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**The poet as performer**

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**Middle Tennessee State University, 1988**

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**The Poet As Performer**

**Donald F. Cusic**

**A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Arts**

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**The Poet As Performer**

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## ABSTRACT

### The Poet As Performer

Donald F. Cusic

In twentieth century America, poets do not just write poems, they also perform their poetry in readings and other platform appearances. This leads to a dichotomy in the role of a successful poet: to be a great writer and/or to be a great performer. Since poets have had, by necessity, to earn a living in some way other than through sales of books of poetry, the public reading has become increasingly important for American poets. Yet, even though performances are an integral part of the lives of many poets, critics have consistently ignored this aspect of poetry or, when they have acknowledged it, denigrated it.

This dissertation attempts to examine poets as performers in their role as a performer. Three poets are examined in depth: Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost, and T. S. Eliot. The first, Vachel Lindsay, became a well-known poet primarily through his performances and clearly loved the stage and performing all his life. Frost was reluctant to perform at first but, as his stature as a poet grew through success from book sales, he adapted to the stage and became a consummate performer. Eliot was never inclined towards performance, although his poetry is very dramatic. Eliot contrasts with the others because, although he performed

Donald F. Cusic

late in his life, he generally eschewed the role of performer for that of critic and poet. During his final years, Eliot's platform appearances were generally lectures on criticism.

The biographies of each of these poets is discussed because personality and a natural affinity for the stage is a major reason someone is a performer. Too, the biographical examination of each poet shows how performances affected their poetry, the public's perceptions of them as poets, and how poets fit into the American culture and achieve recognition for themselves and their poetry.

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## Introduction

The poet as performer has become an accepted part of the academic landscape, making money from readings and gaining exposure for the poetry. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands of times each year, poets travel across the country, usually from university to university, to read their works. But the teachers and academic critics of poetry have tended to ignore this trend. In an article in The American Scholar, poet/performer/critic Donald Hall notes that critics "have insulated themselves from awareness of this phenomenon" and that, though English departments sponsor most readings, they are "ambivalent on the subject" (63). Hall continues that an English department "does not like to think about poetry readings, and if as a critic it mentions them at all, it is dismissive or ironical" (63).

Platform readings--writers reading from their works on a stage--are certainly nothing new in America. They were popular throughout the nineteenth century with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain all being the darlings of this circuit at different points in the century. But poetry readings were not in vogue--Emerson gave lectures which later became his Essays, Ezra Pound gave lectures that became The Spirit of Romance, and Walt Whitman generally lectured on Lincoln. The exception here is James Whitcomb

Riley, the most popular poet in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

As Riley became known as a poet, publishing books like The Old Swimmin' Hole and 'Leven More Poems (1883), he received offers to give readings. It was a call he willingly answered. He had always wanted to be a performer, playing for a short while with a medicine show, writing songs, playing his guitar, banjo and violin wherever he could before beginning his career with newspapers in Indiana. Riley states that as a boy he was "vividly impressed with Dickens' success in reading from his own works and dreamed that some day I might follow his example" so after first reading at "Sunday-school entertainments" and "special occasions such as Memorial Days and Fourth of Julys" he read one night in a city theatre where "I got encouragement enough to lead me to extend my efforts" (Riley 14). This led to his reading throughout his home state of Indiana "and then the country at large" as he became nationally known for his performances as well as his poetry (Riley 14).

Vachel Lindsay, who was greatly influenced by Riley, made poetry a one-man-show with his recitations in the early part of the twentieth century. He was followed by Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost, who read through the 1930s and 1940s. However, the poetry reading as it has blossomed in the latter half of the twentieth century comes from the popularity of Dylan Thomas's three American tours which drew

crowds and attention to poetry readings. From this time (early 1950s) "contemporary poetry started to be identified with the poetry reading" (Hall, "Poetry" 65).

At first, a circuit was developed among colleges who each paid the poet about \$100 for a reading. If he could put enough of these together, a poet could make a handsome amount. Around 1960 lecture agents jumped in and began signing up poets with agencies to represent them on the lecture circuit. This caused the fees to jump to \$500 plus travel expenses per engagement and then to an average of \$1000 per engagement with larger amounts available now and then for a poet like James Dickey. The first agency to really promote and book poets this way was Harry Walker; currently the foremost agency is Lordly and Dame in Boston (Hall, "Poetry" 65). The agents generally collect 30-35 percent of the fee for their own, spending countless hours on the telephone coaxing customers and mailing out promotional brochures.

Although many poets and critics debate the literary merit of poetry readings, most acknowledge the financial benefits. For most, it is the best way for poetry to make any significant amount of money for the poet.

Poetry has long been acknowledged as a form of literature that does not pay for itself in terms of book sales. Judson Jerome, editor of the annual Poet's Market, a source book listing magazines and other outlets for poets to send their work, sardonically asserts "If it is money you

need, poetry is the last commodity you should rely on to provide it" and "if either payment or fame is your motive in writing poetry, you are in the wrong field ((Jerome, Poet '86 11; Poet '88 1). Jerome notes that the main outlets for poetry, the small magazines, generally do not pay except in copies. (Poet '88 1). Some money may be made by entering contests and Judson states that there are poets who "apparently make a career of entering contests again and again, sometimes winning little prizes and sometimes big ones" (Poet '88 401).

Jerome, who offers sound, practical advice to his audience of practicing as well as would-be poets, reminds his readers again and again that "You cannot think of poetry as a way to make a living. Even the greatest of our poets find ways to support themselves and, in doing so, support their poetic habit...Poetry is not a profession in itself" as well as the observation that most "who are actively submitting poetry to magazines do well to have a dozen poems a year accepted even by nonpaying markets (Poet '88 422, 7). He stresses that poetry should be viewed as a "hobby" although he adds "You may be quite serious about it, as many are serious about their hobbies. You may devote your life to it, but it remains a hobby--even for those of us who consider ourselves professionals" (Poet '88 6).

By and large, there is not much interest from the American public in books of poetry and "compared with the total reading population, the audience seriously interested

in poetry is small" (Hazo 286). It is certainly not a "popular" form of literature today; although numerous people regardless of talent or calling write it, few people actually read it. Even the best of today's poets are often unrecognized, as M. L. Rosenthal notes in the Introduction to his book Modern Poets:

There are genuine poets everywhere--sparkling, energetic spirits of every variety--and very few of them receive anything like public recognition. ...Most poets...are known to a few people only--an established poet who has encouraged them, an editor or two, a teacher, and a few other writers in similar circumstances. (x)

Even when a poet has a book he will not make much money and Jerome points out that a fairly normal print run for a book of poetry published by a major trade publisher is a thousand. The author "is usually promised ten free copies, may buy more at a 40 percent discount, and will receive 10 percent of the retail price of books sold after the advance has been paid off" with the result that the poet sells his book "for the advance plus ten free copies" since most books of poetry do not sell a thousand copies" (Poet '86 12). He adds that a few libraries may purchase a book of poetry from a major press but that publishers in general "make minimal efforts to distribute most of them" with the result that "the bulk of even the small editions, often only

a thousand or two, are remaindered (that is, sold at reduced prices to book wholesalers in order to clear the warehouse)" (Poet '86 12).

Donald Hall, discussing poetry's balance sheet and the importance of poetry readings for poets' incomes, observes that "if the poet publishes forty poems in a range of magazines, he may gross as much as \$600" and if he assembles these poems in a book "the royalties after a few years are likely to be about \$600 also while "reading the same poems for one hour at a college" a poet may earn "\$750 to \$1000, and he can do thirty or forty lectures a year" (To Keep 105-106).

