in a variety of poems, including many sketches of lawyers,

famous and obscure. At one end of the range of these portraits is the derisive judgment of Darrow in "On a Bust," which appeared in the first collection after *Spoon River*. It begins,

Your speeches seemed to answer for the nonce—
 They do not justify your head in bronze!
 Your essays! talent's failures were to you
 Your philosophic gamut, but things true,
 Or beautiful, oh never! What's the pons
 For you to cross to fame?—Your head in bronze?³²

At the other extreme is the compassionate tribute to an ill-starred country lawyer, "Cassius Graccus Johnson," in Masters' last collection. The individual, like Darrow, was real, and had been sketched before in *Spoon River's* "Harmon Whitney" and "Cassius Hueffer":

You led such a life that the churches
 Thrust you forth into darkness alone;
 But the lawyers here wrote an inscription,
 And bought you a suitable stone. . . .
 And of all dead men that I know of
 In the village, it can truly be said
 That your humor that ended with silence
 Makes it, somehow, a good to be dead.³³

III

In the last analysis, however, it was in *Spoon River Anthology*, the most original and enduring of Masters' books, that his knowledge of law and of lawyers was most creatively utilized. The poems that make up the content usually have been called "epitaphs" since their words purportedly are spoken by the dead or appear on tombstones. The epitaphs, the introductory poem, and an epilogue called "The Spooniad" refer to 269 persons by name or title. At least 19 are attorneys, by far the largest occupational group represented. Another 10 or more attorneys are represented or mentioned in the epitaphs of *The New Spoon River*, which also must be considered here since some of its controversies and personalities are carried over from the first volume.

There was plenty of legal work in the village of Spoon River in the first book. As Dr. William J. Ford has pointed out, violent death was not uncommon. The 243 epitaphs and "The Spooniad" tell of six homicides, two hangings, seven suicides, a death by abortion, and 13 accidental deaths.³⁴ All these did not occur in the village, but all had their roots there. In addition, the tone concerning untimely death is set in the introduction, "The Hill," in which at least six deaths due to violence or unusual circumstances are referred to:

One was burned in a mine,
 One was killed in a brawl,
 One died in a jail,
 One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife. . . .

But civil strife rather than violence gave lawyers the bulk of their occupational activity in *Spoon River*. Here is where the insights from Masters' 25 years of study and practice of law broadened the banal matters of local historical record to something recognizably general. He had a concept of the universality of his subject as early as 1906, when he told his father he was contemplating writing a novel in the vein that *Spoon River* eventually would follow: ". . . Chicago had shown me that the country lawyer and the city lawyer were essentially the same; that the country banker and the city banker had the same nature; and so on down the list of tradespeople, preachers, sensualists, and all kinds of human beings."³⁵ It was Masters' purpose, as the tale of *Spoon River* began unraveling week by week in the pages of *Reedy's Mirror*, to "draw the macrocosm" by portraying the microcosm.³⁶

The legal snarls of the larger world where Masters had been in contention were telescoped into the local scene of *Spoon River*. To some extent, the power structures of the urban government and judiciary, the financial empires, giant factories and great switching yards were transposed into the village council and justice court, the bank, the canning works, and the "Q" Railroad. In addition, there were individuals in *Spoon River* representative of lawyers and judges Masters had encountered in Chicago. The vague plot structure of *Spoon River* contains relatively clear sequences about village politics and economics, in which the same issues at stake in the larger scene are argued and reargued. In these sequences two opposing figures of epic proportions emerge. One is the liberal lawyer-politician, under such guises as "John Cabanis," "Jefferson Howard," "Kinsey Keene," "E. C. Culbertson," or "Benjamin Pantier." The other is the well-to-do conservative moralist office-holder, represented by such characters as "Thomas Rhodes" (merchant-financier), "A. D. Blood" (mayor), "Henry Phipps" (banker-Sunday School superintendent) and "Editor Whedon" (corrupt journalist).

Village politics, economics, and litigation might seem a narrow ground for advancing a philosophy of humanism as Masters did by maintaining that the elevation of mankind proceeds through the cycles of many lives. The speaker in the epitaph "John Cabanis," however, thinks the field is sufficient for the cause (in "The Spooniad" he is identified as the liberal's candidate for mayor against "A. D. Blood"):

Fellow citizens! I saw as one with second sight
That every man of the millions of men
Who give themselves to Freedom,
And fail when Freedom fails.
Enduring waste and lawlessness.
And the rule of the weak and the blind,
Dies in the hope of building earth.
Like a coral insect, for the temple
To stand on at the last.

In the civic struggles, some attorneys like "Jefferson Howard" and "Kinsey Keene" (both have attributes of Hardin Wallace Masters) are overcome but defiant to the last. Other leaders, like "Harry Carey Goodhue" abandon the battle and go over to the enemy vindictively:

. . . do you remember:
 That staggering up from the wreck of defeat,
 And the wreck of a ruined career,
 I slipped from my cloak my last ideal,
 Hidden from all eyes until then.
 Like the cherished jawbone of an ass,
 And smote the bank and the water works,
 And the business men with prohibition,
 And made Spoon River pay the cost
 Of the fights that I had lost?

Many studies have noted that Masters drew material for *Spoon River* from actual events in Lewistown and Petersburg, and from his father's roles in several controversies. These included bank failures in both villages, the burning of the Fulton County Courthouse on December 14, 1894, and a trial of the arsonists and legal battle on building a new courthouse. The fight concerning local-option prohibition was at its height around the turn of the century when Hardin Masters was Lewistown's mayor. If Masters used these local contests and their contestants as overt vehicles for *Spoon River*, the content of the epitaphs also reflects his own court struggles in behalf of the weak and unlearned, victimized by ruthless opportunists; for the rights of strikers or of injured workers denied compensation; and in estate cases. There also are references to lawyers and political leaders Masters was meeting in Chicago—Altgeld is referred to by name in several epitaphs and is the model for "Herman Altman."

The epitaph of "W. Lloyd Garrison Standard," for example, seems to embody Masters' attitude toward the ambiguities of such reformers as Darrow and Bryan. He considered both to be shallow beneath impressive veneer, as the attorney who defended "the patriot scamps who burned the court house" was:

Vegetarian. non-resistant. free-thinker. in ethics a Christian;
 Orator apt at the rhine-stone rhythm of Ingersoll;
 Carnivorous. avenger. believer and pagan;
 Continent. promiscuous. changeable. treacherous. vain,
 Proud, with the pride that makes struggle a thing for laughter;
 With heart cored out by the worm of theatric despair;
 Wearing the coat of indifference to hide the shame of defeat. . . .

The case is more plainly stated in *The New Spoon River*, where Masters gave more direct editorial judgments—in his own voice, in contrast to the strategy of the earlier book—on the confused idealism he saw in Darrow and Bryan and their disciples. Darrow became "Louis Raguse":

. . . the idol of the back-hall. being plain.
 Unclean. pathetic and weary looking like Jesus.
 All the while his safety box was full of bonds.
 He understood the criminal mind:
 He fathomed the hate of the poor.
 But he loathed charity: let the poor unite against the rich.
 He was neither a master man nor a martyr.
 He was a sophisticate Caliban.
 He longed for fame. he had notoriety.

And Bryan became "Silas Jennings," showing Masters' disgust that his early idol had lapsed into impotence by supporting such issues as religious fundamentalism and national prohibition:

A democrat!
 A believer in the rule of the people!
 An agitator for laws to be made by the people
 To control greed, injustice;
 Then an agitator for laws to be made by the people
 To control tastes, thoughts, expressions.
 A democrat become a despot,
 Denying the equal rights of souls before the law of the soul,
 And violating that inner democracy
 Through which souls are equal as to beliefs,
 Tastes, expressions, joys, wisdoms, visions of life.

One source for suggesting how much of Masters' own court experience and contacts went into *Spoon River* has gone unnoticed in virtually all studies of the work, although Masters himself called attention to the source in his autobiography: "The reports of the Supreme Court of Illinois show my varied activities in that court over a period of many years."³⁷ It is an impressive record, but difficult to decipher. The published reports of the Illinois Supreme Court and Illinois Appellate courts are indexed in many ways, but not by the names of the lawyers who participated in the cases. For a study not yet completed, I have located about 100 cases in which Masters (or his firm during the time of his several partnerships) participated, or in which his father or brother were involved between 1895 and 1920. A preliminary tabulation indicates that Edgar Lee Masters pleaded at least 40 cases before the state high court between 1895 and 1919. Most of these cases came before *Spoon River* was written, the major portion while he was associated with Darrow.

The opinions offer clues to his attitudes and sources, and confirm his own testimony and that of Carl Sandburg that Masters was heavily burdened with legal matters at the time *Spoon River* was written. Sandburg wrote:

I saw Masters write this book. He wrote it in snatched moments between fighting injunctions against a waitresses union striving for the right to picket and gain one day's rest a week, battling from court to court for compensation to a railroad engineer rendered a loathsome cripple by the defective machinery of a locomotive, having his life amid affairs as intense as those he writes of.³⁸

Masters, as has been noted, had a significant practice as a labor attorney. The peak of it probably was in his defense of workers arrested in the Kellogg factory strike of 1903. He took over the defense when Darrow departed unexpectedly for Europe on a honeymoon. The strike echoed the Pullman works stoppage, with many of the issues the same: the powers of government by judicial injunction, labor's struggle for a closed shop, violence on the picket line, and retribution against workers. The brief Masters wrote for the Illinois Supreme Court became first a pamphlet and later the title essay in *The New Star Chamber*.³⁹

Such labor turmoil is referred to in *Spoon River* epitaphs dealing with the rise of industrialists like "Anthony Findlay." First, "John Hancock Otis" recalls that the contemporary of his youth, who rose

To the superintendency of the railroad,
 Living in Chicago,
 Was a veritable slave driver,
 Grinding the faces of labor,
 And a bitter enemy of democracy.

Findlay adds, in his own epitaph:

I, Anthony Findlay, rising to greatness
 From a humble water carrier,
 Until I could say to thousands "Come,"
 And say to thousands "Go,"
 Affirm that a nation can never be good,
 Or achieve the good,
 Where the strong and the wise have not the rod
 To use on the dull and weak.

As the tenacles of industrialism spread, a strong and oppressive judiciary further supported corporate interests against those of the individual, as *The New Spoon River's* "Joseph Meek" finds:

Did I not see the righteous scowls of the Circuit Judge,
 And read the bitter exaggerations of the editors,
 When proof was made that union sluggers
 Were paid five dollars a day to slug the scabs?
 And yet in this same court,
 And amid the silence of the press,
 And with the aid of the same judge
 I was ruined in my little business
 By the canning works in a suit in equity
 Whose lawyer was paid five hundred dollars. . . .

The case of the injured engineer referred to by Sandburg was for an injury that occurred August 12, 1907. A \$15,000 judgment finally was affirmed by the Illinois Supreme Court on February 17, 1915.⁴⁰ It was one of dozens of worker compensation or personal injury suits Masters fought. Corporations contested these matters tenaciously, even when settlements were small, to avoid precedents. Masters recalled, "I met the hard, shrewd, money-grabbing corporation and business lawyers on their own ground, and fought them toe to toe. Some of these now are millionaires, all are patriots, nearly all are pharisees. As I would not have traded places with them then, much less would I do so now."⁴¹

Such an attorney, in Masters' view, was *Spoon River's* John M. Church, who represented the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad and other industrial and financial concerns that had the power to control the courts:

I was attorney for the "Q"
 And the Indemnity Company which insured
 The owners of the mine.
 I pulled the wires with judge and jury
 And the upper courts, to beat the claims
 Of the crippled, the widow and orphan,
 And made a fortune thereat.

The principal *Spoon River* epitaph dealing with corporate and judicial indifference to the plight of an injured worker is " 'Butch' Weldy." Butch, a

reformed tough, had a job in which he had to fill a tank at the canning works with gasoline to feed blow-fires that heated soldering irons,

And I mounted a rickety ladder to do it,
 Carrying buckets full of the stuff.
 One morning, as I stood there pouring,
 The air grew still and seemed to heave,
 And I shot up as the tank exploded,
 And down I came with both legs broken,
 And my eyes burned crisp as a couple of eggs.
 For someone left a blow-fire going,
 And something sucked the flame in the tank.
 The Circuit Judge said whoever did it
 Was a fellow-servant of mine, and so
 Old Rhodes' son didn't have to pay me.

The epitaph echoes not only a fire in Lewistown in which a cannery controlled by the bank was destroyed,⁴² but also a number of Masters' cases. He lost, early in his practice, an appellate court appeal in a case involving a worker who fell from a ladder. Masters represented a fellow worker who had summoned a doctor and been sued by the physician when the employer (a brewery) refused to pay the medical bill.⁴³ Masters lost an Illinois Supreme Court appeal on a case very similar to the "Butch' Weldy" incident, in which a brewery supervisor sought compensation for injuries sustained from the explosion of accumulated gas after he had been ordered to light drying stoves in newly varnished vats.⁴⁴ The injury cases seldom were settled speedily in this era—Masters had one involving the death of a factory worker who was knocked into an open elevator shaft that dragged on from 1903 to 1918.⁴⁵

Persons who suffered physical injury were not the only victims of legal machinations. Masters' second case before the Illinois Supreme Court was an appeal from an elderly Polish-born couple victimized by unscrupulous land dealers and their attorneys. The case "off and on took several years of my time," but the couple exhibited trust and patience for what eventually was a settlement, with only a \$500 fee for him.⁴⁶ There is an impoverished farmer in *Spoon River*, with a name "Felix Schmidt" indicating foreign origins, who has a similar problem but less effective legal counsel. Felix owned five acres, and

One day lawyer Whitney came along
 And proved to me that Christian Dallman,
 Who owned three thousand acres of land,
 Had bought the eighty that adjoined me
 In eighteen hundred and seventy-one
 For eleven dollars, at a sale for taxes.
 While my father lay in his mortal illness,
 So a quarrel arose and I went to law.

Unlike Masters' clients, Felix "lost my case and lost my place," and had to go to work as Dallman's tenant.

Property contentions in Masters' practice included many will cases. Loss of one of these contributed to his depression in the period just before he wrote *Spoon River*: "The winter of 1914 came and my bank account was again low. I had lost the Kellan will case after vast labor and Jake could not understand

why the jury beat me."⁴⁷ The case involved a contest between heirs and was decided by an Illinois Supreme Court opinion filed April 19, 1913. Masters drew interestingly on the case for the epitaph of *Spoon River's* "Searcy Foote." The woman whose death brought the Kellan family dispute to court had suffered from Graves disease, characterized by an abnormal protrusion of a goiter in the throat area. Searcy's aunt, whose wealth he covets and whom he murders with chloroform without retribution, also had throat problems:

. . . there was Aunt Persis more than seventy.
Who sat in a wheel-chair half alive.
With her throat so paralyzed, when she swallowed
The soup ran out of her mouth like a duck. . . .

The legal references in epitaphs about violent crimes principally were based on cases handled by Masters' father, since Edgar Lee Masters had relatively little criminal practice. "Tom Merritt," "Mrs. Merritt," and "Elmer Karr," for example, are sequential epitaphs about marital infidelity, murder, and imprisonment. The sequence is based on a Fulton County murder-rape case that was a sensation in the poet's youth. Masters recognized the case as the one that gave his father "a reputation and put him in line for profitable law business."⁴⁸

The "Jennie M'Grew" epitaph, with its hints of violent death in a rural setting, may be drawn from some elements of a criminal appeal in which Masters collaborated with his father. This is how Jennie seemed to have encountered death:

. . . on a sunny afternoon,
By a country road,
Where purple rag-weeds bloom along a straggling fence,
And the field is gleaned, and the air is still,
To see against the sun-light something black.
Like a blot with an iris rim. . . .

A somewhat similar episode has become famous in Fulton County folklore, though different in many details. On Christmas Day, 1899, the body of a 24-year-old prostitute, Cora Peters, was found beneath a trestle of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy tracks at the Spoon River crossing. Investigation revealed she left a Lewistown tavern the previous night with a 60-year-old farmer, John Hellyer. Hellyer was arrested, and though he claimed Cora was struck by a train (her injuries were consistent with the story), he was tried for murder and sentenced to 25 years in prison. Hardin Masters won an Illinois Supreme Court appeal freeing Hellyer with a brief that Edgar Lee Masters helped prepare. Masters used the case in a more straightforward way in the ballad "Steam Shovel Cut" in another collection.⁴⁹

The failure of a bank is a central dramatic vehicle in *Spoon River*, with many epitaphs about the causes and consequences. Besides Masters' awareness that banks failed in both Petersburg and Lewistown with tragic aftermaths,⁵⁰ he had his own direct experience in how a bank collapse could create fear and judicial chaos. Both he and Darrow lost heavily in their investment in the Bank of America, a system wherein drug stores functioned as branch banks, in 1905. Masters was counsel for an official of another bank in the litigation that followed. The appellate and state supreme court opinions

call attention to much evidence of sharp practice, mismanagement, and bad business judgment in operation of the Bank of America. Darrow's son told his father's biographer that the bank failed because its directors began "grafting and putting in bad loans."⁵¹ Thus Masters had some very personal reasons for the distaste several epitaphs expressed about bank manipulations, as seen most graphically perhaps in "Hildrup Tubbs":

. . . I used my remnant of power
 To fasten myself like a saprophyte
 Upon the putrescent carcass
 Of Thomas Rhodes' bankrupt bank,
 As assignee of the fund.
 Everyone now turned from me.
 My hair grew white,
 My purple lusts grew gray,
 Tobacco and whisky lost their savor
 And for years Death ignored me
 As he does a hog.

