

The First Phase of Poetic Development of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay

Ashok Kumar

Department of English
Mahendergarh, Haryana, India.



Published in [IJIRMP](#) (E-ISSN: 2349-7300), Volume 9, Issue 1, (January-February 2021)

License: [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#)



Abstract

After Walt Whitman and the New Englanders, American poetry lay in doldrums. Although a poet of great caliber like Vachel Lindsay had started even before the turn of the century, but no one knew about him or had heard of anything about a New Poetry movement till Harriet Monroe printed “General William Booth Enters Into Heaven” in “Poetry” for January 1913. It was then that the people learned that a new wind was blowing, and that one poet at least had been swept into an unplugged sea. Lindsay was the first to feel the breeze coming and as soon as he sniffed it he cracked on all sail. Of all captains of the New Poetry Movement he was the real ‘driver’ from first to last. This was the group that revitalized the whole of American letters and gave American poetry the second of its great epochs second chronologically but by no means certainly second in artistic achievement or social significance.

Keywords: Doldrums, Fundamentalist

Introduction

Lindsay born in Springfield Illinois, had capbellite parents and the lasting traits of his mind were derived from his upbringing in this fundamentalist religious sect. his unworldliness and millennial hope, his habit of belief rather than analysis or questioning, above all his sense of life as warfare in the spirit. He also absorbed populist democracy and learned from his mother a profound respect for art. Lindsay’s training for his unique function in the life of the Republic was not consciously undertaken with a poetic career in view. His parents suffering with mental agony had little sympathy with his juvenile inclinations to artistic expression which were at first directed less towards studies at the Chicago Art Institute and later with Henri in New York at the Art Students League. These were the years of poverty and odd jobs, during this period he campaigned in speeches and pamphlets (which he called War Bulletins) for beauty, democracy, temperance and chastity. He also took long walking tours across the country, sometimes paying for his food and shelter by reciting his “Rhymes to be Traded for Bread, while on other occasions he begged.

The year 1906 can be earmarked as one of decisive importance in Lindsay’s life. It was the year when he set out as a tramp poet, with his poetry as slender as his immediate means of subsistence. Having taken a streamer passage to Florida, he found himself stranded in Jacksonville with only five cents in his pocket, This first experience of his he recalls with an evident relish:

“It was not till March 1906 that I made the plunge being stranded in Florida with malice afore thought. I tramped I rode freight. I rode freight cabooses two hundred miles tramped again eight hundred miles through Macon and Atlanta, Georgia, Ashville, North Carolina, Greenville, Tennessee, and Cumberland Gap to Frankfort, Kentucky. My baggage was a razor, tooth brush, comb, soup, bandana and my poems “The Tree of Laughing Bells”. I found an extraordinary responsiveness in cultured and uncultured. It seemed the only time I had ever lived. I will never forget those log houses of the Blue Ridge, those rings of faces lit only by the fire in the hearth.”¹

Lindsay who was deeply influenced by William Jennings Bryan a statesman and a poet not only a poet rather a super poet, capable of reaching American audiences of one million or one hundred million by a mere tent speech. It was from Bryan that Lindsay acquired his crusading spirit his favorite war cry remaining “Rah for Bryan!” This first wandering served to reaffirm Lindsay’s Bryanism and his belief in the common people thus setting the mold for Lindsay’s later life and thought. “The man under the yoke”, who gave Lindsay shelter, “had nothing and gave me half of it and we both had an abundance”. This Samaritan, who provided Lindsay with such a happy encounter, was “what I came out into the wilderness to see” significantly, Lindsay does not omit to mention that his Samaritan was a victim of “big money”.²

This was for the first time that Lindsay had started on a tramping tour being short of funds or rather being out of funds he had to take up odd jobs on occasions on the farms for his logging and bread. At times it was “The Tree of Laughing Bells” the poem Lindsay had referred to that was traded for bread and bed. This poem “The Tree of Laughing Bells was a long nature poem dedicated to aviators with echoes of Edgar Allan Poe, Bryan, Keats, Shelly and Swinburn. Lindsay had published it as a broadside at his own expense in 1905 and the following year i.e. 1906 he bartered it with everyone who would accept it for food and shelter. This poem deals with an Indian maid, but not an Indian maid of the wild west. This is ethereal Indian maid such as is found in Shelly and Keats, but despite her celestial nature, Lindsay’s localism appears in this early poem:

These, the Wings of Morning,
an Indian Maiden Wove.
Intervening subtlety,
wands from a Willow grove,
beside the Sangamon
rude stream of Dreamland Town.³

Lindsay had begun making a mythic stream of the Sangamon before he met Masters. Frequently he introduced into his poems and prose the name of the sluggish river that ran through Sagamon country Illinois “Three fairies by the Sangamon were dancing for a prize” he wrote in one poem and in another poem he had a Dryad inhabited tree grow from Sangamon earth. Hence Clara Stocker has rightly described Sangamonas “Vachel’s favourite stream”.

Lindsay being born of Cambelite parents and lasting traits of his mind being derived from his upbringing in this fundamentalist religious sect, his unworldliness and millennial hope his habit of be liar rather than analysis or questioning and above all his sense of life as warfare in the spirit is well represented in his

early poems starting right from “The Song of the Garden Toad” written as early as 1899 to many in “The Village Magazine”,

But most important was the devout campbellite Christianity which ruled his family’s life. Lindsay a cool rather than a rebellious child was received into the church at the age of eleven and the marked the occasion by the composition of a poem, his earliest preserved work, whose solemn literalness bespoke well enough the feelings which moved the child and which, with due alteration of details, continued to move the man. The verse concluded:

You may not live through the coming night.
Why do you waver this battle to fight?
The master calls you with pitying voice.
You’ll choose Heaven for Hell which is choice?
If you obey his voice and follow him today,
then with a joyful heart he will say:
Come blessed servantm come to me,
inherit the kingdom prepared for thee.

That these lines were no more formalities urged upon the young catechumen by his pious parents may be argued from his earliest private records in a series of note books he kept while at Hirman College. Each of these was headed “This book belongs to Christ”.⁴

Lindsay’s consciousness was deeply penetrated and influenced by Campbell’s teachings is quite evident from these note books that he kept at Hiram College Hence, in spite of, his making extensive notes of his reading especially in Poe and Blake, the poets he went on to echo in the poetry of his early years, there was more extensive reference to a basic religious vocation that of establishing the Christian gospel as a vitalizing source of American life. He had as early as his undergraduate days embarked upon the making of a testimony which was to be almost a personal revelation itself and combine self assertion and religious conviction in a tangled but highly invigorating whole.

“My first essays of ten or eleven show lam for generations rather than a power for doing it accurately. A tendency to fly off at many tangents of thought that confuses the discussion and make paragraphs impossible. A sense of climax and strong sense of dogmatic epigram labour rules the world. A sense that the world is a balanced bundle of laws. A sense of the individuality and strong personal oversight of the creator. A sense that the laws of the should of man and soul of God, and the laws of the roots of the trees are all in common. A sense of the principle of disappointment decay as a part of the natural order, not to be feared but to be understood. A sense that all honest work ought to be respected. A sense that the only social tie, and the only social motive between citizen and citizen is to be respected. God has provided others. But this is all I have recorded here. Comparison of city and country. A sense that man is fundamentally educated by the phenomena of nature and that man is the divinely appointed ruler of nature throughout the universe.”⁵

This leaning towards faith, his belief, religious bent, his campbellite Christianity all went on to influence his writings in the early years of his poetic career, which is revealed in his poems like “Stars of My Hearts” when he says:

And a foolish sqaxon seeks the mangerbed.
Oh lead me to Jehovah's child,
Across this dreamland lone and wild.
Then will I speak this prayer unsaid,
and kiss his little haloed head.
"My star and I we love thee little child."⁶

Again in another small poem "An August Afternoon" composed in the year 1902 the poet addressing himself says:

Oh you have gone to drink of sleep a while,
My God whose breast is bright with rainbows.
Drink with you deep within his breast,
and hold you deep within his breast,
and love his child a while.
May you dream the dreams of God after him.
May your cup of glory fill to the brim.
With your breast upon the rod.
With your soft eyes sleeping still,
lying hidden in the hollow beside the little hill.
May you dream the dreams of God after him.⁷