For these reasons, poetry readings become even more important because they "provide a welcome source of income, may help to sell a few books and give poets a chance to meet people who are interested in their work" (Berke 66). In 1961 Donald Hall wrote that "Writers who perform well on the platform are beginning to discover that they can make as much in six weeks on the road as they can in nine months of teaching" (To Keep 82). While Hall admits that he loves both the income and the performing he admits that "Most poets, if there were no pay for readings, would read for nothing" ("Poetry" 77). The simple fact that the pay is good, however, assures poets a chance to make some money from their poetry, a chance the plain written word, even when published in a book by a major publisher, does not provide. Whenever poets and critics talk about poetry

readings, there are issues raised and concerns voiced. Donald Hall asserts that "poetry readings are narcissistic exhibitions devastating to poets, audience, and American poetry" ("Poetry" 71). Hall continues that "even great poets cheapen their poems by exhibitionism" and cites as elements of bad readings "inappropriate comedy, sentimentality, [and] performance excess" where the poet "solicits or demands attention" ("Poetry" 71). He also blames audiences "assembled in our celebrity culture to revere poets as celebrities" who contribute further to the problem by "cooing at cuteness, applauding cheap shots at other poets or academics, encouraging an appetite for adulation by indulging its own crowd-stupid appetite for adoring" ("Poetry" 71-72). He states that "Maybe there is something to be said against any performance of poetry, even a good one" before setting forth the argument a number of poetry critics make about public readings:

The poetry reading deprives us of civilization's inwardness. Obviously, any performance deprives us of the opportunity to supply our own sound and gesture. Performance makes passivity. When we read silently, we must hear what we read in the mind's ear. (If our throat be not tired after silent reading, we read with eyes alone, and we will never discover the plateau of inwardness.) When mind's voice speaks to mind's ear, we make sounds as perfect as an internal aria. At the

same time, our response to the poem is our own: no communal laugh or sigh or intaken breath controls or suggests the direction of response. Poet and reader, alone together, find an intimacy that crowds inhibit or prevent. The private art--poet in solitude finding and shaping the only word, carving it like alabaster; not poet as gregarious talker improvising the moment's eloquence--finds in silent reading its appropriate publication: its public is a series of intense privacies.

("Poetry" 72)

Hall then asks if public poetry reading "hurts American poetry?" and answers with the observation that many poets write "simplistic poems" because they want to be successful on the platform ("Poetry" 74). He also notes a "preponderance of humor or attempted humor" in books of contemporary poetry and that "light-verse surrealism is a prevailing mode--silliness, goofiness" before asserting that these faults derive from the influence of the public performance on poets and poetry ("Poetry" 74).

Perhaps Hall could have used the example of James Whitcomb Riley to make his point here. Riley notes that readings helped shape his poetry and observes that "The public desires nothing but what is absolutely natural, and so perfectly natural as to be fairly artless" (16). The Hoosier poet continues that the audience at his public readings of poetry wanted "simple sentiments that come

direct from the heart" and that he "learned to judge and value my verses by their effect upon the public" (16-17).

While Samuel Hazo states that "the proper destiny of a poem is to be heard" Stanley Burnshaw, in The Seamless Web, asks:

How much in fact, can any audience experience from a single hearing of any new poem which may call for thoughtful study? Limited as he is by these and other conditions, the poet-reciter does well to choose poems which his auditors will best be able to stay with in their minds. To do otherwise invites the embarrassments of their half-hearing, hence of half-listening--which can also arise with the best chosen text. For even poems suited to the platform are hard to perform well. They demand an extraordinary talent which--as any devotee of recitals soon discovers--very few poets possess. (Hazo 288, 290)

Rebecca Berke in her book on contemporary British and American poetry, Bounds Out of Bounds, cautions that "Readings can also present some very serious problems, which some poets are unaware of" (66). She notes that "a reading is undeniably a dramatic situation with the demands and rewards of that particular medium" and that "far too many poets are tempted by the need to entertain an audience" with

the result that "readings often degenerate into cabaret, with the poet just another "personality on parade" (66).

Berke continues her discussion by asking "Are poetry readings a good thing?" before asking another question: "Which is more important, the poetry or the poet?" She acknowledges that poets need the money that readings give as well as "human contact with their audiences" but notes that "the need to be entertaining at readings drives out all subtleties of language, texture, images or thought" (66). She concludes that, although the poet certainly matters, "ultimately his poetry is what may outlast him" and therefore "its development must be given priority" (66).

Donald Hall has participated in and written about public performances of poetry over a long period of time, making observations about how these events affect poetry and poets. In "Writers in the Universities" he states "Poetry comes from meditation, from conversation, even from arguments with friends; it does not come from lectures or from consultations" (To Keep 87) and adds in another essay, "Poets on the Platform" that reading poetry to public audiences "is bound to change the kind of poetry Americans write" (To Keep 108). Hall confesses that "poets like me, who find performing nearly as attractive as writing, are in danger of becoming not poets but scriptwriters for our own one-man shows" before warning that "there is the danger that actor-poets will sacrifice the poetry to the performance" (To Keep 107-108).

On the other hand, there is the admission of the positive effects the public performance can have on poetry. Donald Hall also feels "poetry readings are the best thing that ever happened to poet, audience, and American poetry" ("Poetry" 71). He states:

While the reading can encourage bad habits, it can also lead to revision. It holds poets to the record of past work. Reading old things aloud, perforce one becomes scholar of old errors. Such knowledge leads to tinkering with old poems, revising them in the margins of books. The same dissatisfaction may help us find fault with current work, and by reading it aloud we try it out...premature publication blocks natural change; but when we have worked to the point where the new poem is no longer volatile, reading it is tentative publication; we watch it behave in public. ..it is more likely that we learn the poems faults simply by saying it. ("Poetry" 75-76)

Samuel Hazo notes that the essential difference between poetry and prose "is that prose is written and poetry is heard" and encourages poets to remember that "reading their poems to others is the culmination of the poetic art, not just a way of airing their views or supplementing their incomes" (288).

In his article for the American Scholar, Hazo states that young poets receive public attention from their poetry in two ways: "publish their own work or present it in person, through poetry readings" (278). Hazo admits "The former obviously must precede the latter, since few poets who have not already been published are invited to give public readings of their own work" (278). Perhaps that is why established poets continue to recommend poetry readings as a way for new poets to expose their poetry, get to know other poets, and develop their writing.

Donald Hall, discussing the advantages performances hold for the poet who reads regularly, states that the performing poet "sees an audience, hears them laugh and clap, or rustle and cough when they are bored" ("Poetry" 88). He also notes that "reading a new poem to an audience is a form of publication" and that "by the very enunciating of it, the poet may see flaws in it" ("Poetry" 88). Hall also observes that poets are likely "to enjoy performing" ("Poetry" 88).

He applies this to himself, stating that at a certain stage of writing a poem "when I can't see anything wrong with it, but I sense that it is not finished" he will read it aloud to an audience (To Keep 106-107). At this point he will know immediately "where the fault is" and concludes that "without the reality of those faces, the poem would not have changed as it was" (To Keep 106-107).

Roberta Berke states "No matter how private a poet may be, ultimately he writes poems in order to reach people" and that "Readings appear to offer poets the acknowledgment they so desire" (65) while Samuel Hazo asserts:

There are more reasons for encouraging the revitalization of the oral or bardic tradition than for remaining indifferent or opposed to it. First, it seems by definition essential to the appreciation of the poem--and this holds true whether the reciter of the poem is the poet himself or another person. Second, it is beneficial to poets simply to hear themselves say their poems; frequently their ears detect flaws that their eyes missed. Third, poetry readings quite literally create audiences that would not otherwise exist and, in so doing, make the appreciation of poetry an active rather than a passive activity--that is, listeners must make a conscious effort to respond, to participate by their very attention in what they are hearing.

(290)

A public reading may enhance the written word and a performance of poetry may even help the poem and the reader/listener. In Performing Literature: An Introduction to Oral Interpretation, authors Beverly Long and Mary Hopkins state "The shared oral experience is likely to

reveal insights to the audience that they overlooked, or enhance those they may not have appreciated fully in their own silent reading (xiii).

Long and Hopkins admit that silent reading "is a more passive activity, not only physically and vocally, but also mentally and emotionally" (xii). They state that with silent reading "we usually read more quickly without attending to the text fully, often passing over words we don't immediately recognize or incidents that interest us less" before concluding that "one performance cannot possibly express all that a literary text contains" and that "the richer the literature, the less likely we are to settle for only one performance, however interesting and satisfying" (xiii, 132). The net result is that this response "does not minimize the appeal of a strong, full performance; it merely reminds us that such a performance does not thereby exhaust the literature" (132).