Many other examples could be cited to show that Masters' practice gave him not only material for the epitaphs but also an attitude about the law that pervaded them. It is not a kindly attitude. The scorn is most evident in the epitaph of *Spoon River's* liberal editor, "Carl Hamblin," with its direct reference to the era's major judicial controversy. The editor was tarred and feathered and his shop was wrecked because of this editorial he wrote

. . . on the day the Anarchists were hanged in Chicago:⁵²
 "I saw a beautiful woman with bandaged eyes
 Standing on the steps of a marble temple.
 Great multitudes passed in front of her,
 Lifting their faces to her imploringly.
 In her left hand she held a sword.
 She was brandishing the sword,
 Sometimes striking a child, again a laborer,
 Again a slinking woman, again a lunatic.
 In her right hand she held a scale;
 Into the scale pieces of gold were tossed
 By those who dodged the strokes of the sword. . . ."

The figure of Justice is unmasked by a radical "youth wearing a red cap," and her face is seen as covered with corruption and bearing "the madness of a dying soul."

If Masters had little respect for the condition of the law and justice, as a number of the poems quoted above indicate, he did maintain that a return to the values of the pioneers who settled the state (his grandfather was one) could give America vitality and restore democratic ideals. The prophet in *Spoon River* who proposes this course, "English Thornton," does it with anarchistic rhetoric. The character may have been suggested by an anarchist orator, John Turner, an Englishman whose deportation Darrow and Masters fought unsuccessfully in a 1903 case before the United States Supreme Court. Although they lost, the matter received much press attention at the time and subsequent comment from legal scholars.⁵³ "English Thornton" urges his listeners:

Arise! and make the city yours,
 And the State yours—
 You who are sons of the hardy yeomanry of the forties!
 By God! If you do not destroy these vermin
 My avenging ghost will wipe out
 Your city and your state.

Although many more examples could be cited, those I have used should sufficiently suggest the extent to which Masters' writings, particularly *Spoon River*, were permeated by matters of law. Legal questions are presented in settings ranging from "the dust of the justice court" ("Harmon Whitney") to constitutional arenas. The arguments are voiced by a varied array of lawyers and public officials, political philosophers and commentators, civic reformers and reactionaries, victims and perpetrators. The influence of law helped give *Spoon River* variety, realism, and a message—contributing to its lasting appeal. "Yes, having been pushed into the law by Fate I resolved to be a learned lawyer, and I became one," Masters commented.⁵⁴ He also became, in large measure through the practice of law, an interpreter of human behavior who could portray a vast range of it with incisive universality.

NOTES

¹ Masters, *Across Spoon River: An Autobiography* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936), p. 286. General biographical information about Masters, unless otherwise indicated, is from this source.

² *Across Spoon River*, p. 340.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

⁴ Edgar Lee Masters was born August 23, 1868, in Garnett, Kansas, during a year when his father tried to establish a practice there. The family returned to Menard County, Illinois, home of Masters' grandparents, in 1869. Census information and family Biblical records show that Masters was born in 1868, not 1869 as he stated in his autobiography.

⁵ "Edgar Lee Masters' Impressive Tribute to Father Read Today at Funeral of Veteran Lawyer," *Illinois State Register* (Springfield), 16 Nov. 1925, p. 1.

⁶ Masters, "Days in the Lincoln Country," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 23 (1926), 782-86; Masters, *The Sangamon* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942), pp. 129-32.

⁷ *The Sangamon*, pp. 26-28.

⁸ *Across Spoon River*, pp. 78, 127; see also Kimball Flaccus, "Edgar Lee Masters: A Biographical and Critical Study," Diss. New York University 1952, pp. 264-67. This is an appendix consisting of an October 21, 1941, letter to Flaccus from Masters, listing books he read from age 17 to 21.

⁹ The appellate courts served as examiners for candidates to the bar from 1888 to 1897, and results of the examination in which Masters participated have not been located: according to Justin Taft, clerk of the Illinois Supreme Court, in a letter of May 14, 1970, to Charles E. Burgess. A file at the Supreme Court building in Springfield contains cards showing bar admission dates for attorneys in the period. The entry for Masters is worded "Edgar Lee Masters, Fulton, June 9, 1891."

¹⁰ The date is in Masters' "Introduction to Chicago," *American Mercury*, (Jan. 1934), p. 49. William C. Goudy (1824-1893), a prosecuting attorney and state senator during his residence in Lewistown before the Civil War, was one of the attorneys, but Masters never met

him. On Goudy, see Albert Scott, *The Bench and Bar of Fulton County* (Canton, Ill.: The Canton Press-Ledger, 1970), p. 18.

¹¹ See Max Putzel, "Masters's 'Maltravers': Ernest McGaffey," *American Literature*, 21 (1960), 491-93.

¹² Letter from Masters to Carter Harrison, January 12, 1940, Newberry Library, Chicago. The firm is listed as "Scanlan and Masters" in cases in *Illinois Appellate Reports* (hereafter *Illinois App.*) after the March, 1896, court term. The 1902 *Illinois App.* and *Illinois Supreme Court Reports* (hereafter *Illinois*) are the last to list the partnership name.

¹³ *Across Spoon River*, pp. 270-75; Masters to Carter Harrison, March 21, 1938, Newberry Library.

¹⁴ *Across Spoon River*, pp. 409-10.

¹⁵ *Mirage* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), pp. 232-35, 261-62.

¹⁶ *Across Spoon River*, p. 128.

¹⁷ *A Book of Verses*, p. 207. A Chicago firm, Way & Williams, printed but never published the book formally. In classical mythology, Themis was a wife and counselor to Jove, and mother of the fates, hours, and seasons and of Astraea, the blindfolded goddess of justice.

¹⁸ *A Book of Verses*, p. 164. In a caustic description of the condition of the judiciary in Chicago in the 1890's, Masters maintained that "the courts of record, and the Appellate Court of the State, sitting in Chicago to correct the errors of the trial courts, were presided over by a preposterous group of fanatics and eccentrics, unfitted by temperament and education to be judges. . . . They roared at the litigants and the lawyers; they sneered at terrified novices in the law, they uttered obscenities under their breath to express contempt of points made in arguments. . . ." (*The Tale of Chicago* [New York: Putnam's, 1933], p. 244.)

¹⁹ *Across Spoon River*, pp. 404-05.

²⁰ Masters, "The Christian Statesman," *American Mercury*, Dec. 1924, p. 388.

²¹ *Across Spoon River*, p. 272.

²² Lois Hartley, "Edgar Lee Masters, Political Essayist," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 57 (1964), 249-61; Michael Yatron, *America's Literary Revolt* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), pp. 1-70.

²³ *The New Star Chamber and Other Essays* (Chicago: Hammersmark Publishing Co., 1904), p. 208.

²⁴ "Trial by Jury in Illinois," *Illinois Law Review*, 4 (1910), 408-16, and "Suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus," *Illinois Law Review*, 7 (1912), 15-29.

²⁵ "Suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus," p. 28.

²⁶ *Across Spoon River*, p. 405.

²⁷ *Maximilian: A Play in Five Acts* (Boston: R. G. Badger, 1902).

²⁸ Dexter Wallace (pseud. of Edgar Lee Masters), *The Blood of the Prophets* (Chicago: Rooks Press, 1905), p. 103.

²⁹ Quotations from *Spoon River Anthology* in my text are from the standard trade edition (New York: Macmillan, 1922), still in print. Quotations from *The New Spoon River* are from the standard edition. (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924). Citation by page number is omitted since only a few poems in each book are longer than one page and the contents page in each book lists the poems alphabetically.

³⁰ *The Blood of the Prophets*, p. 17.

³¹ "Oh, Giant Fate!" in *Songs and Sonnets*, by Webster Ford (pseud. of Edgar Lee Masters), (Chicago: Rooks Press, 1910), p. 63. Rooks Press also published Masters' *Songs and Sonnets: Second Series* in 1912 and Masters' six early plays discussed in my text.

³² *Songs and Satires* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. 98.

³³ *Along the Illinois* (Prairie City, Ill.: The Press of James A. Decker, 1942), pp. 59-60. See *The Sangamon*, pp. 198-201, and William S. Jewell, *Fifty Years in Law and Politics*

(New York: Exposition Press, 1949), pp. 28-29, for information on the attorney, Cassius Whitney.

³⁴ "Sickness and Health in Spoon River," *Quarterly Bulletin of the Northwestern University Medical School*, 23 (1949), 249.

³⁵ *Across Spoon River*, p. 286.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

³⁸ "Notes for a Review of 'The Spoon River Anthology,'" *The Little Review*, 2 (May 1915), 42.

³⁹ Citations from court reports will be given in short form. Opinions in the Kellogg case are in *Jacob Christensen v. Kellogg Switchboard & Supply Co.*, 110 *Illinois App.* 61, and *John O'Brien v. Kellogg Switchboard and Supply Co.*, 216 *Illinois* 354. Masters' role in the case is discussed by Ray Ginger, *Altgeld's America: The Lincoln Ideal Versus Changing Realities* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1958), pp. 231-33. Masters' analysis of the Pullman strike is in *The Tale of Chicago*, pp. 264-69.

⁴⁰ *George W. Wheeler v. The Chicago and Western Indiana Railroad Company*, 267 *Illinois* 306.

⁴¹ *Across Spoon River*, p. 399.

⁴² The destruction of the canning factory by fire happened a short time before the bank failed: John Depler, "Canning Factory Fire," in *Favorite Columns From 'The Years That Were'* (Lewistown, Ill.: The Mid-County Press, 1969), unpag. The Turner, Phelps & Co. Bank of Lewistown failed January 6, 1894: Jesse Heylin, ed., *History of Fulton County* (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Co., 1908), p. 708.

⁴³ *John Brandner v. Jacob Krebbs*, 54 *Illinois App.* 652. Details in the opinion differ somewhat from Masters' recollection of the case in *Across Spoon River*, pp. 219-21.

⁴⁴ *Eagle Brewing Company v. John J. Luckowitz*, 138 *Illinois App.* 131; *John J. Luckowitz v. Eagle Brewing Company*, 235 *Illinois* 246.

⁴⁵ *Nellie Carlin, Admx., v. The Peerless Gas Light Company*, 283 *Illinois* 142.

⁴⁶ *Across Spoon River*, pp. 189-90; *Clarence A. Moore v. Anton Recek*, 163 *Illinois* 17.

⁴⁷ *Across Spoon River*, p. 334. *Jacob Prassel* was Masters' secretary. The case was *Edward L. Kellan v. William Kellan*, 258 *Illinois* 256.

⁴⁸ *Across Spoon River*, pp. 68-69; Heylin, p. 760. A fictionalized version of the case is in *The Tide of Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), pp. 453-515.

⁴⁹ *Flaccus*, p. 238; the brief of the case is reproduced in *Flaccus' dissertation*, pp. 268-83. The opinion is *John C. Hellyer v. The People of the State of Illinois*, 186 *Illinois* 550. *Edgar Lee Masters' assistance to his father* also is indicated in the son's letter to *Hardin Masters* March 1, 1900, in the possession of Dr. Floyd Barringer of Springfield. The ballad is in *The Great Valley* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), pp. 173-77.

⁵⁰ See note 41; the *Brahm & Greene Bank of Petersburg* failed in 1883: R. D. Miller, *Past and Present of Menard County, Illinois* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1905), p. 106.

⁵¹ *Irving Stone, Clarence Darrow for the Defense* (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Co., 1943), pp. 179-80. And see *Across Spoon River*, pp. 290-91. The cases in which Masters participated as counsel were *Kavanagh v. Bank of America*, 239 *Illinois* 404 and *Pryor v. Bank of America—Kavanagh v. Bank of America*, 240 *Illinois* 100.

⁵² Four anarchists arrested in the Haymarket bombing investigation were hanged November 11, 1887. One other had committed suicide in his cell.

⁵³ *John Turner v. Walter Williams, United States Commissioner of Immigration for the Port of New York*, 194 *United States Supreme Court Reports* 279; *Across Spoon River*, pp. 274-75; *Outlook*, 125 (1903), 473-74, and 869-70; Milton R. Konvitz, *Civil Rights in Immigration* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 39-44.

⁵⁴ *Across Spoon River*, p. 399.

After *Spoon River*: Masters' Poetic Development 1916-1919

HERB RUSSELL

The years from 1916 to 1919 form an important and interesting segment of Edgar Lee Masters' career, but unfortunately too little is known about this period of his life, and the books published during these years have received almost no attention from scholars. The years that led up to *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) are well documented through Masters' autobiography, *Across Spoon River* (1936), but after he became famous not much is known about the man—except that his writing deteriorated. During this World War I period Masters produced four volumes of poetry. In the first of these, *Songs and Satires* (1916), he published poems which he characterized as “new,” but since many of them were simply chosen from among the hundreds of poems he had written earlier, their real interest lies in why Masters printed the particular ones that he did.¹ Three later volumes, *The Great Valley* (1916), *Toward the Gulf* (1918), and *Starved Rock* (1919), also contain poems which are not especially distinguished but which are well worth examining for at least three reasons. First, many of them reflect events which came after 1915, and thus they provide a perspective on Masters' attitudes and interests during the period just after *Spoon River Anthology*, which had made him the most talked-about poet in America. Second, they offer various special insights into Masters' esthetic problems, his struggles and failures as a poet. Third—and perhaps most important—these books, in conjunction with *Songs and Satires*, suggest a solution to the riddle of why Masters never wrote another book equal to *Spoon River*.

The first book to follow *Spoon River* has often puzzled critics because Masters returned to some of the banal themes of an earlier time. Three of the lyrics in *Songs and Satires* had appeared in his first collection of poems, *A Book of Verses* (1898), and several others show (through form and style) evidence of having been composed much earlier—before the free verse movement had gained momentum. However, it is not the quality of the poems which I want to discuss, nor the dates of their composition, but rather the question of why Masters chose to publish these particular poems as the successors to *Spoon River*.

Fourteen of the forty-five lyrics in *Songs and Satires* stress achievement or dedication to a goal, and concern romantic idealists—many of whom undergo

major tests on their long marches to success. Implicit in several poems is the suggestion that the individual owes it to himself to follow through with his early ideals. The quest for achievement is often linked to a religious concept and given the quality of a crusade, and a couple of the poems are even based on figures from the Bible: "Simon Surnamed Peter" and "All Life in a Life" (on Christ). The essentially religious nature of the idealist's quest is also reflected in the title of another poem, "Soul's Desire," and in "The Star," where fulfillment of the ideal leads to spiritual health and peace:

"Give me to understand, O Star,
Your inner self, your eternal spirit,
That I may have you and not images of you,
So that I may know what has driven me through the world,
And may cure my soul."²

Masters also uses the Arthurian legend of the Holy Grail—in "Ballad of Launcelot and Elaine" and "The Death of Sir Launcelot"—to show the kind of quest idealists might pursue.

His secular romantics work with much the same zeal. Some look for the ideal in beauty (as in "Helen of Troy," excerpted from the 1898 volume), some in love (as in "A Study"), while others yearn for the visionary capacity itself, as in "The Vision." Even war, generally excoriated by Masters, is seen as a possible expression of human vision in "O Glorious France," in which he says of the soldiers: "life to these/ Prophetic and enraptured souls is vision" (p. 71). He concludes the poem by describing how "the soul of man/ May to one greatest purpose make itself/ A lens of clearness" (p. 73).

Of the remaining poems in *Songs and Satires* a few show signs of an irascible state of mind, such as "The Cocked Hat," a study of William Jennings Bryan, and "On a Bust," in which the speaker says to the bronze head of an unnamed leader:

You cannot glorify
Our dreams, or aspirations, or deep thirst.
To you the world's a fig tree which is curst.
You have preached every faith but to betray;
The artist shows us you have had your day. (p. 99)

But in most of the poems Masters is as congenial as he ever was to be in print. He is especially cordial in "William Marion Reedy," praising the editor whose advice he so respected by comparing him to Buddha (for wisdom) and Rabelais (for humor). All in all, however, there are few satisfying poems in the volume. One other that is at least worth reading is "Silence," which was for many years his most frequently anthologized poem. A sharply realized example of one kind of silence suggests why it may have been popular:

A curious boy asks an old soldier
Sitting in front of the grocery store,
"How did you lose your leg?"
And the old soldier is struck with silence,
Or his mind flies away,
Because he cannot concentrate it on Gettysburg.

It comes back jocosely
 And he says, "A bear bit it off."
 And the boy wonders, while the old soldier
 Dumbly, feebly lives over
 The flashes of guns, the thunder of cannon,
 The shrieks of the slain,
 And himself lying on the ground,
 And the hospital surgeons, the knives,
 And the long days in bed. (pp. 1-2)

Later in the poem, the ever-present visionary motif is also mentioned:

There is the silence of a spiritual crisis,
 Through which your soul, exquisitely tortured,
 Comes with visions. . . . (p. 2)

Because so many of the poems in *Songs and Satires* repeat the same theme—a dogged devotion to idealistic achievement—the internal evidence suggests that Masters was here giving expression to the personal philosophy which had worked so well for him. He had, after all, achieved his long-sought goal of literary eminence by never giving up and by dint of hard work. The question for the future was how would he react in print when the philosophy he seemed to tout did not result in a continuation of his success.

