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From New Elocution to New Criticism and the Dismissal of Vachel Lindsay

Brian McAllister

Albany State University, Georgia, USA

Abstract

Vachel Lindsay's fame was made, and ultimately ruined, by his performances of his "Higher Vaudeville" poems. This essay discusses the performance of the Higher Vaudeville in light of ideas of the New Elocution movement of the early twentieth century which influenced Lindsay's technique. Lindsay conceived these poems as elements of a performance medium. Ironically, some of the New Elocution ideas were indurated by the New Criticism, which discounted performance as constitutive of poetic meaning and led to Lindsay's critical dismissal. A consideration of the Higher Vaudeville as performance argues that Lindsay's achievement warrants critical reassessment.

[**Keywords:** Vachel Lindsay; performances, New Elocution; Higher Vaudeville]

The posthumous assessment of Vachel Lindsay's poetry represents a dramatic reversal. The change in tenor of Lindsay criticism and the suddenness of that change are startling. The critical acclaim for Lindsay during his life was typified by the critic John Gould Fletcher. Six years after the poet's death in 1931, Fletcher saw Lindsay as central to a worthy tradition in folk art:

Ever since the appearance of "The Congo" and "The Chinese Nightingales" I had realized that [Lindsay] deserved the acclaim which Americans audiences were giving him. He had achieved a fusion of popular American subject matter and vivid rhythmic and dramatic presentation which made him the chief folk artist among the American poets. It seemed to me that he had largely fulfilled the task only half accomplished by such earlier American folk singers as James Whitcomb Riley, Irwin Russell, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. He had given the world poetry that was sentimental and yet not false, popular and yet not cheap, democratic and yet full of heightened imagination. (281)

Yet, by 1940, not yet a decade after Lindsay's death, the critic C. P. Lee could confidently assert that "nowadays many a college student has never heard of Vachel Lindsay" (7). T. R. Hummer claims "[n]o poet of genuine visibility has ever been more summarily dismissed—from the canon, from the classroom, from the consciousness of readers—than Vachel Lindsay" (63). Such an abrupt and precipitous fall from poetic favor cannot be explained merely as the correction of a misplaced enthusiasm. Dennis Q. McNerny has voiced this dilemma:

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. (36)

Vachel Lindsay's reputation was made and ultimately ruined by his so-called "Higher Vaudeville" poems and by his exuberant public performances of them. What scholars have failed to recognize is that these poems were conceived as elements in a larger performance. Discussion of that performance and its relationship to the elocutionary ideas of his day can provide a more adequate assessment of Lindsay's achievement.

Lindsay's term, "Higher Vaudeville," has been unnecessarily confused by subsequent scholarship. Most critics have used the term to describe all of Lindsay's poems, whereas the Higher Vaudeville is actually a small set of poems Lindsay wrote between 1913 and 1915. Lindsay clearly marked these poems in the tables of contents of his books. What the Higher Vaudeville poems have in common is that, first, all of them have taken American vernacular forms or sounds as their prosodic inspiration. "General William Booth Enters into Heaven," for example, is inspired by the Salvation Army hymn "Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb?" An introductory note to "The Kallyope Yell" compares the poem to "The Jayhawk Yell," a college cheer from the University of Kansas. "The Santa Fe Trail" is imitative of car horns. Second, all of these poems include introductory comments and marginal notations that are meant to facilitate oral recitation.

In order to fully appreciate Vachel Lindsay, it is important to understand that all of his work was highly politicized. Lindsay's prose is full of references to a wide variety of liberal social reform movements of his day. He was a regular attendee at socialist meetings and at the meetings of woman's suffrage organizations. He had worked with Jane Addams at Hull House. He was an advocate of Henry George's Single Tax Movement. A brochure that he printed to promote his lecture appearances advocates for Ebenezer Howard's Garden City ideas. From his earliest *War Bulletins* and *Village Magazine* to his last illustrated poems, his aesthetic thinking was always influenced by social concern. He was especially worried about the problems of class divisiveness and racial rancor. As Anna Massa in "The Artistic Conscience of Vachel Lindsay" contends, "He believed that a writer's duty was not to himself, but to his audience, which should be all-class and nation-wide" (243). Toward this end, his Higher Vaudeville was an attempt to create a participatory performance form that would foster a sense of community and empowerment in a listening audience