Overall, public readings should have a positive effect for listeners when they return to reading. Denise Levertov finds these listening experiences should complement eye-reading and make it "less silent" because people "would form the good habit of reading not much faster than the voice speaks" (425-426). And Donald Hall admits "No excellent poem is immediately receivable, even in silent reading" and that "If poets hold onto this possibility, then the notion of reading the poem aloud--in their minds as they compose--

can enforce the sensual without denying the complex"  
("Poetry" 74).

There is a conflict between the public reading and the printed word and one obvious conclusion emerges: they are two different endeavors, though linked, and a poem that works well in one medium may not work well in the other. The converse may also be true. Samuel Hazo notes that "American poets can develop a national audience by perfecting the act of saying their poems well in public" then concludes that "The quality of the spoken poems will do the rest" (290). Obviously we are dealing with two separate aspects of poetry--the public and private reading--which are united primarily because both are called "poetry."

Readings help the poet expose his poetry and also give listeners the opportunity to purchase the work. This helps the poet sell books (in fact, the reading itself may be considered a "publication" and Donald Hall states that the public reading "which used to be rare, has become the chief form of publication for American poets") ("Poetry" 63). It also creates a demand for the printed word.

For the poet who is doing performances without a full-length book, this usually takes the form of "Chap books" or pamphlets. These usually come out early in a performing poet's career and are made available at readings. Most of these chap books--which can be anything from several pages stapled together to nicely printed pamphlets with attractive graphics--are sold to people at the reading who have heard a

poet and like his work and want to buy a copy. Thus it is from the poetry readings that most beginning poets find "sales" for their poetry.

The poet who is a great performer, who can read his works (or those of others) in such a way that an audience is genuinely moved, who creates a demand for his presence and his poetry and who steps from the private, small world of poets to the large, public world of the popular culture, is a breed apart. For this poet, recognition, esteem, celebrity-status and financial rewards are available. The public knows and recognizes him as a poet, is able to see and hear him; and often the public uses him as models for their notions of what a poet--and poetry--should be.

There have been a few great performing poets, like Dylan Thomas, whose poetry has stood the test of time. Other poets, like Vachel Lindsay, have not fared as well; he too was a great performer but his poetry has not been considered significant by most critics in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Other great performers, like Rod McKuen, have not been considered great (or even legitimate) poets by critics during the height of their popularity, while someone like Allen Ginsberg has been considered a serious poet primarily through his live performances.

In the end, the poet will be judged by his poetry and not by his performances. But without the public performances, the poet may never get the initial attention that establishes him as a poet, may not be able to make

enough money with his poetry to continue, and may not get any constructive feedback that will help his poetry. But the greatest benefit public readings hold for a poet is that it provides a forum for the poetry that lets the poet know immediately what works and what doesn't. It is hard to imagine an audience when you write alone; performing poetry puts the audience in the same room. Perhaps this is the major advantage of being a poet/performer. Donald Hall sums this nicely when he states:

For centuries, poets have written in solitude. When we publish in a magazine nothing happens; we may get a letter. When we publish a book, we may be reviewed a year later. In the poetry reading the relationship between poet and audience is clear and instantaneous. We write poems, always, with some sense that we might be speaking to others, that poems testify to potential connections among people, now with the living and potentially with the unborn. Present community can become palpable in the poetry reading, as the poet publishes dreams and phonemes by means of his timbre, pitch, and waving hand. Bad readings parody this connection; but at the best moments, like great theatre when actor and audience merge, the poet, saying lines labored over in solitude, reads them returning on the faces of the audience. ("Poetry" 77)

In this study of the poet as performer, three poets will be examined in depth: Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost and T. S. Eliot. Their basic biographies will be told because their human nature and character determines their attitude--and success--as public performers. Lindsay was a consummate performer and his poetry rests largely in the realm of his performances; Frost achieved success first as a poet and only performed after he had established himself as a poet in answer to requests from audiences that he read his works; Eliot has had the greatest influence on critics of poetry in the twentieth century and his disdain of performances has colored a number of critic's views of public performances while his ideas of music and drama in poetry--essential elements in performed poetry--make his poetry excellent examples of performance although the poet himself was not a good performer.

There are other poet/performers--for example Carl Sandburg, Dylan Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg--but they have been treated in another study (Cusic, "Poet"). Too, Lindsay, Frost, and Eliot represent the spectrum of poet/performers with Lindsay always a performer, Frost a reluctant performer who grew to love the stage after his success as an author, and Eliot, who always preferred the roles of poet and critic to that of performer.

## Vachel Lindsay

When Vachel Lindsay was born, on November 10, 1879, Robert Frost and Amy Lowell were five, Carl Sandburg was one, Edgar Lee Masters and Edwin Arlington Robinson were ten, and Wallace Stevens was only a month old. Within the next ten years, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams would be born. Emerson, Tennyson, and Walt Whitman were still alive; among the most popular writers of the day were novelist Mark Twain, critic James Russell Lowell, and poet James Whitcomb Riley.

Poetry, like the country, was beginning to undergo vast changes in this post-Civil War period when the country was well on its way to becoming an urban, industrialized nation. It was the force pulling the country towards industry--and away from its agricultural heritage--that led to the rise in populism during this latter half of the nineteenth century.

In this period of rapid change in American life, populism represented "a way of life characterized by simplicity, hard work, honesty, thrift, and value of the product in terms of toil and time rather than in monetary terms" (Yatron 2). The titans of industry and finance emerging during this time were viewed by the populists as "parasites feeding on the lifeblood of other men's toil" and the populists often summed up the country's problems in one phrase--"Wall Street" (Yatron 2).

The midwest, where Lindsay was born, was no longer as isolated with the advances in technological communication and there was a fear among the inhabitants about the waves of immigrants descending upon the region. Populism was reactionary because much of the country--particularly the midwest--feared the future and loved their idealized version of the past, which was being yanked away from them. This was reflected in the poetry coming out of the midwest in the early part of the twentieth century, particularly from poets like Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Edgar Lee Masters, who were dubbed "The Prairie Poets" by historian Walter Havighurst (Hallwas and Reader 7). These three writers share some common influences: the landscape of the midwest, the history of Illinois steeped in the pioneer spirit, the growing myth of Abraham Lincoln, the populist/democratic idealism of William Jennings Bryan, Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld's social conscience, and the stories of Mark Twain (Hallwas and Reader 7).

In his book America's Literary Revolt, critic Michael Yatron notes that the literary manifestation of populism was mainly "reactionary." He states:

By reactionary we mean that the Populists wanted to turn the clock back to a period which had ceased to exist a half a century before the election of 1896. They wanted to return to the river world of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, to a boy's world of straw hat, bare feet, and fishing

pole. On an adult level this world is characterized by small villages and farms, by hard-working stoic agrarians, who know how to live, love, work, fight--and who are thoroughly equalitarian and democratic. Nostalgia is, in a word, the essence of the reaction which runs throughout literary Populism. (9)

Yartron adds that "For the Populists virtue and manhood lay in hard physical work; higher education, high flown language, well-made clothing, good manners--these were effeminancies to be ridiculed" (10). Vachel Lindsay's poetry and performances embraced this populism, which was part of his popularity as well as part of the tension Lindsay felt in the 1920s and 1930s when he began to realize that his ideals and poetry were being buried by an America that was vastly different from the one of his father.

Vachel Lindsay first discovered poetry at the age of eight when he read Milton's Paradise Lost. At thirteen he discovered Edgar Allen Poe and was admonished by his grandfather Frazee that poets were "clever men, but they almost all have a screw loose, somewhere" advising young Vachel that if he wrote poetry to do it "just for fun," with the poet concluding he would write poetry "on the side," agreeing with his mother's advice to "be an artist" (Lindsay 15, 12).

Lindsay's mother was "one of the world's organizers," active in the Anti-Saloon league which ushered in the era of

Prohibition. Young Vachel was educated at home until the age of eleven and attended Springfield schools from 1890 to 1897. He studied medicine at Hiram College, a Cambellite institution in Ohio, from 1897 to 1900 before attending the Chicago Institute of Art from 1901 to 1903, then the New York School of Art from 1903 to 1908. In all his higher education endeavors, Lindsay failed to graduate (Massa 8).