After the success of *Spoon River Anthology*, and the publication of some earlier poems in *Songs and Satires*, Masters turned back to the Illinois countryside as subject matter for his next three volumes. For several reasons he also gravitated toward the iconoclasm which had worked so successfully in the epitaphs. Implicit in his choice of titles, however, is the ominous suggestion that he began this period of his career with hope and ended it with disgust. *The Great Valley* starts as a panoramic volume about the greatness of Illinois and the Midwest; it concludes with angry enumeration of the country's decline. *Toward the Gulf* continues the anger, but the emphasis is on Masters' personal losses, especially the end of his romantic idealism. *Starved Rock* reveals Masters as an introspective and bitter poet making irate attacks on those whom he blames for his, and the country's, woes.

In the first of these, *The Great Valley*, we see a brief continuation of the romantic side of Masters. The title poem, which opens the volume, has eight sections. In the first, "Fort Dearborn," Masters presents an idealized portrait of the pioneer history of Chicago:

In the loneliness of the log-cabin,
 Across the river,
 The fur-trader played his fiddle
 When the snow lay
 About the camp of the Pottawatomies. . . .³

Section two, "Captain John Whistler," deals with the man who built Fort Dearborn in 1803, an idealist who felt moved

to strive
 For men to be, for cities, nobler states
 Moving foreshadowed in your dreams at night,
 And realized some hundred years to come. (p. 11)

Much later, in section eight ("Grant and Logan and Our Tears"), Masters contrasts this early culture with a more recent society which has grown up indifferent to the pioneer past:

Before you were grown rich,
And populous
You brightened history;
Great men came from you.
But now that you have cities and great treasure
Where are your great ones? (p. 44)

Throughout the long opening poem, Masters stresses that the present is at variance with what once existed, and he speaks of a degeneracy, especially in politics and religion.

The chief political losses are associated with events which came during and after the Civil War, a war Masters blamed on Lincoln:

he became a man who broke all law
To have his law. He killed a million men
For what he called the Union. . . . (p. 56)

Instead of a stable, rural, and essentially simple culture, Masters saw a new, urban society growing up indifferent to the old values. Instead of strong local governments—extolled by "The Little Giant" in "The Lincoln and Douglas Debates" section—there now seemed to be a loosely federated system of corruption, which the poet describes in "Hanging the Picture" (section five).

Elsewhere in *The Great Valley* Masters asserted that the venality of the modern city had passed to the country. This is especially evident in a trio of poems set in a rural village: "Cato Braden," "Winston Prairie," and "Will Boyden Lectures." In the second of these, the poet attacked those who were responsible for this corruption, the "court-house rings and judges in the rings" (p. 123).

This rural-urban duality characterizes much of *The Great Valley*. Often a character reflects favorably on his own agrarian past or on that of the pioneers in the Midwest, as in "Past and Present," "Memorabilia," and "Worlds Back of Worlds." In the last of these, the speaker meditates on the past: "The windmills, barns and houses swim / In a sphered ether, wheeling, dim" (p. 162). On the other hand, some of the more lengthy poems are about urban dwellers or urban values, and here we detect Masters' hostility. The subject of "The Typical American?" is described as "a cog-wheel in the filthy trade/ Of justice courts, police, and graft in wine" (p. 70). Other lyrics in the same vein are "Having His Way" and "The Asp."

We see a similar hostility and sense of loss when Masters turns to the subject of religion. Christianity had a good beginning in its attempt to achieve spiritual fulfillment, but as time went on, Christians took what they wished from pagan learning and then attempted to stifle or change the remaining elements of paganism—as he points out in "The Apology of Demetrius." Thus, in Masters' mind repression and Christianity were always joined. In "Malachy Deagan" he speaks of the innocent diversions of a small town "before the Puritan rake/ Combed through the city" (p. 143). He elsewhere examines ways in which churches try to force people to act contrary to their own inclinations

("The Mourner's Bench" and "The Church and the Hotel"). He even shows how a man might lose his life for a minor breach of the moral code (in "Steam Shovel Cut"): "They hung him up for a little beer/ With a woman on his knees" (p. 176). Masters chose as his champion in this fight against religion "the great agnostic," Robert Ingersoll, one of the most noted—and denounced—residents of turn-of-the-century Illinois. In "Robert G. Ingersoll" he labelled him "a general in the war of ideas for freedom" (p. 77).

Why Masters felt free to use his verse in such a vituperative way is partially explained in three other groups of poems from *The Great Valley*. They are important because they foreshadow the direction his later verse would take. These are the poems about the failure of idealists, the success of cynics, and the necessity of national reform. In "The Search," the last poem in the volume, he tells of three romantics (Don Quixote, Hamlet, and Faust) whose idealism has led them to nothing, and all of Masters' other idealists, artists, and aspirant souls in the volume also fail. At one extreme we find a person unjustly punished—in "The Furies"—who speaks of "ambition that eludes, love never found" and "the memory of the dream" (p. 167). Likewise, a more modern romantic, in "Elizabeth to Monsieur D—," spends her life looking in vain for

An altar for my genius, something true
And near in flesh to triumph for, or brave
The world of evil for. (p. 247)

Contrasted with these lyrics about fictive idealists who fail are two much more interesting poems about real men—successes, whom Masters saw as cynics: "Theodore Dreiser" and "John Cowper Powys." Both figures are characterized as shrewd men unafraid to speak openly about society's ills. Their success comes in great part from their pessimism. Powys is an "observer of men's involuted shells": "Scoffer with reverence, visioned, quick to damn,/ Yet laugh at, looking keenly through the sham" (p. 232). Dreiser is, in like fashion,

Contemptuous, ironical, remote,
Cloudy, irreverent, ferocious,
Fearless, grim, compassionate, yet hateful. . . . (p. 228)

Given Masters' admiration for these two men, here characterized as scoffers and cynics, one wonders how much Masters' verse was influenced by his friendships.

That he was open to outside literary influences may be seen by his comments on the third area here under scrutiny, national reform. In "Come Republic," one of the better poems in the volume, he sounds like the mature Whitman in his attacks on the depravity of politics, religion, and society:

Come! United States of America,
And you one hundred million souls, O Republic,
Throw out your chests, lift up your heads,
And walk with a soldier's stride. (p. 72)

Masters seems, however, to have been convinced that the "greater republic" (p. 100) for which he was looking was not coming very fast. He could hardly hope for the nation's betterment when it was obvious that the integrity of his own "great valley" was declining. What he could not know was that he himself was shortly to experience a decline.

His next book, *Toward the Gulf*, was written in 1917 in Michigan, and certain events there had a negative effect on his poetry. Just when it seemed he had established his reputation and could devote his time to writing, his dreams were suddenly dashed. He had hoped for years to retire to a rural place and to write in what he called a writer's "haven." He thought he had found such a place in Spring Lake, Michigan. However, after moving to that tiny community, he feuded with local residents, was plagued with the presence of an old girl-friend, and, as we also learn from the autobiography, was even considered a suspicious person after the war-hysteria hit.⁴ Masters complicated everything in September of 1917 by walking out of what he had long considered an impossible marriage.

His troubles may have been his own fault, but in his mind he was certain he had been driven out by religious fundamentalists and political conservatives. He says exactly this in his poem "Spring Lake" (in *Starved Rock*) where the artist-hero, "the God Apollo," is driven out of town by a posse of preachers, teachers, and dullards. Masters suggested that such philistines cost him his farm; there is little doubt that they also helped cost him his art, for he used his poetry (and much of his fiction) to punish them, to expose them, and at times simply to call them names. Put together during these trying circumstances, *Toward the Gulf* is a record of losses. No fewer than fifteen of the forty-six poems discuss a romantic ideal which has in some way failed, and, significantly, the poems are more visibly subjective than in the previous volume.

All the idealistic people in these poems suffer a loss of hope. The lovers are deceived by the women they love in "St. Deseret," "Victor Rafolski on Art," and "Delilah." Good politicians are oppressed by the bad in "Sir Galahad," "The World-Saver," and "Bertrand and Gourgaud Talk Over Old Times." And the truly religious are gulled by the apparently religious in "Friar Yves," "The Eighth Crusade," and "The Bishop's Dream of the Holy Sepulchre." Among those who lose the ideal vision, two are left baffled (in "Mirage of the Desert" and "The Room of Mirrors"), one grows bitter (in "Black Eagle Returns to St. Joe"), and one (in "Heaven is But the Hour") mourns its loss: "The tragedy is when Life has made you over/ And denied you, and dulled your dreams."⁵ Another (in "The Landscape") must rely on memory to return him to the days of his youth, when romance was a possibility: "In the room where the dormer windows look—/ There were your knight and the tattered book" (p. 91). It is significant too that the penultimate poem in the volume is "The End of the Search," in which the same three figures found in "The Search" in the previous book are frustrated in their quest. One finally "sings a song of Euphorion/ To hide his heart's despair" (p. 283). The very title of the poem serves notice that Masters himself is no longer a philosophical traveler with idealists.

His next book, *Starved Rock*, simply became a vehicle for the poet to revenge himself on his enemies. The title poem is an apologia, of sorts, for

what follows. In it Masters writes from the vantage point of the Illini Indians who perished on Starved Rock. Like the poet, they perished in what they had thought would be a haven: "And this starved scarp of stone/ Is now the emblem of our tribulation."⁶

Unlike the Illini, however, Masters is able to counter-attack. In "Oh You Sabbatarians!" he denounces the villagers of Spring Lake and ridicules what the town holds sacred. His vituperation is so intense that his lines barely pass for verse:

Oh you sabbatarians, methodists and puritans:
You bigots, devotees and ranters:
You formalists, pietists and fanatics,
Teetotalers and hydropots. . . . (p. 88)

Elsewhere he attacks simplistic views of God and Christ (in "Mournin' for Religion"), refers to divinity students as "crook-nosed psychopaths" and "thick-lipped onanists" (in "They'd Never Know Me Now," p. 148), shows how politicians dupe the faithful (in "The Christian Statesman"), and even invokes the aid of a pagan goddess (in "Pallas Athene") to rid the world of certain strict Protestant sects: "Dethrone our bastard Demos, partisans/ Of Moody, Campbell, all the Wesleyans" (p. 90). In general, Masters tries to make himself as unpleasant as possible where middle-class America's spiritual values are concerned.

While many of the poems in *Starved Rock* are personal invectives too nasty to pass for verse and are deservedly forgotten, the events which led up to the poems should be remembered: by 1919 the poet was at odds with his wife, was without a real home, and in certain respects, was without a country—for the "old America"⁷ he claimed to love was assuredly gone with the war. He was suspicious of the traditional institutions: marital, ecclesiastical, and political. His personal idealism had suffered severe blows, and he had fallen short in his own quest to be an increasingly admired writer and live on a fine estate. In fact, his estate would soon be entirely gone (with his divorce), and his reputation as a writer was in decline.

Thus, while Masters began the period after *Spoon River* at the height of his fame and with a desire "to memorialize Illinois and the country which had given so many distinguished men to America,"⁸ he soon descended to rancor and disgust. He began this period by publishing early poems of idealism and by praising Illinois; he ended it by speaking of himself and his enemies. The hatred generated during these years manifested itself so frequently in his writings that it soon came to dominate, and neither the art nor the artist ever recovered. When Masters wrote his autobiography two decades later, he ended it with the year 1917.

NOTES

¹ *Across Spoon River: An Autobiography* (New York: Farrar, 1936), p. 373.

² *Songs and Satires* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. 171. All subsequent page references to this volume will be included in the text.

³ *The Great Valley* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. 1. All subsequent page references to this volume will be included in the text.

⁴ *Across Spoon River*, pp. 386-94.

⁵ *Toward the Gulf* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), p. 4. All subsequent page references to this volume will be included in the text.

⁶ *Starved Rock* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 4. All subsequent page references to this volume will be included in the text.

⁷ *Across Spoon River*, p. 338.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

The People, Yes: **Sandburg's Dreambook for Today**

CHARLES W. MAYER

There were two poets in Carl Sandburg. One was the advocate of democracy, committed to the lusty, often brutalized life of the people; using the common idiom to celebrate the wonder and the worth of life, and himself at times nearly "daffy with life's razzle dazzle."¹ The other was the poet of flux and drift, dominated by thoughts of loss and death, uncertain of life's purpose, and yearning for some release from the lonely prison of the senses. Forty years ago a discerning Newton Arvin was perhaps the first to define this second tendency: "A troubled skepticism, an enervating indecisiveness, overlies much of what he has written: whenever the raw fact or the strong primitive sentiment is left behind, we are likely to find ourselves in a chartless prairie of bewilderment and doubt. . . ." ² A lyrical pessimism is expressed in all of Sandburg's works, beginning with *Chicago Poems*; its presence in the epic climax of his career, *The People, Yes*, creates a formal tension between affirmation and denial, life and death, growth and decay, dreams and the reality of broken dreams. It challenges the yea-saying principle in the later poem and causes emphasis to fall less on an optimistic social philosophy than on a religious faith in "a moving monolith" (p. 616) the poet calls the people.

Sandburg did not write poetry of tragic personal emotions. His lyric voice is usually sad, nostalgic, almost detached, counting the loss of all lovely things, including love itself. Memories of dead dreams, love that can't last or won't be found, beautiful things caught in the act of their passing—these are subjects that recur. A note was struck in "Gone," from *Chicago Poems*, which tells of the strange disappearance of a wild, passionate girl and plays wistfully on key words brought together in the end: "Everybody loved Chick Lorimer./ Nobody knows where she's gone" (p. 64). Many others are gone: M'Liss, who went away from the old home and left Louie with the yellow roses and moonlight, praying to "Let her be M'Liss always" (p. 389); Mamie, who dreamed of romance and went off to Chicago looking, and now works for six dollars a day in the basement of a department store, wondering about a bigger place "and real dreams/ that never go smash" (p. 17); boys in the yellow and gold of autumn who cried when the nuts were ripe: "And some are in machine shops; some are in the navy;/ And some are not on payrolls anywhere./ Their mothers are through waiting for them to come home" (p. 93).

In "Bilbea," a loneliness out of the past speaks to us in tablet writing from excavations of ancient Babylonia. The persona writes to his friend, evidently a

prostitute, to tell her he was in town Saturday night, went to the old place, saw the other girls, but found no Bilbea: "Have you gone to another house? or city?/ Why don't you write?/ I was sorry. I walked home half-sick" (p. 105). Modern loneliness is man searching in the encyclopedia for "Old-Fashioned Requited Love" and thinking, wryly, that the iceman "gripping a clear cube in summer sunlight" might know (p. 180). Love in these poems goes fast, and so does youth, beauty, and laughter, making the poet observe the green river of working girls flow past and wonder about "where it is all going" (p. 16). The lyric voice typically evokes a mood of passive meditative regret for all things that cannot be saved or grasped.

In his nature poems Sandburg is often like the Imagists of his day and their Japanese masters, attempting to catch a moment, a mood, in a single vivid descriptive picture. But he is also related to the Impressionist painters, conscious as they were of changing lights, shifting weather, the different looks of a bell-tower at morning and at night. In the celebrated "Nocturne in a Deserted Brickyard," motions of the moon, sand, shadows, willows, and waves come to rest momentarily in "a wide dreaming pansy of an old pond in the night" (p. 56). The same tension between motion and rest may be seen in "Flux," where the sea runs red as the sunset "reaches and quivers," and then yellow when the moon "slants and wavers" (p. 34). Such mood poems anticipate the fully expressed statement of "Hungry and Laughing Men," in which all things are running—water, horses, weather, days; what lasts is only the memory of things, often not of the thing itself but of "a pony heel mark" on the grass. Provoked by old notebooks of the Japanese painters, the poet writes his code:

Love to keep? There is no love to keep.
 There is memory of runners, foot-glad flingers,
 heel marks in the blue grass, running
 threats of interchangeable sun and rain-cloud. (p. 386)

If there is transience and death in nature, however, ultimately there is also regeneration. In "Autumn Movement" the poet cries over "beautiful things knowing no beautiful thing lasts"; yet as he tells how the cornflower yellow is torn full of holes, "new beautiful things come in the first spit of snow" (pp. 87-88). Or when "acres of birds" are spotting the air going south in "Falltime," something is finished, but he knows that some new beginning is on the way (p. 88). Or when watching a sunset from an Omaha hotel window—conscious that "Today is a goner" and "Another yellow plunger shoots the dark"—he knows that constellations are wheeling over the land and "all the talk is stars" (pp. 89-90). Stars, birds, the seasons, and those two great reservoirs of life, the sea and land, are for Sandburg great fixities in a world of constant flux, movement, and disappearance.

Nature gives him little assurance of a happy end for man. Human life goes down everywhere to darkness and long sleep. Departing, with arriving and living, is one of the unalterable facts of existence (p. 334), but it is a mysterious fact. "Now you see 'em, now you don't," we are told in "Death Snips Proud Men" (p. 177). Sandburg was haunted, even fascinated, by the strangeness of leave-taking, shown in "To Certain Journeymen" when he commends undertakers, hearse drivers, and gravediggers for knowing the secret behind

their job and laughing as they "earn a living by those who say good-by today in thin whispers" (p. 19). Sometimes he was stirred by nightmare thoughts of death, as in "Under a Hat Rim" (p. 25), but more often sensed the quiet inevitable letting go of loved things cited so beautifully in "Stars, Songs, Faces" (p. 207). All life must go, he says again in "Losses," and we hold at last only the shadows (p. 35).