Lindsay's life work is replete with bold experiments in genre. He mixed verse with prose, wrote illustrated poems, and experimented with a semiotics of design. His children's poems, many in the spirit of Blake, are subtly directed at adult readers. His book, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915) was the first book of film criticism, for he was among the first to recognize the merit of this new

medium. Lindsay's "Higher Vaudeville" poems were an equally radical experiment in the art of performance. Early in his career, Lindsay began to realize the efficacy of vaudeville technique. In an 11 November 1913 letter to Arthur Davison Ficke, Lindsay states that vaudeville is a medium "which I have all my life abhorred," but he also confesses "I at last grasp what those painted folks are up to" (Lindsay 81). What they were "up to" was seeking the audience's collaboration in creating meaning. In her introduction to *The Congo and Other Poems* (1914) Harriet Monroe recalls that, when Lindsay first introduced "The Congo," well before he had gained any notice from reciting it, the explanatory note he sent to accompany the poem had discussed his method as a "type of Greek work which survives in American vaudeville" (vi). He further claimed his work was "an attempt to carry this vaudeville form back towards the Greek precedent of the half-chanted lyric" (vii). In defense of his aspirations, Monroe sees in Lindsay's Higher Vaudeville poems

a return to the healthier open-air conditions, and immediate personal contacts, in the art of the Greeks and of primitive nations. Such conditions and contacts may still be found, if the world only knew it, in the wonderful song-dances of the Hopis and others of our aboriginal tribes. They may be found, also, in a measure, in the quick response between artist and audience in modern vaudeville. (viii-ix)

This desire to foster a creative interaction between artist and audience is very much a natural development of Lindsay's artistic and political aspirations.

The style of the Higher Vaudeville demonstrates that Lindsay was aware that, because the medium of sound is transient, the act of listening to poetry makes demands on an audience that are not required of the reader of print. Readers are at leisure to reread, not only to understand difficult passages, but to compare sentences or images not immediately juxtaposed. The pace of the reading experience is controlled by the reader. Listening, on the other hand, is controlled by the speaker. Hans-George Gadamer has pointed out, "when you look at something, you can also look away from it by looking in another direction, but you cannot 'hear away'" (462). The listening audience must grasp the speaker's message, as Yeats asserted, "swiftly or not at all" (221). Consequently, an oral form will tend toward simpler syntactic strategies. Walter Ong has remarked that oral poetry tends to use an "additive" grammar (38). Sentences are simple or compound. Ideas follow in an additive progression. Inverted word order is eschewed. Ong also notes that oral poetry is also "copious" (40). It makes ample use of repetition and redundancy which allow the listener to keep pace with the presentation. These features are especially true of the Higher Vaudeville poems and distinguish them generically from Lindsay's other poetic works. The Higher Vaudeville are consistently written in a more simplified syntax than his other poems, and these poems alone make liberal use of refrain and *leitwort*.

When Lindsay performed these poems, he consistently found ways to include the audience in the performance. In her biography of Lindsay, *The West Going Heart*, Eleanor Ruggles reports that while Lindsay recited “The Kallyope Yell” he would exclaim “Every day a circus day,” cup his ear, ask “What?” and answer himself, “Well almost every day.” Eight lines later he would proclaim, “Bands a-playing every day,” cup his ear and wait for the audience to respond, “What?” (243). Frederic Melcher, an attendee at a Lindsay performance at the Central Christian Church of Indianapolis in 1917 recalled his surprise at the audience’s response to Lindsay’s recitation of “King Solomon.” As instructed, when Lindsay declaimed “King Solomon he had four hundred sweethearts,” Melcher reports, “to a woman, those good ladies sang back: ‘We were the sweethearts!’” (Ruggles 246). Lindsay was adept at leading audiences in participating in his poems. Ruggles recounts that “he worked them up, led them row against row, aisle against aisle, the floor against the balcony” (243).

In 1916 Lindsay privately printed *A Letter about My Four Programmes for Committees in Correspondence*, which he used as an explanatory and promotional pamphlet in booking his appearances. This document is notable for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that Lindsay’s performances were politicized; second, it shows that he considered an evening’s performance as one holistic event, not merely the performance of a set of individual poems. His “Programme I: The Gospel of Beauty” is a clear example. For this program Lindsay lists twenty-one poems which are to be “threaded together with a discussion of Democracy and Art” (3). Lindsay also asserts a thematic arrangement for the verse in the list. He writes, “the plot of this recital is the contrast of the ‘Kallyope’ message [the third poem in the list] to ‘The Soul of the City’ [seventeenth on the list]” (4). From this description it is apparent that Lindsay has a political message he wishes to impart, and he has couched this statement in a single performance. Most of the poems Lindsay associated with the Higher Vaudeville are part of “Programme III: An Evening of Higher Vaudeville, and Orthodox Verse as well.” The Higher Vaudeville poems in this program are all listed first; all of the “Orthodox Verse” follows. In his book, *Poetry and Community*, BalzEngler has remarked a three-part organization of the poems in this list. Of the sixteen poems, the first six are Higher Vaudeville. The next six are a “sharing of private visions.” These poems are more varied in style and theme, ranging from short, personal lyrics like “The Moon’s the North Wind’s Cookie” to celebrations of American working classes in “Kansas.” The final four poems are presentations of “men of vision” These poems either celebrate or eulogize significant individuals (158).