Lindsay was an intensely religious youth who began each of his diaries with "This book belongs to Christ" and felt his life's calling was "to spread the gospel of Christ through art, to consecrate art" (Ruggles 66). His first drawings and poems were refused by magazines like The Bookman, Everybody's Magazine, and The Century. In 1899, at the age of twenty, he broke off his formal schooling and set out to be a poet.

Lindsay had one hundred copies printed of two of his poems and, inspired by the example of the troubadours of old who took their songs directly to the people, went out at eleven at night on March 23, 1905 in the streets of New York and recited his poems to various people he saw in stores and on the street, offering them for sale for two cents each (Masters 124). He stopped at a bakery, a fish market, candy shop, Chinese laundry and drug store and wrote afterwards in his diary, "I am so rejoiced over it and so uplifted I am going to do it many times. It sets the heart trembling with happiness. The people like poetry as well as the scholars,

or better" (Masters 127-128). Lindsay had made thirteen cents from his efforts.

In March, 1906, Vachel Lindsay took to the road for the first of what would be three walking trips across America during the next six years. He had travelled to Jacksonville, Florida from New York by boat before he began walking north. He had had his poem, "The Tree of Laughing Bells" printed and bound in red covers, decorated with bells drawn in purple, for \$50 and planned on exchanging these for bread and shelter. At Rollins College, Lindsay went to see the president and asked if he could lecture. He was told "yes" and then went up and down the main street of town inviting people to come. Nineteen showed up. After reading some of Edgar Allen Poe's poems to them, he passed the hat and walked away with thirteen dollars.

From here Lindsay went to Orlando and received eighty-five cents after lecturing at the YMCA. At this time, Edward Broderick, a friend from New York in advertising who had been with him, left. Lindsay continued on alone to Tampa where he offered copies of "The Tree of Laughing Bells" to strangers for money or food. In May, he had managed to make it to Grassy Springs, Kentucky and his Aunt Eudora's home; at this point, he had walked 600 miles with his poems (Ruggles 113).

In Kentucky, Lindsay's aunt arranged for him to speak at the June, 1906 commencement of a little country school and Lindsay recited "The Tree of Laughing Bells," subtitled

"The Wings of the Morning." This early work is the story of the narrator going "west of the universe" to obtain some "blood-red" bells that give him "no thirst for yesterday,/No thought for tomorrow" (Lindsay 215, 217). It is a fantasy filled with dandelions, stars, harps, chimes, and bells and weaves a musical spell for the listener. After this reading, Lindsay went back to New York where he sailed to Liverpool with his parents and sister, Joy. Following this trip, Lindsay came back to New York where he lectured at the YMCA on art and the poetry of Sidney Lanier, had two poems, "Litany of the Heroes" and "The Last Song of Lucifer" printed, and sold some of his travel articles to a magazine, The Outlook (Ruggles 129).

In 1909, Vachel Lindsay was still living at home in Springfield with his parents, supported by his father. He had printed "On the Building of Springfield" and was spending every available penny he had to put into print his leaflets, the first titled "War Bulletin Number One" which he wrote and produced.

Lindsay's fourth "War Bulletin" was a collection of poems titled "The Tramp's Excuse." He had been mailing these "Bulletins" to everyone he knew or had heard of and Floyd Dell, associate literary editor of the Chicago Evening Post, reviewed "The Tramp's Excuse" in October, 1909. This was the "first serious appraisal ever given to Lindsay's poetry" and labelled him a "socialist and religious mystic" (Ruggles 156).

In 1912, after Easter, Lindsay headed west to California, to walk and talk poetry. The American had accepted two of his poems and he carried a leaflet, "Rhymes to be Traded for Bread" with him. But people he met along the way soon began to request work from Lindsay for some food and money--the poems alone were not enough--so he split kindling, cut grass with a scythe, hoed corn, helped with some harvesting and other odd jobs during the day while at night in people's homes he would recite "The Proud Farmer," "The Illinois Village" or "On The Building of Springfield" for them. These three poems are part of a trilogy Lindsay titled "The Gospel of Beauty" and he stated they "hold in solution my theory of American civilization" (Lindsay 71).

While traveling along the Santa Fe trail, Lindsay bought the August edition of the American and read about himself under their heading "Interesting People." It was his first national recognition (Ruggles 188). It was also about this time that "a notion began to simmer in his brain of finding the natural meter" for some of his poems in gospel hymns, old ballads, and popular songs. He had already written "I Heard Immanuel Singing" with the music to the first eight lines of "The Holy City" in the back of his mind (Ruggles 189-190). So he began to list some songs which he would use as poetic patterns and listed "Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt," "Nellie Was a Lady," "Alexander's Ragtime Band," "Put on Your Old Grey Bonnet," "Clementine," and

"Gaily the Troubadour." He wrote his poem, "The Flute of the Lonely" to that last melody (Ruggles 192).

At the time Lindsay was walking across the country General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army and an internationally known figure, had died, but the poet was unaware of Booth's death until reaching Los Angeles four weeks later. The news served as the inspiration for what became one of Lindsay's best known poems. According to biographer Eleanor Ruggles in The West-Going Heart:

All one frenzied night he walked in Los Angeles' Sixth Street park, up and down under the palm trees, his head wagging, his hands working, and there in one surging effort--to the remembered beat of the revivalist hymn and music of drum, banjo, flute, tambourine and dedicated voices--he shaped his poem "General William Booth Enters Heaven." (198)

After the initial writing, Lindsay spent a week rewriting, polishing and cutting the poem. After this, he returned home from his first across-country walk, and arrived back in Springfield on his thirty-third birthday.

"General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" begins with the instructions, just under the title, "To be sung to the tune of 'The Blood of the Lamb' with indicated instrument" and the instrument designated for the first stanza is "Bass drum beaten loudly" (Lindsay 123). The words roll off the

tongue in a march-like rhythm: "Booth led boldly with his big bass drum" and from the very first line it is obvious that what this poem lacks in subtlety, it makes up for abundantly in performance. Simply put, this is not just a poem to be read alone and savored, this is a poem to be performed in front of an audience.

The second stanza instructs "Banjos" while succeeding verses instruct "Bass drum slower and softer," "Sweet flute music," "Bass drum louder," "Grand chorus of all instruments. Tambourines to the foreground" and "Reverentially sung, no instruments" as it becomes obvious this this poem is also to be a major production (Lindsay 124-125). This is not a poem for those readers who like quiet, meditative verses to be read in solitude.

The entire poem is a tribute to Booth and his life's work of saving the damned and the poem concludes with the General and Christ together, the earthly foot soldier receiving his heavenly reward (Lindsay 125). This last line, "Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?" not only reminds the reader that the words fit the tune of this old revival hymn, but also questions whether a heavenly reward awaits the reader. It is Lindsay at his didactic best, driving home his point in the poem.

Despite its initial success, the poem has not always been favorably received by poetry critics. Its stock has risen and fallen with different critical movements, although Ann Massa asserts that it "supplied the emotional

inauguration of the New Poetry movement" (Massa 11). Conrad Aiken said of the Booth poem that it is "one of the most curiously over-estimated of contemporary poems...thin and trivial" and it is "imageless, its ideas childish; and as verse it is extraordinarily amateurish" (Aiken 5).

In his biography of the poet, Edgar Lee Masters, discussing the timing of the Booth poem, observes that "the estate of poetry in America was especially feeble" at the time this poem was published, with Whitman dead for over twenty years and Riley an invalid (286). From the time of Whitman's death until "General Booth," Masters states that "poetry was in the hands of those who made poetry a matter of fancy work and embroidery," but "General Booth" would play a prominent role in changing that situation and herald a new movement in poetry (286).

Masters praises the Booth poem for catching the spirit of Lindsay as well as Booth, and the poetry movement about to blossom. He states further:

A glance at the Booth poem will show how subtly and intimately its quantities and accents voice the vigorous psychology of Lindsay, how they communicate the intonations of his speech and his laugh, his cries of rejoicing, his modulated reverences; how they pulse and rise and fall with the very breath of the man, as he breathed in the flesh how they express his physical and, what is more a matter of genius, his spiritual diaphragm.