When men go they go alone, and deep to the salty wet floor of the sea where green-eyed scavengers pick their eyes, or back to the sod, to silence and dust (pp. 58, 134). When men come they rise from the cool moist loam "To shape of rose leaf,/ Of face and shoulder," and only for a day (p. 98). Almost invariably the consolation for extinction in such poems is the breakup of individual identity, its submergence in nature, and a mingling of the flesh with the elements. Although in "Have Me" the poet could speak of his return to the root grass of the sea floor and of a present need, thus, for physical love—"Have me in the blue and the sun," he pleads (p. 130)—he often, nevertheless, feels oblivion to be a powerful attraction, an escape from the fever and fret of sensuous life. "Cool Tombs," from *Cornhuskers*, is the most famous expression of this theme. Light is thrown on that poem by another from the same volume, "Three Pieces on the Smoke of Autumn," in which the poet sinks into quiet harmony with nature but is disturbed, parenthetically, by letters received from the realms of war, art, and labor. His conclusion:

Better the blue silence and the gray west,
The autumn mist on the river,
And not any hate and not any love,
And not anything at all of the keen and the deep. . . . (p. 91)

Love as well as hate must stop in the cool tombs. All the hot passions are burned out together. At the end of *Chicago Poems* the poet makes death a junk man who comes around to pick up all the clocks that will not work right and are tired of ticking. How glad the clock is when the junk man carries it away (p. 75).

One poem from *Smoke and Steel*, "Broken-Face Gargoyles" (p. 175), is perhaps the most imaginative expression of Sandburg's longing to be free of the imperfections and limitations of the physical state. Consistent with other poems, death is figured here as a gentle undertaker who comes doing a swift and mystic buck and wing: "now you see it and now you don't." The magic of this anticipated event opens up a world of sensuous beauty—flashing fish and tangy apples—and "little fool homes" slammed together for birds, with open doors for all. Such beauty and freedom are not promised, however, until six o'clock in the evening a thousand years from now because the poet is not yet "footloose." All he can give us now is broken-face gargoyles:

a double gorilla head with two fish mouths and four eagle eyes hooked on a street wall, spouting water and looking two ways to the ends of the street for the new people, the young strangers, coming, coming, always coming.

Providing the title for *Always the Young Strangers*, the poet's own account of his early years, this passage promises a continuing surge of vitality in the

form of new life despite the imprisonment of the senses in an animal state. In "Gargoyle," a powerful and enigmatic early poem, a jeering mouth is pounded repeatedly by a fist driven by an electric wrist and shoulder. The mouth bleeds melted iron and its laugh is full of nails rattling (p. 137). In still an earlier poem, "Momus," the poet envies a gargoyle face in bronze that has evaded "all the iron things of life" and become a "Careless eye-witness of the spawning tides of men and women" suffering in the world (p. 45). "Gargoyle" produces a brutalized image of earthly horror and destruction; in "Momus" the gargoyle face has escaped to a high and detached mockery of the human condition. In "Broken-Face Gargoyles" something of both ideas may be present simultaneously. Here the twin heads have escaped the generational trap but are neither careless nor mocking as they look with eagle eyes, hopefully, for the young strangers, the new life that never fails to come. Yet in another sense these grotesque hooked heads suggest the animal passions that sometimes reduce life to "the iron things"—to a state of hot metal and mechanical cruelty. The power of the central symbol of the poem depends on tension between the twin suggestions of hope and present reality.

If Sandburg could see only occasional glimpses of light for the individual—both before and after death—he saw even fewer for tribes, nations, whole civilizations. One thing he was sure of as early as *Chicago Poems* is that all worlds made by men, both great and small, go down to dust. In "A Coin," for example, he examines buffalo and Indian-head pennies—"Partners in the mist"—and pays them a poignant farewell (p. 20). In "The Has-Been" a thoughtless boy chips and splatters the face of an ancient stone figure and laughs; but the face is silent, "seeming to clutch a secret" (p. 20).³ These and other early poems, such as "In a Back Alley," "Limited," "Bronzes," and "Under"—the last depicting the undertow as "a sleepless/ Slowfaring eater/ Maker of rust and rot" (p. 47)—are succeeded by the slangy treatment in "The Sins of Kalamazoo," from *Smoke and Steel*, in which the lover of the city just as it is speaks to the loved one:

Kalamazoo, both of us will do a fadeaway.
I will be carried out feet first
And time and the rain will chew you to dust
And the winds blow you away. (p. 174)

At the end he is prompted to wish that Kalamazoo had hounds with bronze paws on its public square (p. 175), a fanciful coda to the theme of change and death. "Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind" is a more formal treatment of the death of worlds; and in a poem from *Slabs of the Sunburnt West*, "At the Gates of Tombs," Sandburg suggests why the death of civilizations is the law of life. Anyone who calls for a world in which sacred and beautiful things shall last—any "noisy gazook"—shall die first: "gag 'em, lock 'em up, get 'em bumped off" (pp. 293-94). The law derives from man himself, but the poet implies that it is a law nonetheless.

The meaning of all this death in the world is usually lost on Sandburg. He finds the dead to be both voiceless and deaf. They hold under their tongues "A locked-up story" (pp. 46, 59). His obsession with loss springs, in part at least,

from his bewilderment in the face of the mystery. One need go no further than *Chicago Poems* to see how unable he is to find answers and how equally unable he is to stop asking the questions. A poem entitled "The Answer" gives the typical response: Silence (p. 45). In others all the last answers "Go running back to dust and mist" (p. 57), or mist becomes the cause of the "voiceless, baffled, patient Sphinx" (p. 75).⁴ Richard Crowder has found Sandburg's persistent repetition of the unanswerable questions, without coming near a conclusion, to be tiresome and irritating to himself and many other readers.⁵

In his preface to *Complete Poems*, the poet characterizes life as inexplicable, incomprehensible, imponderable, and unfathomed (p. xxi). He seems to feel, in a typically romantic way, that poetry is chiefly a matter of expressing these things. A review in *Poetry* written by William Carlos Williams in 1951 helped to seal Sandburg's fate for two decades by blaming his formlessness on a lack of a motivating spirit or theory of poetry;⁶ but it seems reasonably clear that behind his poetic theory, or its absence, is his bafflement in the presence of life's formlessness, that his weaknesses of structure reflect the dominant uncertainty and indecisiveness of his philosophic mind. "What can be explained is not poetry" (p. xxii), Yeats's father is quoted as saying, a maxim that appealed to our poet because he found so little himself that could be explained.

Sandburg's uneasiness in the physical world was not allayed by any conventional religious faith. One critic's examination of his Christian references finds a strong religious feeling and expression running through his poetry,⁷ but no one has argued convincingly that his work evinces an explicit acceptance of the Word. Dan Hoffman's view that he cut himself off from his own "deepest resources" by abandoning the individual consciousness for the field of collective emotions⁸ is essentially correct, but it overlooks the possibility that these resources were neither deep nor extensive. Someone passionately devoted to a humanistic ethic but obsessed by the purposelessness and pain of human existence might find the drama of intense personal passions unbearable and possibly irrelevant. Walt Whitman fashioned a poetic whole from the triad of principles enunciated in his *Democratic Vistas*: democratic en-masse, spirituality, and, in the center, "personalism," the "centripetal isolation of the human being in himself."⁹ In Sandburg the "Me" gives way and with it goes the possibility of either traditional Christian or Transcendental responses, both of which depend on a belief in the significance of the individual spirit. He is left with the principle of democracy, Whitman's "unyielding principle of the average,"¹⁰ and with the need to find in it a bulwark against the troubling facts of being and experience. In *The People, Yes*, Sandburg arrives at a theme in which his skepticism is played off by, even made to confirm, a religious faith that makes personal questions unimportant. He arrives at the divinity of the people.

The People, Yes is a bleak picture of democracy in 1936. Everywhere we find liars, cheats, fixers, panderers, thieves—opportunists and exploiters all. Politics is crooked, industry ruthless and unfeeling, labor bosses self-serving, journalists cynical and without ideals, judges and lawyers on the take. Money is god. Through it all run the twin specters of hunger and heartbreak. Unemployment lines, broken promises, and exploded dreams are the heritage

of a nation. Against this tale of injustice and deprivation the poet asserts his faith in the resilient life of the common people, although his conclusion that "Man will yet win" (p. 617) is less than convincing. The ways and means for making a better world are lacking, and triumph over evil is as far off as ever at the end. The poem could offer little hope to reformers with their eye on the realities of experience. What is more convincing, however, is an imaginative theory of the people that has informed his poetry from the beginning and is given full expression in *The People, Yes*.

Sandburg's primary motive is to provide answers to two questions posed early in the poem: What is the people and where is it going? To the first question he replies,

Is this far off from asking what is grass?
what is salt? what is the sea? what is loam? (p. 456)

A basic identification with nature is thus established. Man comes out of the sea and is a mixture of earth and air, a walking drug store, in fact, proven by the poet in a pharmaceutical *tour de force* on the human body (pp. 539-40). The sea is not only man's origin but a fitting symbol of the people (p. 443). Throughout the poem sea and grass are important symbols of the mass because, for Sandburg, these are collective words in an absolute sense. He refuses to assert, with Whitman, that a single blade of grass has equal validity apart from and as part of the whole. He seems to find comfort and strength in the belief that the people, like nature, constitutes a massed whole without individuating tendencies that would expose it to death in the world.

The poet believes that the instincts of the people are one with the world of natural phenomena. At the beginning he says that the people know what the land knows (p. 442), a truth clarified when we see that homing instincts of the purple martins—their sense of where to go and how—are like those of the people (pp. 452-53). Later the people seems like a monster turtle in its slow obedience to necessity and even seems to develop, like the birds and moths, "protective coloration" in its Darwinian adaptation to a cruel environment (p. 518). As the theme of festering discontent and incipient revolt emerges, analogies are made to the deep-sea squid and the machine world of the insects which do what they must, instinctively (pp. 591, 562). The fear that prompted Hamilton to call the people "a great beast" is justified (p. 469) because the people, it is implied, is a force of nature that will not be denied its right to live.

The energy of life itself is the key point in Sandburg's definition of the people. The point was first made in "I Am the People, the Mob," from *Chicago Poems*: "Everything but Death comes to me and makes me work and give up what I have" (p. 71). Now the point is made chiefly through a stupendous transcription of the language of the people. The grass, like the people, goes to sleep, lives again, but has no name for it (p. 528). But people, Sandburg suggests, do name it: in their anecdotes they express their immortal life. "The footholds of the earth nourish the majestic people," and from the people come a deluge of sayings, anecdotes, proverbs, and yarns (p. 471). The poem is a veritable archive of quotations from the common idiom expressing the optimism and pessimism of the people, its wisdom and folly, common sense, courage, fears, and superstitions. The effect of the whole is to prove the

historical fact of the vitality, the staying power of the people in a world of suffering, monotony, and death. Wolfgang Mieder has recently counted 322 different proverbs in the poem,¹¹ a staggering figure attesting to the people's wisdom for survival and contrasting to the first section of the poem that describes the terrible chaos of tongues in the fatal "Tower of Babel job" (p. 440). This surging irrepressible chorus of quotations, which is similar in many ways to the epic catalog and places the poem, incidentally, among the longest in the language, has the single function of echoing or punctuating the concept of a perpetual life of the people in the midst of endless trouble and meaningless extinction.

While celebrating the great instinctive principle of life animating the people, Sandburg is aware of another element; for the birds leave off where man begins (p. 463). The people is "Mixed from a bowl of sky blue dreams and sea slime facts," or as one Chicago poet confessed, he was both an earthworm and a rider to the moon (pp. 470, 465). The motif of the people as dreamer is introduced in the story of Mildred Klinghofer (a name from the people) who lost two babies in infancy and had a "child-hunger" deep within her until her last hours when, her mind wandering, she cried out for her baby and was solaced by a rag doll: "There are dreams stronger than death" (p. 447), the poet concludes, suggesting that these too are part of the immortal life of the people. The keystone to the arch of life is hope, and the arch is alive and singing, restlessly, as alive as the rivers that run into the sea and return in fog and rain (pp. 451-52). Mist, fog, and smoke in this poem stand for the thin but alive air of dreams as well as the mystery that lies beyond.

Sandburg's second primary question involves the destination of these "moon shooters" (p. 608). "Where to? What next?" is a refrain heard in rhythmic succession from first to last, and a sobering answer is given when the Sphinx breaks its long silence to say, "'Don't expect too much'" (p. 450). The moving sea and wind sing the song of the people: "Man will never arrive, man will be always on the way" (p. 479). "'Where you going?'" the people ask one another (p. 530). Even Lincoln, a dreamer, wishes he knew "'whither we are tending'" (p. 525). History is simply "'Born, troubled, died'" and the future is "'Maybe'" (p. 502). Yet the poet rejoices in the illusions and great unfulfilled expectations of the people (pp. 464-65). Because hope drives the life-giving, life-saving energy, he seems to say, the rag dolls with which aspirations are usually rewarded are useful things. Dreaming in the dark the people is heroic. Uncertainty which ends in loneliness and heart-sickness in the personal lyrics is thus converted into a positive force for continuing vitality.

In one of the most remarkable passages in a remarkable poem, a "dreambook seller" operating in the streets of Chicago gives the people he accosts what they need, although privately harboring terrifying thoughts of extinction. This little "humpty-dumpty runt of a man," overcoming his initial impulse to preach a *nada* world, finally sells the people rainbows and crimson dawns and the assurance that they shall never be tired until the sea is tired, that they will be hard as nails and soft as blue fog (pp. 567-68). Turning the corner afterward, this scholar-clown talks to himself

about the dust of the knuckles of his great-grandfathers, how they once were hard as nails and could pick a vest-button with a bullet, and how his own little knuckles

sometime would shiver into fine dust and how he wanted snowdrifts piled over him and the inscription: HERE NO ONE LIES BURIED. (pp. 568-69)

The People, Yes is revealed as Sandburg's dreambook of and for the people. The opposing principles—misery, loss, transience, the death of individuals—are negated by the glorious fact of the people's coming and becoming. The dreambook seller touched a sensitive nerve. Individual death is all around us: "Men live like birds together in a wood; when the time comes each takes his flight." Then new men take the places of the old (p. 509). Tribes, nations, clans have their hour: "Breeds run out/ and shining names/ no longer shine." Yet one might chisel a headstone of John Doe or Richard Roe, step back, and ask oneself, "'Can this be so when I myself am John Doe,/ when I myself am Richard Roe?'" (p. 575). In mystic lines the poet affirms the sacred Whitman principle of unity between past and present life and sings the permanent life of the people that, like the animals, disregards the extinction of the individual. The dreambook seller longed for the snowdrifts of oblivion when he could have rejoiced in his mortal condition. No one, indeed, lies buried in his grave, for he and everyone live on in the species. John Doe is, yet is not, the name of an individual. Richard Roe dies, but there are Richard Roes everywhere among the people. The ancient myth of rebirth and eternal life is shaped by the poet into a dreambook for today.

In the early poem, "I Am the People, the Mob," the mass is the seed ground for leaders, both the Napoleons and the Lincolns (p. 71). Although Sandburg seems reluctant to acknowledge it in his epic, the implication throughout is that all those despicable individuals who rise above other men to deny and exploit them come out of that seed ground—so many that one asks at times who is left to represent the people. He is not reluctant, however, to say that all of them return to it eventually. Well-known earlier poems, such as "Southern Pacific" and "A Fence," show that death as the great leveler was not a new thing in Sandburg's poetry. The earth is full of "the burst bladders of the puffed-up," he says now, and "the big shots" fade through the glass of death "For discussion in an autocracy of worms" (pp. 511, 471). Through the death of individuals the people becomes not only a seedbed for history but a reservoir of human reserves:

The river of welcome wherein the broken First Families fade,
The great pool wherein wornout breeds and clans drop for restorative silence.
(p. 576)

Death becomes here more than a minister of justice; it is the agent guaranteeing a constant renewal of human vitality purified of all corruption. Death in war is the one kind of extinction that threatens rather than feeds the life of the people. War is not a major subject of this poem of the Great Depression, but in other works the poet's horror of the appalling numbers of dead on the battlefields is consistent with his belief that the people's health depends on the normal flow between life and death, on a natural rise and fall of individuals from the great purifying pool of the people.¹²

The poem does not develop logically toward a conclusion; but as the intensity of its emotion increases, more and more hints are dropped that point

to some optimistic resolution. The poet seems to concur with the people's belief that they have come far and will go farther yet (pp. 520, 596). The gains, although small, can be counted and the people's laughter in misery, foretoking revolt, carries fear to those in power (p. 537). What can stop the people from taking more of their own? (p. 555). Those who deny the people are heard for the last time and dismissed, for one by one they will pass "and rest amid silver handles and heavy roses/ and forgotten hymns sung to their forgotten names" (p. 606). Guesses govern the final sections in which the sleeping people awake, violently, and it is predicted, "Man will yet win" (p. 617).

They are but guesses, however, and as Oscar Cargill has suggested in his essay on the rather mild radicalism of the poem, a belief that "the dream of equity will win" (p. 561) is the belief in a dream, not the reality.¹³ Our real yea-sayer speaks in the words, "The people will live on" (p. 615), and there only. Nothing in Sandburg's poem warrants a resolution between the forces of social justice and those who deny it and, indeed, the poet has not truly created one. His chief evidence has been that the people move constantly from chaos to order and to chaos again (p. 525). Poobahs rise until their use is over; then other poobahs step into their shoes and hold their poobah sway: "The same great river carries along/ its foamflecks of poobahs and plain people." All are carried together down the crumbling river of life (p. 544). It is a curiously static theory of history that causes the poet to deny the possibility of progress and development implicit in previous cyclic theories, those advanced in the nineteenth century, for instance, by Thomas Arnold and the liberal Anglicans.