A complete description of the performance of “An Evening of Higher Vaudeville and Orthodox Verse as Well” no longer exists; however, there is ample testimony that it involved elements of performance beyond the Higher Vaudeville poems. In a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* for 23 July 1964, Phyllis Mills recalls attending Lindsay’s performance at Oxford in 1920. She remembers the audience participating in the Higher Vaudeville poems in such ways as roaring in

imitation of the lions in “Daniel,” but she also recalls, “at intervals, [Lindsay] had every window opened and everyone walking about to ‘take the air’” (649). Another attendee, Arthur Rau, confirms this memory in a letter for the 13 August 1964 issue of the same journal, recalling “audience participation and opening of windows” (731). Though it is certainly too late to reconstruct the performance as a whole, there is enough evidence to demonstrate that the performance as a whole had a method. By encouraging audience response, Lindsay established a co-operative rapport with the audience. By giving separate sections of the audience individual parts of the poetry, leading them row against row, he produced a co-operative spirit among the audience members. By having them walk about and “take the air,” he extended this community spirit beyond the poems.

It is useful in understanding Lindsay’s social program for poetry to see the Higher Vaudeville poems in particular as a response to The New Elocution. Lindsay had been a student of Solomon Henry Clark, the central champion of The New Elocution, at the University of Chicago, and he credits Clark with influencing his performance (*Letter about My Four Programs* 5). Davis Edwards reports that when he personally asked Lindsay if Clark had influenced his oral poetic technique Lindsay responded emphatically, “that’s where I got it. And you can tell the world” (182).

The New Elocution movement began with S. H. Clark’s address, titled “The New Elocution,” to a Chicago meeting of the National Association of Elocutionists in 1897. Clark began by pointing out his objection to Delsartean method. He declared that this made the speakers “mechanical and affected,” and he argued that the purpose of public recitation is to transmit literature to an audience, not to be a vehicle for the reader’s self-expression. Calling elocution the “handmaiden of literature,” he emphasized the need for close, appreciative reading, and he asserted that “training in vocal expression leads the student to a careful, critical, and sympathetic study of literature as literature, with the special object of developing his powers of appreciation” (32). He concluded by asserting that students of the New Elocution “recite *to* an audience rather than *for* them” (36).

The New Elocution movement arose from a short-lived school of oratory called “Expression” which came to prominence in the 1880s. In fact, at the time Clark gave his seminal lecture, he was also head of the Chautauqua Institution’s “School of Expression.” The Expression School of Public Speaking, in response to the excesses of nineteenth-century elocution, had re-opened the centuries-old debate concerning the distinction between elocution and acting.

What has particular bearing on the study of Vachel Lindsay’s performances is the debate over *personation* in the oral presentation of literature. The debate began with an address delivered by Maud May Babcock, a professor of speech at the University of Utah, to the convention of the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking in Chicago in 1915, subsequently published in *The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking* in January 1916. Babcock begins by defining

interpretation as opposed to *impersonation*. She defines interpretation as “the presentation of any form of literary material [...] without the aid of dress, furniture, stage setting, or of literal characterization in voice, action, or make-up,” and she emphasizes the idea that “interpretation means translation—literary interpretation, a translation from a dead printed form to living, breathing experience” (18). She goes on to define impersonation as “an attempt to give exact, literal characterization in voice, action, and make-up, in realistic surroundings of dress, furniture, and stage setting.” She declares that “impersonative presentation will be confined to the stage and drama, while interpretive presentation will naturally and of necessity be limited to the platform and deal with various forms of literature” (19). Babcock believes that an impersonative treatment of a work violates standards of aesthetics,

since it destroys the unity and harmony of a selection by detracting from the purpose of the author, and also since it distracts the listener by directing his attention to the *how* rather than the *what* of that which is being read, and further destroys the purpose of interpretation by appealing to the visible rather than the imaginative. (19)

She concludes that impersonation cannot be considered as helpful to the interpretation, or even as harmless, but must be set down as absolutely baneful to platform presentation and hence to be discarded (19). For Babcock, “real literature will not lend itself to [...] imitative treatment, and there are few, if any, opportunities in things of literary worth to exploit one’s ability as an entertainer.” In agreement with Clark’s dictum that speakers recite to rather than for an audience, Babcock asks, “Shall the audience be instructor and tell us how to proceed?” (21).