He spoke loudly and laughed loudly; he walked firmly, planting his first step down with the emphasis of spasmodically released energy. The Booth poem is written so. (290-291)

In 1912, Lindsay came to the attention of Harriet Monroe, just beginning her magazine Poetry in Chicago, and he sent her "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven." The fourth edition of the magazine, in January, 1913, led with this poem and, according to biographer Ruggles, it was with the appearance of this poem that "the sword of fame touched Lindsay's shoulder" (206).

In fall, 1913, publisher Mitchell Kennerley brought out Lindsay's first book, General William Booth Enters Heaven and Other Poems and Lindsay provided articles for Forum, Collier's, The Village Magazine, and Metropolitan. His work was also anthologized in The Lyric Year. During this time he wrote two more of his famous poems, "The Congo" and "The Kallyope Yell." In November, he was awarded a \$100 prize for "General Booth." This was the second prize for the top poems of the year in Poetry; first prize was won by William Butler Yeats for "The Grey Rock" (Ruggles 211).

"The Congo," sub-titled "A Study of the Negro Race," is the story of blacks in America as viewed before the Civil Rights struggles in the latter half of the twentieth century and before Black awareness, Black pride, and Black consciousness entered the cultural mainstream. In the first section, titled "Their Basic Savagery," Lindsay begins with

the kind of alliteration heard in General Booth, saying "Fat black bucks in a wine-barrel room/Barrel-house kings, with feet unstable" and includes sound effects like "Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM" and "Rattle-rattle, rattle-rattle,/Bing" (Lindsay 178-179). Stage directions for the performance are listed on the side of the poem. The theme is the conversion of African blacks to Christianity, with the message that, if not converted, the "Mumbo Jumbo will hoo-doo you" (Lindsay 184).

There is much in this poem which may be considered racist and very little which can be considered subtle but, again, the poem was written for performance and as a piece to be performed it works extremely well due to the rhythm of the language, the visual imagery of wild savages, the different tones of voice used and the body language that went into relating this poem. The poem is loud, a dramatic one which works most effectively when a performer like Vachel Lindsay performs it before an audience because it is the process of performance which brings it alive.

Discussing the history of "The Congo," Lindsay, in his Collected Poems, states:

Elegant ladies ask me hundred of times as I come to their towns as a reciter: "How did you get your knowledge of the 'neeegro'?" They put e in the word three times over. After profound meditation I now give my answer to them all. My father had a musical voice, and he used to read us Uncle Remus,

and he could sing every scrap of song therein and revise every story by what some old slave had told him. He used to sing the littler children to sleep with negro melodies which he loved, and which negroes used to sing to him, when they rocked him to sleep in his infancy. We nearly always had a black hired man and a black hired girl. My father took us to jubilee singer concerts from Fisk or Hampton, and came home rendering the songs authentically, and from boyhood memory. Moreover, our negro servants did not hesitate to sing. One-fifth of the population of the town of Springfield is colored. I played with negro boys in the Stuart School yard. I have heard the race question argued to shreds every week of my life from then till now. We have so many negroes that we had race riots for a week in 1908. I took time off for months to argue the matter out with a good friend, a local negro lawyer, Charles Gibbs, who was just then beginning to practice law. (Lindsay 23)

Lindsay also states, in this same article, that "I do not want to recite 'The Congo.' You can recite it yourself as well as I can. I do not want to recite 'General Booth'" (Lindsay xlv). Clearly, by the time he wrote this (1925), these poems had worn him out.

Vachel Lindsay's first public performance of "The Congo" was on February 12, 1914 at a Lincoln Day banquet in Springfield. The seven-minute performance created quite a stir, and "As it went on and on, a few people turned away their heads to hide their embarrassment but many more let out snorts and giggles that swelled a rising wave of laughter" (Ruggles 205).

According to Eleanor Ruggles, Lindsay had practiced the poem for some friends before his performance, and "had introduced into some passages a nasal but musical chanting like the Gregorian chant he used to hear at the Paulist fathers' church" with the result that "The Congo" eventually became "his greatest hit" (Ruggles 215).

When Lindsay performed "The Congo" at a small banquet in Chicago, the audience at this gathering "burst into applause" and biographer Ruggles notes that "It was his first overwhelming public experience, the end of the lonely struggle of years to communicate. Though he knew it not, but stood rejoicing in the hope of a vision shared, it was the beginning of yesterday" (218). From the seeds of success were planted the seeds of destruction, and Lindsay would grow to hate and resent reciting and performing this poem.

Macmillan Publishers had the rights to Lindsay's second book, The Congo and Other Poems, and Edward Marsh, the Macmillan editor who was Lindsay's "special sponsor" in the office, "already had plans to promote him as a poet who

recited his work" (Ruggles 226). Marsh made it clear that Lindsay should come to New York when the book was published and help promote it by reciting poems from it to audiences of influential critics, writers, and others who would spread the word. According to Eleanor Ruggles, "Marsh intended to get all the newspaper and magazine people available to go and write up the new poet as a modern troubadour and his poems as chants, after which it would be the thing for private groups to engage him to recite" (Ruggles 226). In other words, it was a marketing ploy to sell books, the poet as performer who would enthrall audiences who, in turn, would turn around and purchase the works. It worked.

In September, 1914, Macmillan published The Congo and Other Poems; at the same time, another book, Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty, based on letters sent home from his walk west, was brought out by Kennerley, and the books were often reviewed together. These two books, "created the picture of him that caught the public imagination--that of a vagabond, an American minstrel, whose great lines came to him in sweeps and were shouted to the clouds and stars as he strode across the plains of the Midwest" (Ruggles 233).

Thus began the phase of Lindsay's career where he was primarily an entertainer. He would never return to the open highway as a vagabond but "was well into the campaign to bring his poems directly to his audience that for the rest

of his life earned him his living and in the next five years made him his unique name" (Ruggles 236).

Vachel Lindsay was a public poet with strong ideas for social improvement. His poetry and performances have been described as "preaching" and critic Dennis Q. McInerney notes that "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" (35). McInerney continues:

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 (35).

After 1912, having made his name nationally famous, Lindsay spent most of his remaining twenty years as a vagabond poet, lecturer and observer. This role was by no means displeasing to Lindsay, for in it he was actively pursuing what he described as his "greatest desire," which was that his message and his work should reach the public.

To this end, he adopted the role of the missionary, going to the people and addressing them in a language he felt they could understand. This meant using the rhythms of jazz and elements of vaudeville to create entertainment with his poetry readings. Lindsay rationalized his efforts, stating, "The American people hate and abhor poetry. I am inventing a sort of ragtime manner that deceives them into thinking they are at a vaudeville show, and yet I try to keep it to a real art" (Yatron 115).

Speaking about his poetry, Lindsay stated, "One composes it not by listening to the inner voice and following the gleam--but by pounding the table with a ruler and looking out the window at the electric signs. Also by going to vaudeville, which I have all my life abhorred" (Ruggles 211). Although Lindsay "abhorred" vaudeville, he felt a kinship with the popular appeal of this kind of entertainment--perhaps because he too wanted to be popular with the masses of people--and Eleanor Ruggles notes:

Without fully approving of vaudeville, he felt in sympathy with its talky, cheeky, point-blank style as a way "to get the public." He began to see that poetic superstructures could be raised on this primitive foundation. From his room upstairs his family heard him through the register humming and beating time, for he found his head jiggling with ragtime hits like "My Castle on the Nile."  
(211)

The view of many critics towards Lindsay's poetry is best summed up by Ezra Pound's observation in 1915 that "one can write it by the hour as fast as one scribbles" (McInerny 31). Dennis McInerny, in the book The Vision of This Land, states that 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" (32). McInerny adds that "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" (33).

Ann Massa, in her book on Lindsay, Fieldworker For The American Dream, states:

His artistic conscience 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. (225)

Michael Yatron argues that Lindsay's "apparent spontaneity and simplicity were achieved by the capacity for taking pains" and that the poet "worked as a literary sophisticate, well-grounded in the rich soil of English verse, and with the fervor of the dedicated poet" (121). But Edgar Lee Masters writes that Lindsay "had a limited understanding of rhythm, and it may be true that he did not know a spondee from a trochee, or a line of hexameter from one of pentameter" although that "did not impugn his inner ear which was rhythmical in the highest and most original sense (272). Masters continues:

He was not interested in theories of sensuous flow, in presenting image for their own sake, in inducing hypnotic conditions by repetitious rhythms, in refinements, in exoticisms, in neo-romanticism, druidism, dadaism, paroxysm, or vitalism. His interest, his passion was America, the American heroes, American democracy, beauty, and religion; and in finding the soul of the U.S.A. and giving it voice. So on one hand he was oblivious of the dead corpse of poetry lying about him mesmerically speaking for culture, technique, and form; and on the other hand he did not hear the raging schools quickly arising around him.