The people will live on. That is the Word. The machine world of the insects engaged in their engineering exploits carries lessons and warnings: "they do what they must," and the flowing of the stream of life clears it of the pollution of those who have forgotten how to work and the price at which it continues (p. 562). The movement, not the end, is the object. Instinct explains the vague decree that comes to the people in the conclusion: " 'Tomorrow you do this because/ you can do nothing else' " (p. 611). When circumstances dictate the people will do what it must, not to obtain the millennium or final triumph over evil, but for life, the one thing that defines its immortality.

Sandburg owes something to the evolutionism of the German Romantics, for whom truths were revealed through a religion of a struggling, gradually self-realizing Life-Force.¹⁴ Arthur Lovejoy has shown this best by quoting Schelling:

Has creation a final goal? And if so, why was it not reached at once? Why was the consummation not realized from the beginning? To these questions there is but one answer: Because God is *Life*, and not merely being. All life has a *fate*, and is subject to suffering and to becoming. . . . Being is *sensible* only in becoming.¹⁵

Our poet would seem to deny a faith in the proliferating growth and development of individual forms upon which this philosophy rests. Yet the people is always on the move; and in a world of eternal becoming, it never arrives. It attains self-realization by hearing the truth: " 'The voice of the people is the voice of God' " (p. 588). The people has heard,

"Something began me
and it has no beginning:
something will end me
and it has no end." (p. 589)

That something, for the poet, is the great purified pool from which all energy and force of the people come. The voice of God is in all the words of the people—petty, commonplace, or exalted—heard throughout *The People, Yes*. The skeptical poet, haunted by thoughts of extinction, is subsumed in his dreambook for today. The people is God, immortal and divine; its life is "a hallelujah chorus forever changing its star soloists" (p. 588). These soloists are not individual men and women, but the mass, "a moving monolith" called the people. In the ceaseless force of its movement the poet finds its meaning and his own faith.

NOTES

¹ "Band Concert," *Complete Poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1950), p. 90. Further references to this edition are indicated by page numbers inserted parenthetically in the text.

² "Carl Sandburg," *New Republic*, 9 Sept. 1936; rpt. in *After the Genteel Tradition*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1964), p. 69.

³ William Alexander, in "The Limited American, the Great Loneliness, and the Singing Fire: Carl Sandburg's 'Chicago Poems,'" *American Literature*, 45 (1973), 67-68, sees both of these poems as belonging to a short sequence of poems—including the justly famous "Limited"—that strikes a major theme of American writing in the first thirty years of this century. In this sequence, Alexander suggests, the contemporary American is shown to have lost touch with the eternal verities and with his own deeper national traditions. My emphasis differs from his insofar as I try to see these early poems as being consistent with the poet's general sense of an inevitable decay and death of civilizations.

⁴ Arvin, in "Carl Sandburg," p. 69, cites the key images that are true emblems of the poet's almost unrelieved uncertainty: mist, fog, phantoms, ashes, and dust. One might add "smoke."

⁵ *Carl Sandburg* (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 83.

⁶ "Carl Sandburg's *Complete Poems*," *Poetry*, Sept. 1951, p. 345.

⁷ Henry E. Kolbe, *Religion in Life*, 27 (1959), 249.

⁸ "Sandburg and 'The People': His Literary Populism Reappraised," *Antioch Review*, 10 (1950), 277-78.

⁹ *Collect and Other Prose*, Vol. 11 of *Prose Works 1892*, in *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 391, 398.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

¹¹ "Proverbs in Carl Sandburg's Poem 'The People, Yes,'" *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 37 (1973), 15.

¹² For lyrics in *Chicago Poems* and *Cornhuskers* that focus on large numbers—on the "acres" of men buried by the engines of modern warfare—see "Killers," "Statistics," "Buttons," "Wars," "Shenandoah," "Grass," "Out of White Lips," "A Million Young Workmen," "Smoke," and "The Four Brothers."

¹³ "Carl Sandburg: Crusader and Mystic," *English Journal*, 39 (1950), 182.

¹⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (1936; rpt. New York: Harper, 1960), p. 317.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

Sandburg's Chromatic Vision in *Honey and Salt*

RICHARD CROWDER

Caroline Spurgeon reminds us that the act of seeing involves all that man is. It is the means by which, for example, the poet observes and absorbs a great part of life, engaging both the mentality and the imagination in receiving sight impressions, then describing them and giving them significance. The poet as a whole person is involved.¹

Not least in the seeing process is the reception of colors, to which some observers are patently more sensitive than others. Faber Birren remarks, as case in point, that psychologists frequently find older people more inclined to notice form than color.² Birren is a well-known American consultant in color, author of numerous books on the subject with relation not only to personality but also to such topics as interior decoration, printing, packaging, sales, mental therapy, and painting. His clients have included many large businesses, and some twenty-five years ago he developed standards of color practice adopted by the United States Navy and Coast Guard. Birren's credentials are considerable. What he has to say about the connection between one's color preferences, age, and traits of character can be accepted with confidence, for his statements are drawn not from the surmises of tea-room faddists but from the considered conclusions of psychologists, psychoanalysts, and biologists after myriad experiments and discoveries.

Carl Sandburg was an exception to Birren's generalization about the elderly and their apparent decreased interest in color, for as an old man (his last book was published on his eighty-fifth birthday) he was addicted to color more than were any of his contemporaries in their last work. His *Honey and Salt* (1963) makes reference to colors close to three hundred times, more often than not in observation of the phenomena of the natural scene. Although he moved from the Midwest to North Carolina twenty-two years before his death, he never forgot the prairies and the cornfields, the skies and the water of his birth region. On the other hand, always sensitive to the scene about him, he recorded the nuances of change in his new surroundings as well, including mountains and sea, from morning to evening, from day to day, from season to season. The hue and shade in which he took such pleasure is the subject of this essay, together with some speculation as to their possible psychological implications drawn from Birren's analysis.

By way of contrast with Sandburg, Wallace Stevens refers to color only some forty-five times in "The Rock," the last section of his *Collected Poems*

(1954). The fact that Stevens by this time was almost totally ruminative ("The Plain Sense of Things," "The World as Meditation," "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself") may in part explain not only the scarcity of color but also the tranquillity of what colors there are, the dominating greens and blues with dashes of brilliance only for accent.

E. A. Robinson, in *Nicodemus* (1932), his final book of shorter poems, presents a different problem because of his bias toward character analysis. He uses black more than any other color, and that chiefly in describing the central figure of "Toussaint L'Ouverture." Total color references are fewer than in Stevens. Fire and blood, brought into the picture of violence in some of the poems, are next in frequency to black, but a paucity of vivid color is a marked trait of Robinson, whose efforts are expended not on exterior description but on attempts at understanding the interior lives of his characters.

Ezra Pound's "Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII" (1969) contains a few whites, blues, and greens, a scattering of yellows, reds, blacks, and one gray. Had not the elderly Pound lost much of his energy? Had he not turned to contemplation at the cost of earlier exuberance and vituperation? Cool colors would tend to support such a conclusion.

In *Four Quartets* (1943) of T. S. Eliot it is not surprising that "fire" ("flame," "glow," "glare") exceeds the whites and grays by fourfold, for it is toward the "crowned knot of fire" that the soul is voyaging. Except for a few instances of red and sapphire, the other colors, thinly spread, are fairly subdued: brown, yellow, black, and green. The poet was only in his mid-fifties when *Four Quartets* was published, but after this book he turned his attentions to the drama. One can explain the colors in part by saying that much of the imagery is liturgical (fire) and also by recognizing that the poetry is largely cerebral (white and gray). On the whole, however, references to color are rare.

In Book Five of *Paterson* (1958, the poet being seventy-five) William Carlos Williams is persistent in his repetition of white, especially in the description of a unicorn and a tapestry. Other than the whites there is relatively little color, compared, for example, with the last poems of Stevens. One might speculate the cause as being Williams's scientific mind (accustomed to antisepsis) or possibly fidelity to the outward colorlessness of industrial New Jersey.

Like Marianne Moore, E. E. Cummings distributes the colors with a steady unlavish hand in his last collection, *73 Poems* (posthumous, 1963). Whites are more numerous than any other color. One would expect, if memory does not fail, some fair-sized quantities of green and gold, but there are only five of the one and four of the other. After two reds, the list dwindles to one reference each to blue, yellow, purple, and fire. In the last of these poems, Cummings uses the concept of timelessness to show what time is.³ Color finds no easy place in such transcendental abstraction.

Robert Frost's last book of short poems to all intents and purposes ignores color. In the sixty pages of *In the Clearing* (1962) colors are named only nine times and then not always color for its own sake: "the Red Man," "da Gama's gold," "an albino monkey," "like a ripe tomato," "a pitch-dark limitless grove," "the orchard green," "flowery burst of pink and white," and "the Milky Way."

For a poet who relates himself closely to the out-of-doors, this dearth is surprising. Page after page is devoid of even a hint of color. If Birren's observation is valid, that, as one ages, his interest is elsewhere than in color, then assuredly Frost as old man would be proof positive.⁴

Not so with Sandburg. In *Honey and Salt* over two hundred eighty-five color references occur, either by overt naming or by suggestion (in sixty-five pages of the *Complete Poems*⁵). With the exception of the Robinson and Frost books, the other collections we have named are considerably shorter, but, even so, to judge by the number of color references divided by the number of pages, no other major twentieth-century American poet born before 1900 was so prodigal of color as Sandburg.

Victor Laprade, the nineteenth-century French poet, said that in order to be effective in writing and describing (he makes a play on *peindre*), it is not enough for a poet to think, but he must also see.⁶ It can be said that Sandburg began by seeing not only shapes, but tints. He had a vivid sense of color which he relied on all his life. His first book, *Chicago Poems* (1916), although not quite so "colorful" as *Honey and Salt*, nevertheless made use of hue and shade over two hundred fifty times. In this first book reds are prominent, for there is a great deal of brawling and heartiness as well as a sense of social injustice here (red being a color of violence). White is next, followed in frequency by yellow, brown, and gray in close order. Not so often, but at the same time not so sparse as in Williams or Moore, are green, blue, purple, flame, and black (but none of the pink to be found in the final book).

Forty-seven years later, his life drawing to a close, Sandburg is still painting his images in varied and brilliant, often dazzling colors. Even when he does not mention particular hues, he is aware of the presence of "tint," "glint," "rainbow," "dark flower," and "sunny hill" as well as "crystal" and "prism," which reflect color. He records the achromatic object colors black and white in both literal description and imaginative figure (as we shall see)—white most of all, black ten times.

Sandburg's long-time friend Archibald MacLeish said of him in a memorial address: "With Sandburg it is the body of the work that weighs, the sum of it, a whole quite literally greater than the total of its parts."⁷ The first poem of *Chicago Poems* records details of a brawny metropolis; the last poem in *Honey and Salt*, over seven hundred fifty pages later, celebrates the evolutionary rise and triumph of the Family of Man. Between are hundreds of poems, long and short, made of particulars touched, smelled, tasted, heard, and above all seen, that add up to a holistic picture of life itself. This impressionistic collection emphasizes immediate objects and action without analytical attention or intellectual speculation. It reminds one of the painters of the last third of the nineteenth century (Monet, for example) whose short brush strokes of bright colors in close proximity put the burden of mixing on the mind and psychological reaction of the beholder. *Honey and Salt's* seventy-six poems focus on love and alienation (and evanescence), compassion and indifference, identity and the impersonality of number, but Sandburg's steady theme is empirical: the vanity of trying to attain abstract definitions of the big concepts. Day-by-day living and observing yield what answers are available. No one poem settles the matter; all the poems add up to the all-important sum total. His many metaphors for love, for example, are to be found in the unexpected

little quotidian experiences. These seemingly inconsequential sights and sounds, to return to the Impressionists, become in juxtaposition the differentiated whole.⁸

In examining the color references, we will move from the smallest number to the greatest. Pink, purple, and black occur least of all in Sandburg's last book. Pink is the color of flamingo feathers (pp. 736, 763), but the poet carries the color into symbolism in his search for the qualities of love, an ultimately indescribable delicacy. A first sign of love is "pink doors closing one by one" (p. 707), the seductive charm of narrowing choices. Just as Emily Dickinson (whom Sandburg admired) selected her "own society," so, says Sandburg, does the young lover see that he must close "pink doors . . . one by one." In another metaphoric use of color, Sandburg suggests the nubile properties of a burgeoning season in "The pink nipples of the earth in springtime" (p. 759), an image which has its source not only in the sight of fruit-tree blooms but in a sense of fertile youth and promise. The shade of rose in "First Sonata for Karlen Paula" serves as harmonizing factor: "rose-candle co-ordinations" (p. 749) and "rose-light" as a pool in which floats a "ring of topaz," but this is virtually a literal description of the sky at daybreak. Elsewhere, the poet speculates that lovers may have talked of "wild arbutus they found" (p. 751). So, except for the pink doors and the pink nipples, Sandburg uses the color only to picture straightforwardly what he has seen. In context a mood of charm, softness, and warmth emerges. Birren says indeed that pink is the color of love and affection. A person who prefers it is said to be likable and to have a fond attachment for the full life, even although he may not have a strong capacity for participating in it. But note this: Sandburg chooses to color his images pink very rarely.

Purple (including violet, amethyst, and lavender) is of no more interest to the poet than pink. He uses it to little symbolic purpose. It helps him to describe the sea (pp. 714, 722, 759), the distant scene—mountains and horizon (pp. 707, 743), the coming of evening (p. 730), and the wings of a luna moth (p. 764). Only in one place does he put the evolutionary past far back "among lavender shadows" (p. 761), where the facts are hard to distinguish, where the purple shades are opaque screens between the here and the there, the now and the then.

As for black, it describes the feathers of a crow (p. 763) and the rings of a caterpillar (p. 764), but it does more. It is the background for various forms of light: actual lights of an evening (p. 708) and fireworks contrasting with black water (p. 749); five brass ships in "pools of ink" (p. 724); lightning in "a black rain" (p. 720); and dawn coming "out of the night of black ice" (p. 710). This latter is somewhat symbolic, for day is pictured as warm and friendly in contrast with the darkness and potential hostility of night. The same kind of threat emerges in the image of love as a rose which will "curl black" (p. 737) as the relationship withers and in the emptiness of "the Black Void" (p. 767). On the other hand, no threat at all, but a voluptuous appeal is intended in "the black velvet sheen of midnight" (p. 736) and the beautiful and fresh image of "The long black eyelashes of summer's look" (p. 759). Contrast, background, threat, and luxuriousness—although black is in limited supply in this book, it is put to varied use.

Green, flame, and brown are the colors next in frequency (about fifteen times each). Green is often the color of water, especially the sea (pp. 756, 759, 760, 761), and of water creatures: lobsters are gray-green (p. 760) and sea-green (p. 763); a frog is as "green as the scum he sits on" (p. 764). Green is the color of mist (pp. 767, 769), moss (p. 749), and a parakeet (p. 768). Only twice does Sandburg go beyond literal description: when he brushes in the scene of spring with a synecdochic "creep of green on branches" (p. 733) and suggests heat, sensuousness, and a slow pace in "pearl-green miles of summer months" (p. 764).

Sandburg's use of fire and flame is in general conventional. He mentions Elijah's "chariot of fire" (p. 714); he pictures burning cornstalks lighting up the November sky with their fire (p. 727); a fire dancer waves "two flambeaus" (p. 730); the "fire leaves" of a bonfire sing "a slow song" (p. 749). Flaming blossoms (pp. 731, 738), leaves (p. 770), and sun (pp. 710, 758) do not surprise the reader. It is natural for Sandburg to put flame and fire in opposition to coolness: colored leaves reflected in river water may suggest to the viewer a Nazi burning of a ghetto—"a slow fire of Warsaw" (p. 746); the earth is a "heaving fireball cooled off" (p. 770); a dead man is "proof against/ ice or fire" (p. 726); in the long evolutionary poem "Timesweep," the poet uses a metaphor of "flame" to suggest the energy of the year's seasons at their peaks and the "cool" as their beginnings and endings:

Each speaks its own oaths of the cool and the flame
of naked possessions clothed and come naked again. (p. 759)

Similarly, shades of brown (bronze, rust, sorrel, russet, umber, tan, tawny) are often very quick strokes of the impressionist's brush. They describe an evening sky (p. 724) and the foliage of autumn (pp. 745, 746, 759), which is also characterized by wheatstraw and cornshock (pp. 733, 745). Mention of "the red fox" (p. 765) implies orange-red to reddish brown. A pony on the prairie has a "sorrel face" (p. 768); pigeons are "mate brown" (p. 768).

But brown adds to the poet's figurative language more than the colors we have considered so far. For lovers, as evening comes, the moon is "a bronze wafer" (p. 735). Ships at anchor "fade into walls of umber" (p. 724). The honey of the book's title poem is the golden side of love—the sweetness, the glisten (p. 706). Love can appear unexpectedly, for sometimes "it's a summer tan" (p. 706), but, unfortunately, love as symbolized by the rose can "wither brown" (p. 737). Statues of strong leaders invite the epithet "bronze gods" (p. 721), although the seeming endurance of bronze must not be misleading ("Ubi sunt. . .?"). In giving advice to his granddaughter, the poet proposes occasional contemplation, the child seated "silent in a chair of tarnished bronze" (a brown study?), her mood a combination of quiet, antique music and autumn melancholy: "Now I will be/ a clavichord melody/ in October brown" (p. 750).

