

The Second Phase of Poetic Development of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay

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Abstract

In this period Nicholas Vachel Lindsay had accumulated intensive experience of Springfield as an archetypal American city full of potential but currently mediocre. In 1909 he came up with the publication of War Bulletins which was a monthly pamphlet and ran into five issues this of course was a private affair and dealt with what Lindsay thought to be American cancers. These War Bulletins contained articles story and poems of Lindsay alone. He distributed these War Bulletins on Springfield streets and spoke to whoever would listen to him whether YMCA or Anti saloon league.

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Introduction

It was between 1908 and 1912 that Lindsay developed his gospel and preached on his tramping tours. His message now started reaching the masses as number of magazines started publishing his works, "The American Magazine" published his Gospel of beauty and "The Proud Farmer." This was after Edward J. Wheeler, recognizing the potential in the poet devoted an editorial of current Literature of his Village Magazine, a privately published anthology of Lindsay's ideas written illustrated and edited by him. This editorial attracted the attention of Hamlin Garland who invited Lindsay to address the literary hub of the Chicago renaissance, the Cliff Dweller's club. In 1912 Harriet Monroe came across a recent article in 'The American' on his quaint publications and wrote to him asking for his works with the view of seeing into it, reviewing and including some in her forthcoming magazine 'Poetry' and she was obliged with a bunch of Lindsay's latest poems of which General William Booth Enters Into Heaven was one. It was in January 1913 that the literary world in America was electrified and thoroughly shaken by the publication of "General William Booth Enters into Heaven" in "Poetry".

This marked the advent of a great singing poet of the decade in America, there was no check what so ever on Lindsay for another ten years or so which saw him coming up with number of volumes of his poems. With the publication of General William Booth Lindsay became a nationally acclaimed poet having great merit.

The poem in itself is a tender glorification of General Booth of the Salvation Army and a reiteration of Lindsay's own faith in humanity and of his idealization of the leaders of mankind. The subject matter,

simple but noble conception and its pulsating rhythm were fresh notes in a poetry that had started experiencing a new birth of vigor and a wider and deeper public interest. The poem hence loaded with these qualities attracted attention of the people won the 'Poetry' prize and thus proved to be the real and proper beginning of Lindsay's career as a poet. Immediately after this a volume of poetry taking its title from General Booth poem was published in 1913, making it apparent that a new voice was singing in America. The poet as independent, an adherent of none of the new schools that were springing up and formulating rules:

"To my own tunes I will chant my words."

He stood alone quite untouched by literary movements or theories. His subjects were completely his own. His poetry could easily be divided in two distinct groups. One being called "Fantasies and Whims", showed a delicate, at times, wistful imagination, reminiscent of the little boy reading Grimms 'Fairy Tales'. The other poems were, for the most part, an exposition of his social philosophy, exhortation to beauty and goodness affirmation of faith in mankind, praise of the heroes and great men of the past. His methods were dictated only by himself and his subjects. Some of his meters were old and conventional. Many were the alternately rhyming quatrain or some slight variation from it, that was closely related to the verse form of innumerable hymns in innumerable Sunday hymnals. Some few, however, were new, new that is, in American poetry. They were written in a basic, emotional rhythm that had some counterpart in political oratory in religious preaching, and in group singing and activity.

The selection of this method was not a haphazard one. Lindsay felt the necessity of reaching as many people as possible with the help of his poetry. He had come to modify his early belief in the readiness of people generally to accept conventional poetry and so he had learned to employ the means best fitted to communicate thoughts and feelings to large groups. In a letter to Jessie B. Rittenhouse in January 1914 he wrote:

"The American people hate and abhor poetry. I am inventing a sort of regtime manner that deceives them into thinking they are at a Vaudeville show and yet I try to keep it to a real art. I can put what might be called my prose essay self into it. In the end I shall go back to the Olympian gods and the muses but I have been accused of being inhuman for seventeen years and desire just a little respite and revelry on paper, and companionship with my fellow creatures."¹

Embarked on what he called the "Higher Vaudeville" Lindsay toured the country, giving poetry recitals before college students, women's clubs, variously assorted groups. He became a platform celebrity. He recited his poems elaborating and playing upon the subtle speech cadences, until the audience became infected by their vigor and joined with him in the creation of communal chant.

Vachel Lindsay thus started making an inroad into the hearts of the people of America. He was a poet with distinctly new qualities, one who not only wrote verse but also gave musical touch to it. He wrote great poetry for a decade or so and gave it his voice too. Hence in order to make proper assessment of this great poet's works we need to hear him perform on the platform and as of now we need to read his poetry loud as per the instructions given there in so that it vibrated the strings of our inner ear for which they had been written as Lindsay intends to say so in his preface to *Collected Poems*.