(288)

Lindsay's own view of art is best expressed in an entry in his diary/notebook where he wrote "Artists always preach, if it is nothing more than their school of art. Art is pre-eminently didactic" (Masters 74). For Lindsay this meant that his performances were not just a way to entertain an audience, they were necessary to instruct an audience, to enlighten truth, present beauty, and convert those of little faith to Lindsay's views of poetry, beauty, truth, art, life, and whatever else he was consumed by.

All the criticism Lindsay encountered about his poetry during his lifetime did "no good whatever" and Masters observes he "sang naturally or not at all" and that "criticism only made him self-conscious" (333). As Lindsay approached forty, he was filled with discouragement, the sales of his books diminished, and Masters notes "he began to see himself as a jazz poet, a kind of clown, whose vogue was passing and had even passed" (333).

Lindsay often called his poetry "higher vaudeville" and this meant, according to Conrad Aiken, that poetry ought to be "primarily for entertainment" (3). Lindsay felt that poetry should be popular entertainment, the troubadour should be revived and that audiences should participate at poetry readings. Aiken states:

Mr. Lindsay was seductive largely because he was so shining an example of the barbaric yawp...His poetry...yelled, and it wore a sombrero. But the rude, perspicacious critics worried Mr. Lindsay.

The "high seriousness" of which they unseasonably reminded him made him a little uneasy and furtive with his saxophone, and he began keeping it out of sight. He not only dropped his doctrine of the "higher vaudeville," he even suggested that recitation, and the writing of poetry for recitation, had not been of his own choice, but had been forced upon him by his audience. (4)

This notion of the "barbaric yawp" casts Lindsay as some sort of loud primate, his poetry a series of primitive noises, his performances a kind of primeval ritual. Perhaps that was inevitable because Lindsay stayed close to the basic emotions in his own heart as he tried to be heard by everyone and create tribes of followers. To be noticed by a public Lindsay perceived as indifferent to poetry, he had to be loud, impossible to ignore, and too obvious to overlook. Although he succeeded in this quest, the end result was failure because it saddled Lindsay with an image of what he was not: uncultured, unsophisticated, rude, vulgar, and tasteless.

Lindsay's successful performances excited audiences, but a number of critics were dubious that poetry so entertaining could be meaningful. This rejection by a number of critics led to Lindsay rejecting his own poetry and in the end the consummate performer felt he was a failed poet, yet he continued performing and accepting the public's approval. Herbert Gorman, a contemporary of Lindsay's,

describes Lindsay's performances in an article dated January, 1924 in the North American Review:

Anyone who has heard Vachel Lindsay recite will bear witness to the fact that he is not self-conscious...Lindsay must be taken as he gives himself, whole-heartedly. It is part of his naivete that he is not selective. He just pours out everything until the whole man is before the reader. No other American poet has so given himself to his readers. No other has been so confirmed in his conviction of a mission. (11, 15)

Critic Austin Warren observes that "Lindsay used something like two octaves in the range of his performance" and another contemporary, Carl Van Doren, declares that "his reading is almost singing; it is certainly acting" (Warren 90; Van Doren 31).

Lindsay's performances were legendary, but even during his lifetime they blurred his poetry, putting a mask over what he was saying because of his method of saying it. Critic Henry Morton Robinson in an article from The Bookman in 1932 asserts that "those who heard him cannot tell to this day whether it was the poetry or the delivery that was touched by greatness" (47).

In his readings, Lindsay touched a wide range of emotions, and his dramatic performances created moods,

scenes, and sounds for his poems. In The West-Going Heart, author Eleanor Ruggles states:

Lindsay's voice was not always thunder. He recited General Booth and in the hush engendered by the last reverent lines there were some who wept. He recited "The Santa Fe Trail"...and not only the fog horn but the bird-notes of the Rachel Jane and the sighing of the wind over prairie grass were in his voice. His gestures, too, were eloquent; the clasped, supplicating hands of the revivalist, the prophet's arm upraised in admonition, the easy backward thumbpoint of the hiker on the highroad, the rambler at his roadside gate. To make communication complete, he had begun to call on audiences to join in certain phrases." (243)

The author states further that "Those who never saw him in his handling of an audience never knew the whole man; he worked them up, led them row against row, aisle against aisle, the floor against the balcony. It was self-intoxicating" (243). But it was also draining on him and after several months on the road performing he became simply an actor going through the motions.

Pond's Lecture Bureau, a New York booking agency, was managing Lindsay in spring, 1915 for some of the poet's major appearances, although "most of his engagements were

still secured, after zealous effort, by some personal enthusiast surrounded by a coterie of keen readers" (Ruggles 238). At this time, Lindsay's fee was \$50 for colleges and \$100 for women's clubs, although he performed free a number of times before friends, in homes, and in front of classes.

The Art of Moving Pictures, a pioneer work in movie criticism by Lindsay, was brought out at the end of 1915 by Macmillan, around the same time "The Chinese Nightingale" received the Levinson Prize from Poetry for \$250. This poem, which first appeared in the magazine in February, is significant because it was the first time the poet signed his name "Vachel Lindsay" instead of "Nicholas Vachel Lindsay" like he did on the other works. Macmillan also brought out A Handy Guide For Beggars, a series of sketches from Lindsay's walks, after purchasing the rights from Kennerly.

By 1916 Lindsay was torn between "a big Chautauga circuit" and the notion that the poetry performances were "in danger of running away with him" (Ruggles 262). During one burst, he recited twelve times in three days, each performance lasting an hour, and on one day performed five times. This was not unusual in his schedule during this time. The essential conflict with Lindsay was his need of the solitude all writers need in order to write and his need for the audience all performers crave. He had said of his mother, who spoke at religious and political rallies, that "she drank in nerve-force from her audiences and even if she

had to crawl to the platform, her speaking was the last thing she would ever give up" (Ruggles 262). Ironically, the same could be said about Lindsay himself.

On his speaking tours, Lindsay offered audiences four different programs. The first was "The Gospel of Beauty" and included a number of his poems about Springfield as well as talk of democracy and art. The second was a discourse on "The Art of the Moving Picture" while the third was for "tired business men," who presumably needed some lighthearted entertainment, and was "An Evening of Higher Vaudeville" with his poems "General William Booth Enters Heaven," "The Congo," "The Kallyope Yell," and the "Santa Fe Trail" included. Finally, he had a program for an evening of poem games with one long solo, "The Chinese Nightingale" (Ruggles 262).

In 1920, Lindsay took a most unusual step for a poet and hired a manager, A. Joseph Armstrong, a young English instructor at Baylor. Under Armstrong's management and organization, Lindsay gave three tours across the country from early March to June. It was an attempt by Lindsay to make a lot of money, but it was a "slow death to his creative soul in casting his poems before Rotary and Kiwanis, who were alarmed lest he be not amusing, and women's clubs, whose chairmen had names like Yvetta" (Ruggles 269). These groups and organizations bought him for name value, his celebrity status, and saw him only as an evening's entertainment. Lindsay, on the other hand,

"wanted audiences whose minds were alive and who would read his books. He wanted young hearts and new territory" (Ruggles 269). This routine of lecturing and reciting from one end of the country to the other lasted until the end of Lindsay's life with only one interval of rest when his health broke down. It was not all drudgery, though, because while he hated all the problems and rituals of touring, he still loved the idea of travelling and he felt a profound love for America, which he felt he expressed through his constant touring and reciting.