Brown and its shades, according to Birren's researches,¹⁰ indicate substantiality, dependability, steadiness, agelessness. For Sandburg they would appear variously to hold these qualities, yes, but also a tinge of sadness, evanescence (when the rose turns brown, when day disappears into night), and introspection ("October brown").

Sandburg at eighty-five was more interested in gray than in the colors we have thus far touched upon (although other colors, as will be apparent, were still more useful to him). Gray (which in these poems includes "mousey," "gunmetal," and "smoke") is often the first choice of older, mature people; a quiet mixture of the entire spectrum, it typifies life on an even keel—nothing too much.¹¹ Although white, blue, and green are colors that the poet uses to color the sea, sometimes water is also gray, especially if the mood is meditative (pp. 711, 747, 748). The season of the year has an influence:

To the north is the gray sky.
 Winter hung it gray for the gray
 elm to stand dark against. (p. 722)

Fog is generally gray (pp. 729, 755), as when mountains in a Japanese print go "into gray shawls on Friday" (p. 743); and mountains themselves can be gray as they slope down "to the rivers" (p. 747). A tree frog is hard to distinguish against "the tree-bark-gray" (p. 764). More particularly, the bark of the hickory and the beech is gray (pp. 746, 770), the latter actually "silver-gray." Weevils leave "ashen paths" (p. 764).

Sandburg encapsulates maternal love and influence in the phrase "a mother's grey eyes singing to her children" (p. 753). The quietness of a deep love is characterized by "a little gray sparrow" (p. 735) and the unpresumptive "my little pretty mousey love" (p. 735). Smoke as gray connotes such a mood as melancholy or loneliness in "those in smoke garments" (p. 731) or vagueness tinged with pensiveness in "the smoke-shadow of a dream" (p. 768).

The poet puts gun-metal to two uses. He sees it first as the skeletal structure of a skyscraper: "The inside torso stands up in a plug of gun-metal" (p. 724). Then, the coming of evening is "a dusk of gun-metal" (p. 724). The most symbolic of the occurrences of the gray is in "Timesweep," when the persona refers to himself (a Whitmanesque representative of the human race) as "one more swimmer in the gold and gray procession" (p. 771); that is, in life that is sometimes triumphant and ecstatic, noble and elevated, sometimes introspective and tranquil, sad and monotonous.

From twenty-four references to grays, the leap to forty yellow-related hues is the beginning of an affirmative revelation about Sandburg. If we judge by his preferences in colors out of all the phenomena he could record in his world, Sandburg was no run-of-the-mill old man, content with a conventional modicum of grays, blacks, browns, and purples. A man who chooses yellows (including gold, brass, orange, saffron, and lemon), according to Birren, is good-natured and loves the companionship of other people. A man of good will, he is solicitous of others and even defers to their opinions and convictions. Characteristically euphoric, he rarely has mental problems, appears to be insulated against great heights and depths of emotion and intellect. A preference for various yellows shows imagination, interest in novelty, a nervous drive toward self-fulfillment. Yet the man may live in a world apart, introspective and contemplative.¹²

Although in Sandburg's poems such comments as "brass is a hard lean metal" and "gold is the most ductile metal" (p. 710) focus on qualities of malleability, the sensitive reader is aware also of their yellowish color, much of

which elsewhere occurs in straightforward description, recording, for example, the appearance of a lead pencil (p. 745), caterpillar rings and the wings of a lunar moth (p. 764), a fanciful "yellow horse" (p. 750), love as "a goldfinch" (p. 735), fireflies as "night gold" (p. 765). Autumn leaves, of course, he sees as yellow (pp. 743, 744, 746); wheatstraws are partly gold (p. 733), and corn is yellow (pp. 719, 727). The Missouri pours its yellow waters into the Mississippi (p. 719). Dust makes a yellow sheet over a cornfield (p. 753). In another season "the branches all end with the yellow and gold mice of early spring air" (p. 722).

Gold and topaz brighten the sky as dawn comes on (p. 750). Reflection of light tints the water of a fish bowl until it becomes "molten-gold air" (p. 755). At the end of the day the setting sun accents the landscapes "with shot gold of an evening" (p. 753). The wings of birds flash "in sunset gold" (p. 732). Five ships are "sheathed in brass haze" (p. 724). Along the sky "long tubes spread lemon" (p. 746), the color caught "in the lemon sea" (p. 747). The moon itself is sometimes gold (pp. 735, 752, 764) and sometimes brass (p. 735).

Oranges and bananas, just by being named, suggest their color (pp. 749, 768). The loot from a sunken ship is brass (p. 718). In apparel the poet notes "cream gold buttons" (p. 742), "yellow silk bandannas" (p. 750), "a pair of orange slippers" (p. 750), and ochre as part of a jockey's silks (p. 728).

More metaphorical is the description of life as a "gold and gray procession" (p. 771), gold bringing up images of brightness, triumph, and riches. In analyzing the first signs of love, the poet says it may be "a brass cry" or "a golden gong going ong ong ong-ng-ng" (p. 707), primarily onomatopoeic, but recalling color. Again, although he emphasizes metal as value, Sandburg suggests color in defining various levels of sin: brass and "old gold" (p. 748), an interesting reversal, for in the mercantile world gold would have greater monetary value than brass but here represents highly reprehensible offenses.

From time to time the poet writes of the responsibility of a user of words. In "Almanac" (p. 712) he bids the reader to

Take an alphabet of gold or mud and spell
as you wish any words: kiss me, kill me,
love, hate, ice, thought, victory.

If the speller's letters are of mud, the words may be vicious; if on the other hand, they are of gold, the result may be loving, contemplative, triumphant.

It is clear from this listing that Sandburg thinks highly of the euphoric and energetic color yellow and its related hues. As an old man he sees yellow more frequently in *Honey and Salt* than he did in the 1916 *Chicago Poems*. But even more is he drawn to images in red and blue and white. Red and blue, about equal in their appeal to the poet (references to each are in the mid-forties), generally are considered contradictory in their psychological implications.

Red is the color of interests directed outward.¹³ Through red the highly wrought emotions find release. (There are nearly twice as many reds in *Chicago Poems* as in the less explosive *Honey and Salt*.) A "red" man is more often than not vigorous, assertive, even impulsive, but with a base of deep sympathy. If his opinions are formed quickly, he is still not stubborn, but open to persuasion.

In the use of red Sandburg is now and then deliberately obscure in his attempt to express the ultimately inexpressible. He wrote to G. D. Eaton on July 14, 1922: "For me, it is a test of a work of art whether it has the elusive, the incommunicable."¹⁴ When his granddaughter asks, "Which of you on a golden morning/ has sent a silver bullet/ into a crimson target?" (p. 750), the reader's reaction must be mystification, for, although there is a hint of the rising sun, in context with "a silver bullet" there is no certain equation. "Copper" (p. 748), placed between "brass" on the one hand and "old gold" on the other, may indicate sins of middle seriousness, but the poet does not provide clarification. Some passionate mortal "may cry . . . / for red answers to a white riddle" (p. 717), but why "red"? For unthinking, possibly violent emotional reaction?

In a poem about Indians Sandburg employs the word *copper* three times, not only in indicating the skin hue of the people—"copper girl" and "copper men"—but in describing the evening sky: "the copper curve of prairie sunset" (p. 719). Blood, of course, brings red to mind (pp. 742, 763). Jockey's silks have red stripes (p. 728). "Red silk bandannas" (p. 734) and "red silk scarfs in a high wind" (p. 717) are symbols of love and passion.

Typically the poet's reds, like most of his colors, are literal in their function. A fire dancer flourishes her torches and casts "red shadows" (p. 730). In one of his many metaphors defining love and the signs of love, Sandburg says that sometimes love comes as "a slow blinking of two red lanterns in river mist" (p. 708). The sun is red in the morning (p. 723) and casts a "bronze and copper path" for the approach of dusk, itself a "maroon" (p. 724). The poet warns that, for appreciation's sake, "The praise of any slow red moonrise should be slow" (p. 710). To some viewers the moon appears "a copper coin" (p. 735), and at times there are "ribbons of red" across the sky (p. 753).

Among the birds Sandburg chooses the redbird (tanager?) and the cardinal (p. 763) and a maroon cockatoo (p. 768). His hippopotamus is "red-mouthed" (p. 728), his lobsters are "red and sea-green" (p. 763). In one of his obscure phrases he says of fish in a bowl that "their speech was scarlet" (p. 755), possibly explained by the reflection of light as they moved, breathed, and had their being. In seeking relevant metaphors for love, he speculates that perhaps love is "a big red apple" (pp. 736, 737), the color here not necessarily chosen for passion but for succulence and desirability.

Red plants and flowers especially attract the poet's attention. Redhaws are said to be of a "gypsy crimson" (p. 745), and sumach is red and crimson (p. 746). In the autumn "a red silk creeps among the broad ears" of corn, where also "A red flower ripens" (p. 727). In most passages the poet is more specific as to the kind of flower. Not unexpectedly, "Passion may come with baskets/ throwing paths of red rain flowers" (p. 717). (Is this a Sandburg invention? The dictionaries do not list "rain flowers.") He notes that "dahlia leaves are points of red" (p. 733), that poppies have "crimson sheaths" (p. 717), that carnations are crimson (p. 751). The rose is always red (crimson) in Sandburg—no yellow, no pink, no white, always red when the color is delineated. At dawn one sees "crimson ramblers/ up the ladders of daytime arriving" (p. 710). (Incidentally, this present participle echoes Sandburg's beloved Whitman.) But the rose he sees as inadequate symbol for love, although he struggles with it at length in

"Little Word, Little White Bird" (pp. 735-40). Sandburg's argument is that the rose is easily destroyed and very easily replaced (pp. 737-38). The rejection of the rose comes in spite of eleven occurrences in fifteen lines. The rose appears twenty-six times in *Honey and Salt*, and there is no reason to think of it as of any other color than red. (As in *Chicago Poems*, there are here many flowers, most of them mentioned only once.)

Interest in blue is about equal to interest in red in this final book. The combination, if we follow Birren, increases the complexity of Sandburg's portrait. Whereas red suggests an outgoing personality, blue is the color of deliberation and introspection.¹⁵ A man who prefers blue is sensitive not only to others but to himself. He knows himself well enough that he can keep a firm grip on his enthusiasms and passions. A "red" man can be talked into seeing justification in the other side of a question, but a "blue" man, filled with considerable egotism, will hold to his opinions as the last word, fixed, inflexible. If fame comes to a man who prefers red, it generally is the result of his restlessness, whereas a man who chooses blue will achieve fame only through patience and perseverance.

How then does Sandburg make use of blue? Generally in a quite conservative and conventional way. He sees water bugs as blue (p. 764) and notes that baboons have blue rumps (p. 766). Fog, mist, smoke, and flame are tinged with blue (pp. 708, 710, 749, 754, 758, 767). He speculates that "a quiet blue flower" or even specifically bluebells might have been in the lover's mind when he told his sweetheart, "Thou art like a flower" (p. 751). He celebrates the morning glory as it "staggers on/ a path of sea-blue, sky-blue/ Gettysburg Union blue" (p. 741). (Sandburg the Lincoln enthusiast is speaking here.) He describes the delphinium in his brother-in-law Edward Steichen's Connecticut garden as "a rocketform of blue" (p. 753) bearing "little mistblue cups" (p. 754).

Distances make objects blue: there are "blue peaks" (p. 743); a haystack is a "blue smudge" (p. 753). And of course the sky is blue (pp. 716, 729, 743, 744, 745, 753, 755, 759, 760, 763). In describing Lake Michigan the poet sees blue in constant interplay with white in true impressionistic style: "water blown from snowwhite mountains/ met the blue rise of lowland waters" (p. 732). And among other colors the sea is blue (pp. 722, 747, 748). In writing of "New Weather," Sandburg recalls that "Fair weather rode in with a blue oath" (a promise of continuance?). But what happened? "Blue rains soaked the lowland loam" (p. 733).

Finally, in "Impasse" the poet seems to equate the mystery of tricks of magic with "offertories in blue," begging the performer to "Tell us again: Nothing is impossible./ We listen while you tell us" (p. 728). Men long for certainties, for reassurances, but the truth is that, when the show is over, confidence fades into the blue.

White, supposed to denote naiveté and innocence (in Sandburg surely only a pose), recalls purity and youth (which the impatience of some readers of this poet would label childishness). White is commonly associated with simplicity, candid honesty, and decency.¹⁶ Far from being an absence of color, however, white for Sandburg is a lively hue in its own right. Goethe is said to have considered white the brightest of all colors, and the same can be said of Sandburg, whose images do not tend toward the fearful white spider, moth,

and heal-all of Frost's "Design," nor indeed the threatening whiteness of Moby Dick. Rather, characteristically, the whiteness of the salt in the title poem calls forth the Biblical "savor" of a life lived in love (p. 706).

More references to white than to any other color accent *Honey and Salt* (over fifty-five, including milk, snow, ice, lamb wool, silver, tin, and aluminum). *Chicago Poems*, forty-seven years before, contained about the same number, topped, however, by nearly seventy-five references to red, possibly because of Sandburg's bursts of violence in propagandizing for the labor force. In late June, 1917, in fact, he confessed to Amy Lowell that here and there he was able to detect such a strain in his verse at the expense of a more human quality.¹⁷ On the other hand, there is very little of the early stridency in *Honey and Salt*: years and conscientious effort had softened the noise.

Even Sandburg's use of ice and snow is not negative. Although the earth eventually should become an "iceball," it will be "heaving" (p. 770); "hills of ice" are actively inhabited by "polar bears" (p. 765). Leif Ericson sights "a soft white horse on the top cone of an iceberg" (p. 714); elsewhere an iceberg wears a "shining white hat" (p. 768). Snow is a covering, it blows, it is a bed (pp. 759, 731, 767), although in "Old Hokusai Print" Sandburg considers "the white snow on the blue peaks" as "no dream snow" (p. 743).

As for the "white" metals, Sandburg's passage on the various prices of sins in hell (graded according to veniality and gravity?) lists "tin and aluminum sins" and also "silver-dollar sins" (p. 748). Silver is indeed a frequent choice of the poet's. Even in its metallic uses it suggests whiteness: referring to payment, Phocion's executioner demands "more silver for more hemlock" (p. 713); granddaughter Karlen Paula's obscure "silver bullet" (p. 750) is undeniably white against the crimson sunrise. The sound of silver causes a pleasant reaction in addition to its reflection of light: one of the first signs of love may be "a silver ring" (p. 707) as of a bell; the whippoorwill has a "silver throat" (p. 764). The shine of the sun is silver (pp. 749, 762) as it lights the legs of a spider (p. 754). And at night the moon can be silver (pp. 716, 735).

Developing his theme of the family of man and the democracy of death, Sandburg reminds us that "all bones [are] white" (p. 742). Elsewhere, he points out that the elephant has "straight ivory tusks" (p. 736). Innocent whiteness is apparent in the act of "a child drinking a bowl of milk" (p. 745). The poet recollects how his granddaughter was entranced by foxgloves one summer day—by "The snowsilk buds" and the "deep wells of white," a part of the bloom (p. 727). He pictures "lotus and pond lilies" as white (p. 764).

In the evening, as the moon comes up, it turns "the corners" of a skyscraper into "white prisms and spikes" (p. 723). In fact at one stage the moon itself is white (pp. 722, 755) as is the starlight (p. 749). Of a morning comes "A white shot dawn" (p. 755). In rising smoke the poet sometimes sees "Sheet white egg faces" (p. 756), not always gray. The whiteness of wool helps Sandburg describe a cloud, which takes various shapes, including "six white snakes" (p. 724), not threatening, simply passing. In order to describe the delicacy of love, he says it is "thinner than snowwhite wool finespun" (p. 758).

A sorrel horse has "a white forelock" (p. 768). More figuratively, "Love is a white horse you ride" (p. 751) (an unconscious borrowing from the scenes of

knightly romance?). Again the "moving cloud" takes "A white horse shape" (p. 724). Transferring the figure to the waves of the ocean, the poet likens the breakers to white horses (pp. 708, 710, 767). He says further that "white sea spray" can create loneliness (p. 740), but high-rising waves can be exciting "snowwhite mountains" (p. 732). "Lake Michigan Morning" (p. 732) is structured, as we have seen, on an impressionist's constant interaction of blue and white: "Blue bowls of white water/ Poured themselves into white bowls of blue water." The wind is sometimes "white" (pp. 733, 750), probably in its relation to the clouds. Some birds are white—a gull (p. 760) and an albatross (p. 768). In his search for the aptest symbol for love, Sandburg settles (with much repetition and much testing of other images) on an anonymous "little white bird" (pp. 739, 740).

love is a little white bird
and the flight of it so fast
you can't see it
and you know it's there
only by the faint whirr of its wings
and the hush song coming so low to your ears
you fear it might be silence
and you listen keen and you listen long
and you know it's more than silence

Here is the living white of simple directness, without duplicity, without calculation, but requiring sensitive attention.

Symbolic use of white occurs in other lines. What is "a white riddle" (p. 717) if not an unsolvable mystery? What is "a little mouth's white yearning" (p. 724) if not the inexpressible longings of innocence?

Could one white gull utter a word—
what would it be?
what white feather of a word? (p. 760)

White here, as in "a white riddle," is the ineluctable mystery, "the elusive, the incommunicable." For the most part, however, Sandburg's white is representative of his participation in life, not a withdrawal. In conjunction with his active choice of other colors it shows him to have been a complex man.