Babcock’s thesis was not accepted by mainstream scholars without dissent. In the April 1916 issue of *The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking*, R. A. Talcott, professor of public speaking at Valparaiso University, asked, “Is there a legitimate place in Lyceum work for literal characterization and pantomime in the presentation of literature?” (118). He proceeds by expanding Babcock’s dichotomy of impersonation versus interpretation into a four-part scheme of *interpretative reading*, *impersonative reading*, *straight personation*, and *acting*. He argues that impersonative reading, which he defines as reading with the use of literal characterization in voice and with pantomimic action without the trappings of costume or stage properties, cannot be dismissed from serious literary appreciation out of hand. He asserts that “there is a place for such personation,” and that place is “in the lyceum where a college professor can personate with perfect propriety and with no loss of dignity” (120). One reason Talcott gives for the use of personation is that speakers “can lead people to an appreciation of the highest and best if [they] first give them something that is easy to appreciate” (121). He insists that “personation does not belong to vaudeville,” and he asks, “would you send people to shows where decency is not always paramount when they

might be getting in the lyceum an entertainment consisting of clean personation interspersed with some pure interpretation of literature?" (122).

Lindsay seems to have been aware of the subtleties of this argument in at least one regard. A major objection to personative treatment raised by Babcock is that it "destroys the unity and harmony of reading, since the mechanics of impersonation make it impossible to pass quickly and unnoticeably enough from one character to another" (19.) Lindsay was aware of this difficulty and punctuated his stage characterizations by dramatic exits and entrances. Paul Horgan, who saw Lindsay perform, recalls that the poet's first entrance on the stage was both dramatic and in character. "Suddenly, and with dramatic violence, the side door was flung open, and the poet came before us treading a dance step" (566). When the performance of that poem was finished, Lindsay left the stage, "and when he returned he was in another mode" (567).

Though Babcock and Talcott disagree on the use of personation, they both implicitly agree on the terms "lyceum" and "vaudeville." They use the term "lyceum" to designate an oral presentation designed to edify and enlighten an audience. In contrast "vaudeville" designates any oral presentation designed solely to entertain. Vachel Lindsay's term "Higher Vaudeville" is in concert with this distinction. Lindsay had been inspired by the popularity of vaudeville and had realized the efficacy of its participatory strategy, but he had not engaged in the baser shenanigans of the typical vaudeville performance. Like the term "vaudeville" used by Babcock and Talcott, Lindsay's Higher Vaudeville is an entertainment, but it is aimed at a higher goal. When Talcott asks if we should "send people to shows where decency is not always paramount," he reveals an attitude implicit in Babcock's stance—that audiences will, or should, seek out literature of their own accord. Talcott, however, is willing to *promote* literature among the citizenry. Lindsay's Higher Vaudeville is intended to make a similar concession to the audience. On 18 January 1918 Lindsay wrote to Jessie Rittenhouse: "The American people hate and abhor poetry. I am inventing a sort of rag-time manner that deceives them into thinking they are at a vaudeville show, and yet I try to keep it to a real art."

Clark's ideas of elocution had an immense effect on the subsequent study of public speaking in the United States. As K. B. Valentine points out, under the influence of the New Elocution the study of oral interpretation moved from "a skills focus to a literature focus" (559). An influential text book of the early twentieth century, Algernon Tassin's *The Oral Study of Literature* (1923) illustrates this change. In the introduction to his text, Tassin argues for the use of instruction in oral reading as a tool for literary appreciation, claiming that "the higher forms of literature cannot be appreciated by young people except when read aloud, and that reading aloud enriches the appreciation of even discerning minds" (14). His text, he says,

is not an “elocution” book, and the lessons given in the appendix are not “elocution” lessons. They concern getting the thought of the writer, and the oral reading contemplated is only a test of whether one got the thought or not. (21)

Tassin’s book is a direct product of the New Elocution, and it implicitly denies oratory as the *locus* of meaning. Following the ideas of such thinkers as Tassin and Clark, university systems in the United States began to consider oral recitation as a method of literary study and, consequently, began offering courses in “the oral study of literature” as opposed to “elocution.” With the publication of Clark’s *The Oral Interpretation of the Printed Page* (1915), interpretation rather than personation became the accepted theoretical norm for the oral presentation of literature among the majority of theorists, despite the protests of scholars such as R. A. Talcott. The debate never fully subsided and is still sometimes engaged today. David A Williams, for example, argues in his 1975 essay that a reader must decide “how much impersonation should be used.” He points out that “no one has yet devised a system to indicate the amount of characterization” a reader should employ (52).