By 1922, Lindsay was no longer news, no longer the darling of Manhattan media offices. At forty-two he was famous but the world of letters, whose crest he had ridden since 1914, was becoming enraptured with others. Lindsay labelled this year as the time the high and mighty of New York "slapped his face" (Ruggles 302). Audiences increasingly demanded only two poems--"General Booth" and "The Congo"--and after nine years of these poems, he found he was "used up in shouting" (Ruggles 305). Still, he could not ignore the lure of the spotlight and Eleanor Ruggles notes that "every new audience worked on him like alcohol; he met it in a wave of love and pleasure" (307). But after each performance, unknown to those audiences, Lindsay suffered "fits of vertigo, black depression and then such dazed dullness that he could hardly catch his train" (Ruggles 307). Lindsay was paying a high price to be a poet/performer. Looking back at Lindsay's problems, they

were probably nervous ones in light of current medical knowledge.

Near the end of his career, Lindsay said of himself "I have put as much energy into reciting as a National League baseball player puts into grand-stand plays while Ann Massa, taking the baseball metaphor further, states "Lindsay's description of himself as the 'Casey-at-the Bat' of American poetry sums up his reputation during his lifetime" (Lindsay xvii, 3). There was something in him that loved touring and he states in his "Introduction" to his Collected Poems "I want to come to your town" and "all touring appeals to me as a splendid and unending drunkenness" (Lindsay xix, xxvi). Lindsay loved his audiences although he had "contempt for his 'educated' audiences" because repeatedly "with mass vulgarity and without having taken the pains to read some of his work, they insisted that he should recite one of his popular poems such as "The Congo," "General Booth Enters Heaven," or "The Santa Fe Trail" (Yatron 81). In a letter to Louis Untermeyer, Lindsay expresses his despair of performing these poems again and again. He states: "[It] will drive me mad if I do them once more. The public positively clamors for them and absolutely refuses to listen to my new pieces. Yet they stand me up to recite till I am sick of my life" (Yatron 81).

Lindsay also disparaged of "newspaper editors that never scrutinize my books and who send their reporters to get hasty impressions at my recitals" and who conclude that

"I can recite, but cannot write" (Lindsay 19). He complained about "newspaper reporters of the sort who never read any man's books, and who do not expect to begin with mine, [who] are fond of filling column after column, in town after town where I recite, with stories of how I have spent the most of my forty-three years in some form of deeply degraded beggary" (Lindsay 19).

But Lindsay's problems were that audiences and contemporaries "were impatient when his writings did not tally with his image as the flamboyant author and mesmeric performer of repetitive, syncopated chants" (Massa 3). Lindsay's poetry was "poetry to be performed [and] audiences clamored for his performances" (Massa 3). At times these performances "had a curiosity value, when he donned fancy dress, for instance, or accompanied his poems with snatches of song and dance, and they always had the attraction of his inimitable delivery, a mixture of revivalist sermon and stump speech" (Massa 3).

But the performing wore him out and in his biography, Masters notes about the performing, "He did this for nothing except for the means of life, and for the sustenance that it gave to his inordinate desire for applause and appreciation, without which he was miserable" (331).

In 1923, Lindsay taught at Gulf Park Junior College in Gulf Park, Mississippi, then moved to Cleveland before moving to Spokane. There he met Elizabeth Conner; she was twenty-five, he was forty-five and they married soon after

they met. The day after their wedding he "dumped thankfully into her hands his enormous personal and business correspondence" and from that time on she was his secretary and manager with the result that "never were his affairs so vigorously administered" (Ruggles 355). They had two children; Susan Doniphan born May 29, 1926 and Nicholas Cave, born September 16, 1927.

Deeply in debt, Lindsay set out in October, 1928 against doctor's orders to tour the midwest and east. Four months later he had done what many considered impossible--he had wiped out his last debt. In addition, Lindsay continued to publish books but they were less and less commercially or critically successful. He tried to convince one of the recording companies (Victor) to record his recitals but they were not interested. He finally did make some recordings of his poems in January, 1931 in New York under the auspices of Columbia University (Ruggles 408). It was also at this point that he began drinking wine and smoking heavily, abandoning his lifelong teetotalism. In 1930 he received an Honorary Doctorate of Literature from Hiram College.

Lindsay was diagnosed as having idiopathic epilepsy in 1931 and his doctors wanted to legally commit him. They did not and he died a suicide at one a.m. on December 5, 1931 after drinking Lysol.

Popular taste and the taste of the critics are often not the same; indeed they are often at odds. In the world of poets and poetry, this has meant that the poet/performer

who has achieved a great amount of success is not necessarily considered a great (or even good) poet by the critics. In the case of Vachel Lindsay, the public recognized him as a great performer and accepted him as a great poet during his own lifetime. However, fifty years after his death in 1931, critics are ambivalent about his poetry, with the general consensus being that he was not a great poet and that his poetry has not stood the test of time. John T. Flanagan, editor of Profile of Vachel Lindsay, a compilation of critical essays on the poet, notes:

When Norman Foerster published the first edition of his popular anthology American Poetry and Prose in 1925, he naturally included Lindsay and selected six poems to represent one of the freshest American talents since Poe. A quarter of a century later, F. O. Matthiessen in The Oxford Book of American Verse allotted Lindsay twenty-one pages and chose to include six poems. But in 1965 the situation was quite different. In their anthology entitled American Poetry, Gay Wilson Allen, Walter B. Rideout and James K. Robinson resurrected Frederick Tuckerman, gave space to H. D., and allocated forty pages to many obscure and untested poets such as Robert Creeley and Wendell Berry, but failed to include a single poem by Vachel Lindsay. The nadir of Lindsay's fame has

certainly been reached when a collection of American verse running in excess of twelve hundred pages completely omits his work. (114)

In the Introduction to their book, The Vision of This Land, critics John E. Hallwas and Dennis J. Reader state that a major reason Lindsay has "fallen from favor" is "because the role of the public poet has fallen from fashion" and Dennis Q. McInerney states that "The critics did not totally believe in Lindsay because they were never quite sure what they were dealing with in him" (9, 32). McInerney also states:

Lindsay's militant, unself-conscious exuberance, the at time 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. (29)

Lindsay's performances were legendary, but even during his lifetime they blurred his poetry, putting a mask over

what he was saying because of his method of saying it. Critic Henry Morton Robinson in an article from The Bookman in 1932 asserts:

As long as he could translate his poetic impulses into almost purely rhythmical terms he was regarded, and rightly, as one of the leaders of the new poetry...In fact he put his poems across so convincingly that those who heard him cannot tell to this day whether it was the poetry or the delivery that was touched by greatness. (47)

From 1906, when he began his performing after failing as an artist and dropping out of the Chicago Art Institute and the New York Art School, until his suicide in 1931, Lindsay's constant, exhaustive performing all over the country took its toll on the poet's health and poetry. Hazelton Spencer, in her article "The Life and Death of a Bard" written in 1932, just after Lindsay's death a few months before, notes:

[Lindsay] appeared before a million people...[He] had to keep on the road all his life, harder spurred than ever during the last few years by the increasing needs of his family...Only now it was not the open road of high adventure beside the springs of new creation; it was the dreadful trail of the national lecturer. Back and forth from Maine to California Lindsay drove himself

reciting, reciting, reciting--shrinking from the crowds with a sensitiveness incredible to those who did not know him--hoping with a childlike pathos that they would accept him as well as his act--trying to preserve his temper when silly committee-women insisted on hearing the old set-pieces he had become so weary of performing. (43)

This same critic attributes Lindsay's suicide to his being "worn out" from the economic necessity of reciting his famous works to high school students, candidates for the bachelor's degree, and the "nice boring people who frequent poetry societies" (35).

The poet as performer, in the case of Vachel Lindsay, appears ultimately as an enigma and a contradiction. Somehow, he became trapped by his performances, unable to escape the clutches of a public who demanded the same old poems over and over again. At first, it gave his poetry recognition, but in the end it hurt his poetry and destroyed him. It may be convincingly argued that the same fate befell Dylan Thomas. That fate, a result of the poet's performances overshadowing his poetry, has left Lindsay the distinction of an entertainer whose performances convinced audiences he was a great poet while the critics remain unconvinced.