In view of his clear loyalty to the United States, and particularly his continuing interest in Lincoln, the American common man, and the historic growth of the country (*Remembrance Rock* provides a sweeping panorama), it is a startling coincidence that the poet's vision of this land as recorded in *Honey and Salt* is dominated by red, white, and blue.

For a final impressionistic admixture of hues, one can look at "Runaway Colors" (p. 753), where in six lines the poet creates from the countryside a riotous *mélange* which the reader (viewer) must merge into a harmonious whole. Nine words and phrases either are specific in naming color or at least succeed in bringing color to mind: "smoke of these landscapes," "sun," "shot gold," "grey," "blue smudge," "yellow dust," "ribbons of red," "crows," and even "pits," which calls up the blackness of a storage hole (not the dead blackness of a grave).

Perhaps if Sandburg had turned his attention away from tints and shades toward (for old men) the normative abstractions of form, line, and structure,

he would have been able to achieve greater profundity and to arouse more widespread critical interest, but he probably would have lost his readership. The direct, simple, mainly primary coloring of his images may have been related to his lack of interest in the intricacies of philosophic speculation that attracted, for example, Frost, Stevens, and Eliot in their last works. He appeared rather to find satisfaction in accurately recording the outward appearance of what he saw in his kaleidoscopic universe.

In part, then, his continued youthful eye for color can be attributed to his determined purpose to direct his poems toward the "simple people," as he himself called the common folk of America, readers with unsophisticated literary taste (of course, they were not his exclusive patrons). Such an attitude kept his thoughts on the thoughts of the man in the street and field, his eye on the cityscape, seascape, mountainscape, landscape as that man would want to see them and write of them if he had the talent. As Sandburg grew old, his experience of the world naturally affected his intellectual views. But his hope for mankind was irrepressible in the face of social breakdown or even holocaust, and he tempered what he was seeing with the constant idealism we generally attribute to youth not yet made cautious by a tragic view. Sandburg, the old man, transcended tragedy. He lifted up his eyes and was refreshed by nature both around him and in his memories of Illinois. Hence, his poems were colorful to the very end. His capacity for enjoying and sharing with his readers the scenes he loved was part of the reason his lines retained the colors that are said to appeal to the young. His never-discarded esteem for the man of the masses restrained him from extended philosophical profundity even in his last book. This caused him to create descriptions of a bright environment that such a man would read with appreciation. Those pictures would at the same time be recognizable to the ordinary reader and also open up his experience of the universe through the insights of a poet who loved him and spoke his language.

If Sandburg chose to see the world in bright, sanguine colors, we cannot register surprise. His letters, his interviews, his biographies reveal that he was a warm, outgoing, thoughtful American, filled with humor and undeniable *joie de vivre*, in love with his homeland and dedicated to its people. Although his colors hardly ever serve to complicate matters and color as symbol is rare, Sandburg in his old age, instead of looking for subdued hues in reserved quantities, was using vivid colors in greater abundance than any of his contemporaries. It is testimony to an interest in the phenomena of life ordinarily associated with the vigor of youth.

NOTES

¹ Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1952), p. 57.

² *Color: A Survey in Words and Pictures* (New Hyde Park, N. Y.: University Books, 1963), p. 187. Noted hereafter as *Color*.

³ E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1972), p. 845. Cf. Jane Donahue, "Cummings' Last Poem: An Explication," *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* (Kiel), 3 (1970), 106-08.

⁴ Although Hart Crane was much younger, he died thirty-five years before Sandburg and is often classed as his "contemporary." In the poems composed after *The Bridge* (that is, within the last two or three years of his life), Crane used color more than any of the other poets save Sandburg. Shades of white predominate, not always a vivid white, but sometimes "ashen" and "brine-caked." Over fifty instances of color (in wide variety) occur in the thirty-nine pages of his late poems, including "Key West: An Island Sheaf" and "More Late Poems." Of course, one must bear in mind that he was still a young man (thirty-three) when he died, before he had lost his young man's predilection for color.

⁵ Carl Sandburg, *Complete Poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), pp. 706-71.

⁶ "Pour écrire en poète, pour peindre, il ne suffit pas d'avoir pensé, il faut avoir vu." *Le Sentiment de la nature*. Quoted by Spurgeon, p. 57.

⁷ Sandburg, *Complete Poems*, p. xx.

⁸ In keeping with this concept of one large impressionistic poem, the references in parentheses are to pages (except where noted) rather than to titles in the *Complete Poems*.

⁹ *Color*, p. 195.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-94.

¹⁴ *The Letters of Carl Sandburg*, ed. Herbert Mitgang (New York: Harcourt, 1968), pp. 210-11.

¹⁵ *Color*, p. 198.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁷ *Letters*, pp. 119-20.

Sandburg and the Lincoln Biography: A Personal View

VICTOR HICKEN

I first saw Carl Sandburg at a meeting of the Illinois State Historical Society in 1950. All state historical societies are admixtures of antiquarians, genealogists, and professional historians, and must perforce tailor their offerings to the varied interests of their membership. Sandburg obviously had been added as the penultimate offering of the weekend, a presentation calculated to insure full attendance at earlier sessions of the Society.

Sandburg had ended his monumental celebration of Abraham Lincoln more than a decade earlier, and it had indeed become a kind of classic of good writing and bad history. In fact, in most graduate schools of history, it was a vogue current in 1950 to refer to Sandburg as a third-rate historian, a second-rate poet, and a first-rate personality. What had puzzled most professional historians, men such as Benjamin Thomas of Springfield, Illinois, and James G. Randall at the University of Illinois, was exactly where Sandburg had found much of his material for his *Abraham Lincoln*. Both men were on hand to hear Sandburg at that meeting which, incidentally, was held at New Salem, Illinois, a reconstruction of the village in which Lincoln made his first permanent settlement in Illinois.

My own associations with the Civil War professionals had been formed on my student-teacher relationship with Professor Randall, who was then in the midst of writing his brilliant *Lincoln, the President*. To this day I can still see Randall shake his head over some part of Sandburg's *The Prairie Years*, wondering whether somewhere or somehow there was truth in this or that particular piece of writing, or whether they were part of Sandburg's well-used poetic license. Even then, there was no doubt that much of Sandburg's material was based on rumor and hearsay, and it was often claimed that, by using the same kinds of sources, he could just as well have written a scatological version of Lincoln which would have brought lynching parties to the Sandburg residence. Yet, it was difficult in any case to prove Sandburg wrong in certain segments of his writing. No one knew where to go to find proof of error, and perhaps now it is beyond the possibility to do so.

At any rate, Sandburg made his appearance at New Salem State Park, and it was certainly a grand one. It was, as I recall, a sparkling fall day full of greens, oranges, yellows, ochres, and sun and shade. The elms were still tall in Illinois then, not having yet been felled by blight. One must even suppose that

Sandburg's favorite wild shrub called sumac was in rare color. The poet-historian stood in front of the replica of the Lincoln-Berry store and gave one of the most brilliant performances I had seen in my young life. It wasn't that he was a good singer—that he certainly was not. It was just that he was Sandburg! He was dressed in black, a kind of Protestant version of clerical garb set off by a starched white shirt and a black string tie—exactly the type of tie Lincoln generally wore. His hair was a snowfall over one eye, and every so often, when he reached a pause in one of his songs, he lifted his right hand from the strings of his guitar in order to push the hair back from his forehead. It was a typical Sandburg gesture, rich because it was part of the personality of the whole man.

I do remember that I came away from that New Salem weekend with a number of inner impressions. As Sandburg alternately roared and whispered his way through Lincoln's favorite songs, I was drawn to make my own comparison between Lincoln's own life and that of Somerset Maugham's "verger."¹ The verger, in Maugham's great story, was fired from his parish because he had never learned how to read and write. But he invested his savings in a string of tobacconist shops and became, as a consequence, a millionaire. Maugham's ultimate question was: "What if the verger had known how to read and to write?" The answer is that he would have remained a verger. What would Lincoln have become (or parenthetically Harry Truman) if he or Harry had succeeded in their respective business enterprises?

A second feeling that I brought home from New Salem was possibly less abstract. In order to see Sandburg better, I had placed myself a little to the side and slightly behind him. There I could see the reaction of the crowd as well. I really cannot remember what Sandburg was singing at the moment—it may well have been "The Blue-Tailed Fly"—but I can recall focusing upon Professor Randall, the most important historian present. I had been fairly close to Randall at the University of Illinois, in his seminars and several classes, and I felt that I could gauge when he was bemused and when he wasn't. In this instant a look came across his face which was, at once, one of revelation and admiration. Randall had just finished a good part of his *Lincoln, the President*, and he seemed almost to be saying to himself: "I will win professional respect, but Sandburg has won the royalties!"

I suppose what Randall had recognized was the essence of Sandburg's success. He was a colorful personality with a flair for poetic tonality. But most of all, he had gotten to a part of the real Lincoln in his biography, and he had done it before anyone else. None of this had come easily to Sandburg. Back in his college days at Lombard, in between his classes and athletics, he had become intrigued with Lincoln's character. Even then he made an effort at gathering Lincoln anecdotes from people—people who had known Lincoln, and people who had known people who were acquainted with Lincoln. Even then, it is quite likely that Sandburg did not question his sources, and that he accepted quite easily what he was told about the Railsplitter and his early years. One is even inclined to suspect that, with all of the tale gathering which Sandburg did at this time, he himself forgot where he had heard some of the Lincoln stories.

Sandburg's odyssey was a never-ending search, and he did what was absolutely necessary to obtain any material he could find. He spent many

weekends in boozy interviews with Joseph W. Fifer, a former governor of Illinois. It is doubtful whether Fifer had ever really known Lincoln; after all, he had enlisted as a private in Mr. Lincoln's army in the early Civil War years. But later, as a high official of the State of Illinois, he had heard a multitude of stories about Lincoln, and under the influence of Kentucky Straight with branch water, he was much inclined to talk. Sandburg became acquainted with Fifer before the colors faded, plied him with a largesse of his favorite drink, and came away with a treasure trove of fact and fancy.²

As it was, Sandburg never used this material for decades, and it is possible that he might have remained a lesser writer with a sectional reputation if fate had not intervened. In 1922, when he had almost completed his *Rootabaga Stories* for children, his publisher Alfred Harcourt suggested that he write a children's book on Lincoln. Sandburg agreed, and went back to Elmhurst, Illinois, where he lived. There he began to put all of his Lincoln materials together.

What happened, of course, is that the story of Lincoln got away from him. The subject was too enormous and complex, and Sandburg had fallen so much in love with the elemental earthiness of the man that the writing went on and on. During and after the completion of what was to be *The Prairie Years*, Sandburg made some interesting admissions. They are keys to the understanding of the author within the whole Lincoln theme. In a bit of correspondence with Lloyd Lewis, another newspaperman-historian who was to produce a fine biography of U. S. Grant, Sandburg admitted: "The Lincoln drags . . . at least a dozen chapters have to be entirely rewritten, early ones where my ignorance was stupendous and will still be there when the job is done."³ To another friend Sandburg complained: "I found myself not guiding, but being guided by, the material."⁴ Later, in a letter to Gamaliel Bradford of Massachusetts, Sandburg reminisced about his writing. "There were times when I was on the Lincoln book," he wrote, "that I felt as if in a trance, saw automobiles as horses and wagons, and saw cities of brick and stone dissolve into lumber cottages and shanties. . . ."⁵

The Prairie Years was finally finished in 1925. Sandburg took the bulging manuscript to Alfred Harcourt, who immediately gave it to Van Wyck Brooks, then a major Harcourt reader. Brooks was overwhelmed by the imagery which Sandburg had woven into his writing, and by the presence of a Lincoln hitherto unknown.⁶ There were moments when Sandburg piled detail upon detail in order to create an effect. One ten-line description of Lincoln's Springfield, as it was in 1837, had farmers hauling corn, wheat, potatoes, and turnips. Wagons rolled up and down the streets, axles creaking, pulled by foam-flecked horses whose sides heaved under the lashings of drovers. Hogs piled down the sidewalks by the dozens. Men on horseback spurred from one store to another. But they were not just horses in Sandburg's imagination—they were "roans, grays, whites, black horses with a white star in the forehead."⁷ It was all more a grist for movie scripts than good historical writing, but Harcourt and Brooks knew a best seller when they saw one.

Almost immediately parts of the book were sold to *Pictorial Review* for what was then considered an enormous sum. A year later, Harcourt, Brace and Company produced the book in hardback. Praise wafted up from editorial

rooms throughout the nation. The book was extolled in England by reviewers whose comprehension of the vastness of Lincoln's West was most limited. In the United States, H. L. Mencken, who thought himself the only realistic cynic qualified to make judgments, called the book the beginning of the "best American biography. . . ."⁸ Paul Angle, then a rising Lincoln historian in the Midwest, called the writing incomparable, though a few years later he was to complain that the "historical writer can hardly omit all mention of the materials he has used." Sandburg had indeed failed to offer citations for his sources, and he had provided no bibliography.⁹

Praise for *The Prairie Years* was not completely unqualified, however. Some critics were quick to note that Sandburg had placed Crawfordsville, Indiana, on the banks of the Wabash River, an obvious error. He had even interjected that Percy Bysshe Shelley, the English poet, had drowned in an Italian lake rather than in the Gulf of Spezzia. A few other critics, people like Edmund Wilson, the eastern esthete, complained about the "corn" and the maudlin sentiment which ran through stretches of Sandburg's writing. Wilson noted that, in the first edition of *The Prairie Years*, Sandburg had Lincoln kneeling at the bedside of his dying mother while "her bony hand" ran back and forth through the boy's "sandy black hair." Her "fluttering words seemed to say he must grow up and be good to his sister and father." It was ridiculous writing, Wilson pointed out, and from the standpoint of hindsight and truth he was absolutely right. Sandburg had not written history; he had made up a story right from the wisps of his fertile imagination.¹⁰

Despite the occasional criticisms of classroom professionals and the complaints that the reader couldn't tell where imagination blended into fact, the book was a best seller. For the most part it deserved to be. Sandburg had opened up a box of secrets about Lincoln, and he had sought to find the essential man. It was not that there had been a lack of previous writing on Lincoln. Indeed, much research had already been done concerning the Great Emancipator. But what Sandburg did was to provide Lincoln with a soul, a development which took place at about the same moment the nation was in search of its own. It must be remembered that the 1920's had been a decade of some rather sordid happenings—the Teapot Dome Scandal, the Veterans Bureau corruption, the aftermath of the "Blacksox" revelations, and Al Capone in Chicago. With all of that, the nation was athirst for heroes. Charles A. Lindbergh was only dreaming of flying the Atlantic at the time of Sandburg's first Lincoln volume, so the nation would have to wait for that event. Until then, Lincoln, with all of his myths and realities, would suffice. It was as Harry Golden was to write later: "*The six volumes [the entire Abraham Lincoln] not only re-create what America was but what America could and morally ought to be.*"¹¹

The impact of *The Prairie Years* upon the literary and intellectual life of America was incredible. Hollywood sought to capitalize upon the new wave of Lincolniana with two early sound movies—the first with Walter Huston in the leading role, the second a John Ford movie with Henry Fonda playing Lincoln. Robert Sherwood, as shall be elaborated upon later, added his own interpretations to Sandburg's material with a play called *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. American composers, especially Charles Ives and Aaron Copland,

tried to catch Civil War moods and nuances in their music. But even more importantly, within the decade following the publication of *The Prairie Years*, the hyperactive propagandists of the New Deal made valiant attempts to merge the Lincoln theme with the political revolution of the 1930's.

In retrospect it almost seems inevitable that Lincoln would be transfused into the bloodstream of the New Deal. Sandburg had once expressed the opinion that what Lincoln was during the first fifty-two years of his life determined what he was to be in the last four. That sort of statement is hardly a profundity; we are all products of our past. But quickly after the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, it was pointed out that the President had gone the same route as Lincoln. His earlier years were filled with pain and anguish; they were part of his preparation for greatness.¹²

Such transferences were much less outrageous than what was to come, however. In 1938, the Works Progress Administration produced a play written by E. P. Conkle entitled *Prologue to Glory*, virtually all of it based upon Sandburg's first volumes on Lincoln. But Conkle elevated poetic license far beyond the point at which Sandburg had stopped. He later admitted that the play made no "attempt to be true in all its historical details. . . ." ¹³ Set in New Salem in 1831, it limned Lincoln as a figure made desolate by the death of Ann Rutledge, whose demise, it seemed, was made infinitely more easy by the machinations of vaguely identified political and business interests. One would be hard put to conceive that business was big enough in New Salem to center itself upon poor Ann. After all, Lincoln himself couldn't even get the Lincoln-Berry store off the ground. But it must be remembered that in 1938, President Roosevelt had moved far to the political left, and the "bad guys" were on the business and political right. Roosevelt had already attacked the Supreme Court, and he had made popular the phrases "malefactors of great wealth" and "economic royalists." When Conkle had his Lincoln curse those who stood in the way of the best interests of the "people," his viewers got the message. Roosevelt as well as Lincoln was knight errant.

The trouble with Conkle's play was that the message was *too* transparent. It was really quite amazing that *Prologue to Glory* lasted on the boards as long as it did. Yet, while the corpse of Conkle's effort was still warm, Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* opened on Broadway. Sherwood's play, like that of Conkle's, was a rehash of *The Prairie Years* with some further adulterations. Despite these handicaps, the play was an immediate success, and well it should have been because of its marvelous acting and direction. Once again it was calculated to tie Roosevelt to the Lincoln legend.