“All my verses marked to be read aloud, should be whispered however contradictory that may seem. All poetry is first and last for the inner ear, and its final pleasures are for the soul whispering in solitude. Even the University of Kansas war cries have not served their full use till the graduate takes his walk alone through the wheat, whispering to himself its secret battle cry, in meditative warfare arming himself for the soul’s long solitary Pilgrims Progress to the Sun.”²

The decade saw a different variety of work laid before the public to enjoy and assess the poet with, Lindsay who had been dubbed many things a jeffersonian poet of promise; a visionary of sorts gone to seed in his later years; a flamboyant lyricist; self-conscripted to a vain Populist crusade: a mellennialist who sought nirvana through jazz and enlightened tramp on parade; spokesman for the “higher Vaudeville” and “New Localism”; a profounder of Springfield myth at last, perhaps, a Salvationist who marched blind, but led by faith, into the kingdom of God much like poet’s own William Booth, came up with verse which could easily be classified differently at least in few that is four five groups namely visionary group of poems, Mythical poems, his dancing poems i.e. those on which the dance could be performed, then his so called jazz poems-ones dealing with higher Vaudeville and off course the biographical poems.

The first volume of his poems taking its title from General Willima Booth poem, deals mainly with biographical poems of his, describing about various statesmen of America and the world, rather his heroes, the great life’s that influenced him. The volume contains poems expressing admiration and indignation with regard to various statesman of United States, and impresses itself on our memory as the message of man who lives in his own time, and who looks to the living future rather than to a dead past.

“General William Booth Enters Into Heaven” the title poem of the volume is a poetic tribute to the founder of the Salvation Army (1829-1912) to be sung to the tune of the revivalist hymn “The Blood of the Lamb”. General Booth is followed into heaven by the motley assortment of sinners he has saved from “Bull necked convicts” to “Drug fiends Pale”. The procession is accompanied by salvation army workers where described in Lindsay’ boisterous alliteration and Onomatopoeia (“Big voiced lassies made their Banjos bang”). The meter is an interesting one which the poet used frequently in this type of poetry; a four beat lone accentuated in this case by the actual bating of a drum, in which any number of off beats may intervene. Although the meter is theoretically similar to that of Anglo Saxon verse as well as to the “Sprung rhythm” of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Lindsay uses it in a highly original manner which suggests a half-savage, almost primeval emotionality.

The newness to be found in Lindsay’s passion was in its special object and method. He was the first to boost for beauty in the common American language. In, this his earliest notable poem he took the theme of a revival sermon and the rhythm of a revival hymn and achieved the fruitful marriage of salvation with jazz. So much is national, but Lindsay gave his poem a touch of local colour such as any medieval painter might have given it.

“Jesus came out from the court-house door,
stretched his hands above the passing poor.
Booth saw not but led his queer ones there,
round and round the mighty court house square.”³

The scene of the triumphant entry is Springfield, or some town like it; thus Lindsay had brought the drama of salvation home to his own neighbours.

This is one poem which incidentally was the poem which had initiated the Guarantor's Prize of the Poetry magazine, and the one which drew out compliment for its composer from the, then famous Irish poet W.B. Yeats. Yeats in the banquet arranged in his honour by poetry publicly addressed the obscure American, poet Lindsay with the compliment for this particular poem i.e. General Booth. He said,

"This poem is stripped bare of ornament. It has an earnest simplicity a strange beauty; and you know Bacon said, 'There is no excellent beauty without strangeness'."

This brings before us another aspect of the young poet a crusader with a sense of the tragedy and comedy in all the futile and costly ugliness around him. He was sure that people intended beauty and so it was his business to strip off the cheap offerings, the tawdry incrustations of false ideals and reveal to them the living shrine. This in Lindsay's opinion is what a poet is for. This is what he is trying to do in preaching his Gospel of Beauty in crying out against drink, prostitution, luxury, graft and other forms of vicious hideousness, and in pleading for bare beggary, true love, imaginative thinking, clean living-all austere ideals, which he deals with in this volume of his poetry. The poet has been able to get his message into his poetry which is just the beginning of the ascent on the hill of fame and recognition. At least Harriet Monroe finds it so and voices her feeling thus in her poetry volume 3 on page 183.

"Perhaps it is not too fond of a chain that at least he makes a beginning, puts one stout foot on the slope of Parnassus, in such poems as General William Booth Enters Into Heaven, Eagle Forgotten, Where is David? And one would praise finely phrased lines, and passages of high spiritual sympathy, in the poems about Poe and O' Henry and the light hearted singing lilt in some of the fanciful poems." Mr. Lindsay is poet with a message, a message which his fellow countrymen would seem to be in need of."⁴

The genuinity of his opinion is very evident from his various works that deal with his ideas and show his earnest effort is stabilising the truth of his opinion; different aspects of which are dealt with, in different poems like "The Drunkards in the Street" which brings forth his cry against drink as he says:

Why should I feel the sobbing, the secrecy, the glory,
this comforter, this fitful wind divine?
I the cautious pharises, the scribe, the whited sepulchre,
I have no right to God, he is not mine.
Within their gutters, drunkards dream of hell,
I say my prayers by my white bed tonight,
With the arms of God about me,
with the angels, singing, singing,
until the grayness of my soul grown white.⁵

Similarly we are exposed to other aspects of his art in 'The Trap' where he is crying against prostitution and is of the belief that this social evil is a doing of human beings themselves specially men who try to exploit poor maids who are helpless and thus trapped to show foul death.

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