These poems were penned down by Lindsay during the years he was in Chicago having gone there to study Art. This decision of going to Chicago and joining the art institute had been made by him while at Hiram College Ohio. Here Lindsay had joined to study medicine as per his fathers desire, but instead of taking interest in medicine Lindsay was reading widely in Kipling, Ruskin, Emerson, Lowell and Poe. He was indulging in introspection in self analysis of which he kept a record in a series of notebooks. We find in him a steadily developing humanitarianism and a desire growing stronger and stronger to devote himself to his fellow men. He was finally able to write, "At last I am attending my choice of College. It is organized within myself the college of the love of the people..... Tolstoy after my 31st year shall find me his literal follower. As he had consecrated the novel so may I consecrate art."⁸ He convinced himself that he should be allowed the "privilege of self education" and leaving the college. Though he had to face obstacles and struggle a lot while making this decision but in spite of parental objections and pleas he left college in the spring of 1900 to join the art institute at Chicago.

In Chicago he attended classes at the Art Institute and spent the remaining hours in the Field Museum. His studies did not make him forget his dedication to humanity; he soon became identified with a church in Chicago and within a month, was a teacher in its Sunday school. For a few months Lindsay had a job in the toy department of Marshall Fields and studied at night in the Institute, but soon finding his day work tiring he gave up his job to concentrate on his art studies. After having spent four years in Chicago he left for New York to study under Robert Henri at the Case Art School Thus we find him consistently devoting himself to art and its learning. "There is one consistent thread in my life", Lindsay said to himself, "from first to last I have been an art student".

But as stated earlier while in Chicago he was writing poems which magazine editors consistently and with marked unanimity of judgment rejected. In New York too he did not stop and continued his efforts at composing poems and at last a poem was accepted for publication, namely “The Queen of Bubbles”, appearing in the New York Critic in 1904. Significantly enough this poem has a subheading “Written for a Picture”. The poem reveals marked development and maturity in Lindsay’s thoughts:

The youth speaks,

Why do you seek the sun
in you bubble crown ascending?
Your chariot will melt to mist,
your crown will have an ending.

The Goddess replies,

Nay sun is but a bubble,
earth is a whiff of foam.
To my caves on the coast of Thule,
each night I call them home.
Thence faiths blow forth to angles,
and loves blow forth to men.
They break and turn to nothing,
and I make them whole again.
On the created waves of chaos
I ride them back reborn.
New stars I bring at evening,
for those that burst at morn.
My soul is the wind of Thule,
and evening is the sign.
The sun is but a bubble,
a fragile child of mine.

(Winter 1903-1904)⁹

After this probably being short of finance or possibly Vachel Lindsay at last felt he should now earn his own living, he embarked on a quixotic adventure that of selling copies of his own poems. From door to door, up and down the west side of New York he went trying to peddle his verses for a few cents a piece. With a good deal of humour he describes his adventures in his diary,

“Well I tried a sleepy big shock headed bakewr, first I tried to give the poem to him. He considered the thing for some time as I explained it, but finally handed it back saying he had no use for it. I thought there was torch of class pride and the resentment of my alms and irritated independence in his manner. So the next place I said to the proprietor, ‘I will sell you this for two cents’. At once I saw the thing take. My customer smiled and said, ‘Newspapers cost only one cent, with lots more reading matter than this’, but he took two cents from his till all right.”

References

- [1] Conard Aiken, *The Higher Vaudeville: Vachel Lindsay*, New York, 1919.
- [2] Stephen Graham, *Tramping With Poet in the Rockies*, New York, 1922.
- [3] Maynard T., *Our Best Poets: Vachel Lindsay*, New York, 1922.
- [4] Lund R., *Books and Authors*, London, 1022.
- [5] Jones L., *First Impressions : Vachel Lindsay*, New York, 1925, p. 85-96.
- [6] Davison E., *Contemporary American Authors: Vachel Lindsay*, New York, 1928, p. 207-236.
- [7] Albert E. Trombly, *Vachel Lindsay Adventurer*, Columbia, 1929.
- [8] Krymborg A., *Our Singing Strength or a History of American Poetry*, New York, 1929.
- [9] *An Anthology of American Poetry*, New York, 1929.