Propaganda is such a harsh word, even now, but the proof of Sherwood's intentions lay in his third-act presentation of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Raymond Massey, a conservative in 1976 but a liberal in 1938, played the Lincoln role and even he caught the implication of Sherwood's lines. Massey was to tell the *New York Times* that Lincoln was definitely a New Dealer, and that "Roosevelt . . . stands in the broad tradition for which Lincoln fought."¹⁴ A later *Times* reporter went on to call Lincoln's rebuttal to Douglas "one applicable to current events as well as to events preceding the Civil War."¹⁵

While Sandburg was delighted with the play, he had little to say about the way in which Sherwood had used the materials from *The Prairie Years*. Of

course Sandburg's own roots were deeply embedded in socialism, and when Roosevelt commenced a more radical phase of the New Deal, he was quick to give his support to the administration. Sandburg did not even question Sherwood's further extension of the crusade to identify Roosevelt with Lincoln. The year 1938 was a year of labor strikes and of Roosevelt's ill-fated assault upon the Supreme Court. In Sherwood's mind anything that labor did was proper, and he has his stage Lincoln say:

It seems obvious to me that this nation was founded on the supposition that men have the right to protest, violently if need be, against authority that is unjust or oppressive. The Boston Tea Party was a kind of strike. So was the Revolution itself.¹⁶

Sherwood's Lincoln attacks the Supreme Court directly, and the implication of his words is that skulduggery and corruption carry more weight on the bench than does the rule of law. Within a few years—when the Court was changed in composition and had become dominated by New Deal appointees—Sherwood became one of its more ardent supporters. It all seemed wildly hypocritical in 1938, however, for though Sherwood's Lincoln could support violent resistance to law and authority by the labor movement, the real Lincoln was forced to fight a four-year war in an attempt to enforce law and authority.

All of these developments do indicate that Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln* had a stirring effect upon the radical choir of the 1930's. While Sandburg pressed the Lincoln-Roosevelt connection in his lectures on the college circuit, Roosevelt's speech writers did the same for the incumbent President. In a sense then, Sandburg's biography of Lincoln was both a catalytic agent and a product of the times in which it was popular. In 1934, during a "fireside chat," Roosevelt argued that he believed as did Lincoln, that the "people" should do for themselves what he believed others wouldn't do for them. In 1936 he told the American people that "we can renew our pledge of fidelity to the faith which Lincoln held in the common man." Two years later he said: "Lincoln, too, fought for the morals of democracy."¹⁷

These years represented the spring tide of Sandburg's life, and we may assume that he reveled in the adulation of his colleagues. But, with the coming of World War II and the emergence of a new group of skilled Lincoln historians, Sandburg's preeminence began to wane. His scholarship and research methods came under increasing scrutiny. Most of all, it became obvious that Sandburg had depended far too much upon hearsay in his writings, and upon that well-meaning but sometimes undependable source, William Herndon.¹⁸

Herndon was undoubtedly one of the brightest young men in Lincoln's Illinois. He was Lincoln's law partner during the 1850's, and kept the law firm going when its senior member was called to Washington. In 1865, almost in the very instant after Lincoln's assassination, Herndon realized the importance which the martyred President was to have in history and national mythology. He literally and figuratively got on his horse and rode to the New Salem-Petersburg area in order to interview all of those who claimed to have known Lincoln in his youth. Since he had a flair for writing and since he could

slip into his manuscripts all of the nuances and implications of what he had heard, his words were to have an enormous impact upon the unfolding of the Lincoln legend. Furthermore, he had actually worked with Lincoln—he had known the everyday man as he had revealed himself in daily dealings—and the result was that he was able to fit pieces and patterns together in the overall Lincoln puzzle.

The trouble was that Herndon had numerous prejudices which cut against the grain of fact. There were possible facets of Lincoln's past which Herndon really *wanted* to believe, and he directed his investigations in such a manner that these facets became goals. He had an abiding hatred for Mary Todd Lincoln, for instance, and he was determined to prove that she was Lincoln's cross. So what Herndon did in the case of Ann Rutledge was to put one and one together and come up with three. Lincoln had known a girl in New Salem by the name of Rutledge. Lincoln *had* fits of melancholia from time to time. Since Herndon had some first-hand evidence of spats between Lincoln and his wife, he went right on to a wrongful conclusion. Lincoln had loved Ann, he went into a temporary insanity when the girl died, and Lincoln's married life with Mary Todd was dominated by remembrances of things past.¹⁹

Sandburg swallowed the Herndon assumption entirely and willingly, for after all it fitted his own romantic concept of Lincoln's prairie years. Today, the Ann Rutledge story is regarded as sheer hogwash, for the only fact we know of her relationship with Lincoln is that they did know each other. Ruth Painter Randall, in her brilliant but uneven book, *Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage*, not only buried the Ann Rutledge story for good but she made Mary herself a character worth studying.²⁰ That last development probably accounts for the fact that at least two Broadway plays in the past five years have centered on Mary's unfortunate life, *Look Away* (1972) and *The Last of Mrs. Lincoln* (1972), as well as one television series, *Mrs. Lincoln's Husband* (1974).

But Mrs. Randall's exculpation of Mary was to come three decades after *The Prairie Years*. In the 1930's, Sandburg's description of Lincoln's supposed romance with Ann, along with Edgar Lee Masters' poem about the young girl, resulted in a synergetic effect. Sherwood's play and the two Lincoln movies of the decade added to the fiction. The town officials of Petersburg hurried out to New Salem to claim the "remains" of Ann Rutledge so that they might be buried with decency in the town cemetery, which incidentally is close to the business district as well. It is really doubtful that anything could have been found after so long a time, and I have been told by one expert that what was really removed to Petersburg was no more than one button and an indeterminate bone. Yet, year after year, tourists wander into the Petersburg cemetery to view the Rutledge plot, and to read the Masters' lyric which is carved into a stela.²¹

Sandburg followed his study of Lincoln's early life with an intricate and involved presentation of *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*. It too was successful and, like the earlier volumes, its theme was readily worked into the warp and woof of the New Deal. Yet, by 1940, the Sandburg works on Lincoln were out of print and, in truth, the New Deal had come to an end as well. The immediate postwar years brought only a mild revival of interest in Sandburg's

works, but this came about mostly as a result of clarifications about Lincoln's life by professional historians.

In 1950, these same professionals honored Sandburg with a round of parties and banquets in Illinois. This was the occasion for the aforementioned New Salem appearance by the poet-historian. Virtually all of these historians were members of an unofficial Lincoln "clan." Harry and Marion Pratt were there. Both were working upon a gigantic project aimed at accounting for Lincoln's activities each day of his life. Paul Angle came down from Chicago, and Allan Nevins journeyed back to his native state from Columbia University. Benjamin Thomas, the author of the best one-volume Lincoln biography, was also present.²²

Throughout the several weeks of Sandburg's visit to Illinois there were numerous gatherings designed to honor Sandburg for his work on the Lincoln theme. Frederick Hill Meserve, whose collection of Lincoln photographs was the greatest in the country, recalled Sandburg's days as a lecturer in one of the dedicatory speeches in the poet's honor. "I can hear the extraordinary voice," wrote Meserve, "now whispering soft, now booming loud, slowed down almost to stopping one moment, words mouthed and rolled on the tongue and lingered over, then suddenly rippling and tripping forth in a heart-jumping change of pace."²³ Irving Dilliard, the brilliant editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, added a little note about Sandburg's literary addiction to sumac. He, Dilliard, promised to gather some sprigs of Illinois sumac and send them periodically to Sandburg.²⁴

Television further hailed the rediscovery of Sandburg, and he appeared on a number of programs during the 1950's. In 1959 and 1960, the Dell Publishing Company persuaded Sandburg to cut his six volumes of *Abraham Lincoln* into three paperbacks, and it was in these volumes that Sandburg admitted his inadequacies of historical scholarship in the first editions of the work. He agreed that the Ann Rutledge "romance" had been an improbable one, and he carefully screened out many of the overdone descriptions of Lincoln and his surroundings. The reprints are not good reading, for the surgery performed by Sandburg destroyed the mood of the writing as well as the blights within it.

It was during this last upsurge of Sandburg's popularity that I had my last glimpse of the man. The year 1958 was the centennial of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and the Illinois Historical Society along with the City of Galesburg planned a celebration of the event. Once again Allan Nevins came back to Illinois, and Bruce Catton, now in the throes of producing his military studies of the Civil War, was also on hand. I can still remember Catton's look of surprise and pleasure at hearing some of the more obscure Civil War songs as they were sung by the Galesburg High School choir. It was an interesting session, indeed, with Sandburg's contribution being a mild castigation of the people of Galesburg for having "discriminated" against the Sandburg family in his youth.

Sandburg was very likely overstating the case for, after all, he had attended Lombard College in that city, and the area itself was heavily populated with families of Swedish origins. Even so, the audience did not get the message. It wasn't the song they wished to hear, it was only the singer.

NOTES

¹ "The Verger" can be found in W. Somerset Maugham's *Complete Short Stories*, II (New York: Doubleday, 1952).

² See *Carl Sandburg: A Pictorial Biography*, by Joseph Haas and Gene Lovitz (New York: Putnam's, 1967), p. 108.

³ *Ibid.* Although Sandburg did his writing in Elmhurst, Illinois, he was still a part of that "left bank" literary and cultural ferment which existed in Chicago in the 1920's. It is strange to think that at the same time that Al Capone was the virtual boss of Chicago, such people as Ben Hecht, Edna Ferber, Sherwood Anderson, Clarence Darrow, Jane Addams, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Lloyd Lewis were keeping an intellectual pot boiling in the Windy City.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The Letters of Carl Sandburg*, ed. Herbert Mitgang (New York: Harcourt, 1968), pp. 255-56.

⁶ Haas and Lovitz, p. 108. See also "Forty Years of Friendship" by Alfred Harcourt, in *A Tribute to Carl Sandburg at Seventy-Five*, ed. Harry Pratt (Chicago: Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, 1953).

⁷ This section still remains in the paperback volumes: *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years*, I (New York: Dell, 1960), p. 105.

⁸ Haas and Lovitz, p. 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Richard Crowder, *Carl Sandburg* (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 97.

¹¹ Harry Golden, *Carl Sandburg* (Cleveland: World, 1961), pp. 258-59.

¹² Alfred Haworth Jones deals with this in his *Roosevelt's Image Brokers: Poets, Playwrights, and the Use of the Lincoln Symbol* (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974), pp. 51-63, 112-18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁴ *New York Times*, 30 Oct. 1938, Sec. 9, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 Dec. 1938, Sec. 10, p. 5.

¹⁶ As quoted by Jones, p. 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

¹⁸ A marvelous discussion of this can be found in Roy P. Basler, *A Touchstone for Greatness: Essays, Addresses, and Occasional Pieces about Abraham Lincoln* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), pp. 3-55. The standard work on Herndon is David Donald's *Lincoln's Herndon* (New York: Knopf, 1948).

¹⁹ See Basler, pp. 11-33.

²⁰ Ruth Painter Randall was the wife of Professor James G. Randall.

²¹ The story about Petersburg was told to me by James Hickey, the Curator of the Lincoln Collection of the Illinois Historical Library.

²² A curious characteristic of the Lincoln "clan" of writers during the 1930's and 1940's was the marvelous camaraderie which existed within the group. Most of them, including Sandburg, were fairly good drinkers, and once in their cups would divulge aspects about Lincoln rarely to be found in print. Most of the Lincoln scholars present at the 1950 galas have passed away.

²³ F. H. Meserve, "Thoughts on a Friend," in *A Tribute to Carl Sandburg*, p. 337.

²⁴ "Friends on the *Post Dispatch*," in *A Tribute to Carl Sandburg*, p. 360. Dilliard is still alive, but retired, and is presently known for his splendid research upon the Supreme Court.

Lindsay/Masters/Sandburg: Criticism from 1950-1975

WILLIAM WHITE

Although no full-length or descriptive bibliographies or even extensive checklists of criticism exist for Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg, it does not mean that a researcher cannot find out what has been written about them. It would of course be convenient to have these books and articles all listed in one place—and if interest in them continues this may one day be the case—but at the moment one must dig through such bibliographies as the annual PMLA and MHRA lists, the various H. W. Wilson guides, the Spiller, et al. *Literary History of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), Lewis Leary's *Articles on American Literature 1950-1967* (Durham, N. C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1970), and Allen Tate's *Sixty American Poets 1896-1944*, rev. ed. (Washington, D. C.: Library of Congress, 1954).

Of the three poets, Fred B. Millett's *Contemporary American Authors* (New York: Harcourt, 1940) treats all of them, yet this book is 35 years old; Elizabeth Lindsay's *Inventory of the Lindsayana Collection in Springfield, Illinois* [at The Lincoln Library] (Hartford, Conn., 1949) is also out of date, and Ann Massa's *Vachel Lindsay: Fieldworker for the American Dream* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970) has only a selective bibliography, so my own list, "Vachel Lindsay-iana: A Bibliographical Note," *The Serif*, 8 (June 1971), 9-11, is the most helpful of all, although the periodical—no longer published—may be hard to find. For Masters, Frank Kee Robinson's work (see items below for 1968, 1969, and 1970) is by far the best bibliographically, although the most recent is found in the bibliographical references in notes to John T. Flanagan's *Edgar Lee Masters: The Spoon River Poet and His Critics* (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow, 1974). Finally, for Sandburg, R. G. Newman has a selective checklist in the special issue of the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 45 (1952), 402-06; *The Sandburg Range* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1958) details an exhibit from his library displayed at the University of Illinois Library on 6 January 1958; and best of all is in Mark Van Doren's *Carl Sandburg* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1969), which lists editions, translations, addresses, introductions, prefaces, articles, interviews, conversations, MSS., musical settings, recordings, and movies in the Library of Congress collections.

For the benefit of those who are working on Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg I have compiled the following list, mainly of books and articles about

them, published during the past 25 years, from 1950 to 1975. Although I have tried to be as comprehensive and complete as possible, especially for the most easily available material, I have not dealt with translations, all reprintings, or the many reviews of books by or about the three poets. It is what I might describe as a "working" bibliography, arranged under each poet's name by years, so that one can see what was published about the man in any particular year. Obviously, the amount of research and writing on Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg has not been overwhelming—nothing like it has been on Henry James, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, or Ernest Hemingway, for example—but it has been fairly steady, and the three authors are not forgotten men in American letters.

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1956

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1958

Duffey, Bernard I. "Progressivism and Personal Revolt." *The Centennial Review*, 2 (Spring 1958), 125-38. [Treats Masters and Sandburg.]

1959

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1964

Duncan, Hugh Dalziel. *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center from 1885 to 1930*. Totowa, N. J.: Bedminster, 1964. 181 pp.

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1970

Ford, Thomas W. "The American Rhythm: Mary Austin's Poetic Principle." *Western American Literature*, 5 (1970), 3-14. [Compares American Indian songs with Lindsay and Sandburg.]

1972

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1975

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VACHEL LINDSAY (1879-1931)

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1951

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1954

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1956

Carmer, Carl. "Three Aprils and a Poet." *Atlantic*, April 1956, pp. 69-71.

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Avery, Emmett L. "Vachel Lindsay: Spokane Journalist." *Research Studies* (Washington State Univ.), 25 (1957), 101-10.

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1959

Ruggles, Eleanor. *The West-Going Heart: A Life of Vachel Lindsay*. New York: Norton, 1959. 448 pp.

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Cady, Edwin H. "Vachel Lindsay Across the Chasm." *Indiana University Bookman*, No. 5 (Dec. 1960), pp. 5-11.

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Notes On Contributors

Charles E. Burgess, a reporter for the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, has been a newspaperman for many years. Along with an M.A. thesis on "The Use of Local Lore in *Spoon River Anthology*," he has written numerous articles on Edgar Lee Masters and other regional literary and historical figures.

Marc Chénétier is affiliated with the Université de Paris III—Sorbonne Nouvelle, where he co-edits the journal *Trema* and researches contemporary American literature. Among his publications are other studies on Vachel Lindsay.

Richard Crowder, Professor of English at Purdue University, has long had an active interest in 20th-century American poetry, and from 1963-65 he was a Fulbright Lecturer in American poetry at the University of Bordeaux, France. In his lengthy list of published titles is the Twayne Series book *Carl Sandburg* (1964).

Victor Hicken, Professor of History at Western Illinois University, is currently President of the Illinois Historical Society. His numerous publications include *Illinois in the Civil War* (1966), *The American Fighting Man* (1968), and *The World is Coming to an End!* (1975).

Charles W. Mayer is an Associate Professor at Western Illinois University where he teaches courses in American literature. He has forthcoming articles on Stephen Crane, E. W. Howe, and Henry James, and has recently completed a study of Kate Chopin.

Dennis Q. McNerny, an Associate Professor of English at Bradley University, is the author of a book called *Thomas Merton* (1974) and has written articles on Thomas Merton and Bernard Malamud. He is working on a study of Eric Hoffer.

Herb Russell is serving as a liaison officer for the Illinois Humanities Council and completing a doctoral degree at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. His dissertation subject is Edgar Lee Masters.

William White is Professor and Director of the Journalism program at Oakland University, Michigan, and also Visiting Professor of American Studies at Wayne State University, where he is the editor of *Walt Whitman Review*. He has authored a vast number of articles and books, one being *By-Line: Ernest Hemingway* (1967).

Blair Whitney, formerly on the faculty at Michigan State University, is now Staff Associate for Academic Affairs for the Illinois Board of Higher Education. He has published on various midwestern literary figures, including the Twayne Series volume *John G. Neihardt* (1976).