Though the New Elocutionists disagreed among themselves about such problems as the place of personation in oral delivery, they implicitly agreed on one central tenet. They considered poetry to be a writer’s art. For them oral presentation is the translation of the “real literature,” as Babcock so boldly put it, which is the printed page. The effect of this assumption on Lindsay’s reception was two-fold. First, it discounted his performances as a mere showman’s trick. Second, it inspired critics to consider the printed poems individually ignoring their role as elements of a larger performance. The performances were viewed as *promotional* of Lindsay’s work, not *constitutive* of it. All the critics who heard Lindsay admitted the power of his delivery, but none recognized a generic difference from his work and that of his American contemporaries.

Interestingly, Lindsay’s contemporary critics often betray a suspicion that their criticism is inadequate to Lindsay. Typical is Virginia Woolf’s review of Lindsay for *The Times Literary Supplement* of 29 January 1920. Woolf considers the language of Lindsay’s poems “generally too large and loose for the thought; it is often even more banal than the thought—pompous, careless, slack, and conventional” (64). Still she wonders how such “mediocrity should yet remain buoyant and seaworthy,” and she concedes that “you walk on with the tune running in your head. It comes back of its own accord later in the day.” She asks, “has it not somehow addressed itself to you also?” Woolf’s dilemma is typical of Lindsay’s American admirers; those who saw the performances were quick to admit their power but were unable to describe adequately how that power arose. John Dos Passos, for example, saw Lindsay perform at Harvard. He recalled, “We went to kid, but were very much impressed in spite of ourselves” (Ruggles 237).

Lindsay's performances were in dialogue with the ideas of the New Elocution. Ironically, the New Elocution's focus on the text anticipates New Criticism and ultimately sows the seeds of Lindsay's critical dismissal. New Criticism, with its emphasis on a careful reading of the text and its belief in the heresy of paraphrase and the affective fallacy, considers the written text as the sole *locus* of meaning. In *Theory of Literature* Rene Wellek and Austin Warren pose the problem of the *ontological situs* of the poem. Though they concede that the printed text cannot be considered *the* poem, they assert that print is indispensable claiming that "poetry is written for the eye as well as for the ear" (144). Thus, the central assumption of New Criticism is that the poem is an *object* rather than an *event* (21). The new critic held the proper object of study to be "the poem itself" and viewed public recitation of poetry as derivative. For the new critic, recitation is necessarily an act of *translation* not of *creation*. It is inherently imperfect and constantly in need of verification from the printed text.

This understanding of public recitation as translation has been embraced by twentieth-century theorists of elocution. Wallace Bacon, for example, claims that the twentieth-century approach to public speaking, in contrast to the elocution of the eighteenth century, treats the text as "a point of return" rather than as "a point of departure" (4). In other words, the purpose of public recitation is to interpret for the audience a text, and the public speaker's primary concern is fidelity to that text. The act of recitation, therefore, is a translation of an unchanging meaning that resides in the text. This understanding of the public speaker's function is, Bacon asserts, "the clear line of change from the eighteenth century to our own time in the teaching of oral reading" (4). In *Literature as Experience* Bacon and Breen imply the primacy of the text when they assert that the experience of poetry "exists only within the poem itself" (124). And they further claim that "the poem exists only in the words in which it is set down" (235). Thus, they discount both extra-textual events in the performance as part of the poem, and they ignore the participation of the audience as constitutive of meaning.

After Lindsay's death, as critics read these poems on the printed page divorced from their performed context, they faulted the poetry for its simplistic syntax and repetitiveness, not considering that these characteristics arise from Lindsay's understanding of the demands made by a listening audience. Further, as critics were unable to see such elements of performance as audience participation and extra-textual events as essential elements of the poems, they were unable to see the Higher Vaudeville as generically distinct from other lyric poetry. But the testimony of those who saw the performances demonstrates that Lindsay's performances were successful. To a person, attenders report feeling a real power in Lindsay's presentation. To a person they report having left the auditorium feeling that they had experienced something remarkable, that they had been part of an empowered community.

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Brian McAllister is an associate professor of English at Albany State University in Albany, Georgia USA. He has a PhD in English from Auburn University. His principle interest is in modernist poetry and poetics especially marginalized modernists and modernisms. He has written on such poets as Vachel Lindsay, Fenton Johnson, and Muriel Rukeyser.