Critic Austin Warren describes Lindsay's life as "selling poetry to the nation" and no one doubted he was a great salesman (85). It is important that a poet be popular

if his poetry is going to sell well since the public does not buy poetry to any great extent, and most books of poetry are notorious for their lack of sales. For Lindsay and a number of other poets, the best way to be a "salesman" is to be a performer but, though the poet may enjoy increased sales from these performances, he risks losing his poetry soul. It is a balancing act not many can do; Vachel Lindsay proved to be one of the tragic victims of this dilemma of the poet as performer.

## Robert Frost

When Robert Frost entered the last third of his life, he could look back and see that his rise in popularity as a poet after his return from England in 1916 was due to the quality of his verse, the success of his books, his active campaigning with critics and editors, and his public performances. The books had led to invitations to read his poetry in public and, although painfully shy, he had overcome his initial inhibitions and created for himself the image of a gentle New Hampshire farmer, down to earth in his character and his poetry. His first book released in America, North of Boston, had become a best-seller and he would eventually win four Pulitzers, numerous honorary degrees, be elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and become a public poet--the poet most Americans would know, love, and equate with the terms "poet" and "poetry."

Robert Frost was a reluctant performing poet at the beginning of his performing career, although he came to be known later as one of the premier performing poets in the nation. He did not perform his own works until after he had returned from England and after the publication of his first two books, A Boy's Will and North of Boston. A late bloomer, Frost was forty-one at the time.

Frost's first public performance of his own poetry occurred on May 5, 1915 for the Delta Chapter of the Phi

Beta Kappa at Tufts College, just outside Boston. The invitation was prompted by Nathan Haskell Dole, who had also urged the Boston Author's Club to invite Frost to talk before its members during a luncheon earlier that same day. Frost accepted the invitations, although he had never faced a public audience before to read and talk about his poems. He did it because he was "determined to suffer through whatever torture of nervousness and pain such an experience would inflict, and he would do it not only to advance his own standing as a poet but also to earn money for the support of his wife and family" (Thompson, Triumph 31).

The first public performance of a Robert Frost poem had occurred at a Men's League Ladies Night banquet in Derry, New Hampshire. Frost had been asked to read some of his poems by William E. Wolcott, pastor of the First Congregational Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts, but the poet recoiled from the idea with fear, telling Wolcott that he had never read any of his poems before a public gathering and doubted "if he would have the courage" to do so that evening (Thompson, Early 318).

The poem, "The Tuft of Flowers," was read that evening by the pastor of the First Congregational Church in Derry, Charles Loveland Merriam, and as Frost walked back to his farm afterward, he felt a great satisfaction that the poem had been accepted and admired. The poem would also be printed in the local newspaper's next issue, a further honor since he had only sold five of his poems in twelve years

(Thompson, Early 321). Shortly after this, in March 1906, Frost began teaching at the Pinkerton Academy, drawing a regular salary for the first time in his ten years of marriage.

Speaking before students in the classroom was for Frost the first step in speaking before audiences. During his Pinkerton years, he often invited a fellow teacher, Sidney Cox, over to his house where he read aloud poems. Reading Yeats, and following accounts of the Abbey Players in Dublin through newspapers and magazines, Frost first began to formulate his own aesthetic theories about poetry. These theories presented Frost's belief in sentence sounds or the sounds that create meanings when the words are said. He wrote in a letter: "What I am most interested in emphasizing . . . is the sentence of sound, because to me a sentence is not interesting merely in conveying a meaning of words; it must do something more; it must convey a meaning by sound" (Thompson, Triumph 35).

After this initial performance, a few more poems by Frost were performed, though still not by him. "The Trial by Existence" was carried by the newspaper, The Independent, in October, 1906 and a commemorative poem was printed as a broadside, which was sung by the students to the tune of a well-known hymn.

In the ensuing years, Frost had a few more of his poems published and even saw four poems, "The Falls," "Twilight," "My Butterfly," and "His Lady's Cruelty" printed in a small

book (only two copies made) for himself and Elinor Miriam White, his girlfriend and later wife. He spent a short time as a newspaper reporter but soon left that and became a farmer. Frost was a horrible farmer, more interested in writing poetry than engaging in agriculture, and finally began teaching at the Pinkerton Academy in 1906. He taught here for five years, until 1911, and developed his talents as a teacher, which would serve him the rest of his life.

The first time Robert Frost spoke in public was at his high school graduation on June 30, 1892. Valedictorian, chief editor of the school newspaper, and Class Poet, all in his senior year at Lawrence (Massachusetts) High School, Frost had written a poem which was printed in the program and which would be sung at the end of the ceremony. As valedictorian, Frost sat on the stage waiting for his turn; when it came, he was "almost overpowered by fright" and he "jumped up, hurried to the center of the apron, took a deep breath, and began to rattle off his words like bullets. He knew he was speaking too fast, but there was nothing he could do about it." When he had finished and sat down he became "conscious of the familiar and frightening pains of nausea in his stomach" (Thompson, Early 129, 132).

Frost's next speech before a public audience came after his success as a teacher when Henry C. Morrison, Superintendent of Public Instruction for New Hampshire, obtained an invitation for him to speak to a convention of New Hampshire teachers in spring, 1909. Frightened, he

tried to walk off his nervousness and finally, with a pebble in each shoe to distract him, gave a well-received speech (Thompson, Early 349). After this success, he was scheduled to give other talks before New Hampshire teachers at other conventions.

The event which allowed Robert Frost to become a poet rather than a teacher and farmer who wrote poems was the death of his grandfather. When he died in 1901, the elder Frost's will provided that Robert would inherit the major part of his estate. Included in this bequest was a cash annuity that was paid to Frost regularly for over twenty years. It was this cash annuity, and the sale of his grandfather's farm, which allowed Frost to take his family to England in 1912. It was this move to England--and this situation of not having to work--which allowed Frost to publish his first two books and begin his road to fame.

Frost had not had much success in his native country and saw England as a place to blossom as a poet. He wrote in a letter to a friend, "My dream would be to get the thing started in London and then do the rest of it from a farm in New England where I could live cheap and get Yankier and Yankier" (Thompson, Early 476).

One night, after the rest of his family had gone to bed, Frost sorted through his poems to see if he had enough for a small book. He had never before submitted a manuscript to a publisher, nor tried to organize his poems into one book with a unifying theme. On this night he was

struck by the different moods of the lyrics, written during the past twenty years, which seemed to him often inconsistent and self-contradictory. He read the poems in different lights and finally became "attracted to a possibility" that the works "might express a figurative truth through metaphysical fiction" (Thompson, Early 397).

That first book was published by David Nutt, the first publisher approached by Frost. A Boy's Will appeared during the first part of April in 1913 and was favorably reviewed by The Athenaeum and The Times Literary Supplement in England while the Derry News in Frost's adopted hometown in New Hampshire carried a feature story written by one of Frost's former students whom the teacher had cultivated for just such a purpose.

Frost was not adverse to politicking for favorable reviews of his books or manipulating those he came in contact with during his public career as a poet to put himself in the best light. After the acceptance of A Boy's Will by David Nutt in London, Frost actively courted Ezra Pound and the fellow-poet and critic quickly took up the cause and secured several favorable reviews for Frost in America, establishing him with Harriet Monroe and her influential Poetry magazine.

When Frost landed in New York after the return voyage from England, he stopped by his American publishers, Henry Holt and Company, to meet with them and discovered they had sold a poem, "The Death of the Hired Man" to the New

Republic for \$40. They also asked Frost to stay in New York for a few days for lunch with the editors of the New Republic, which he did, and said he should attend a meeting of the Poetry Society of America. Frost also visited the offices of the Atlantic and made plans to attend the Boston Authors' Club annual luncheon (Thompson, Triumph 6, 14).

At the Boston luncheon, Frost shared speaking honors with another poet. According to biographer Lawrance Thompson, by the time Frost was introduced he was "in such a dour and frightened mood that even his voice trembled and his words came awkwardly." His wife had warned him before the luncheon that he should avoid such engagements and stick with writing; during this ordeal he was inclined to agree with her. When he finished this first public performance of his own poetry he was "miserable" and "disgusted with himself for having botched the assignment" (Triumph 33-34).

The dinner that night went a little better, although he was unable to eat because of nervous indigestion. But he read "Birches," "The Road Not Taken," and "The Sound of Trees" and the college paper reporter wrote of "the pleasing impression made by the poet of the simplicity of his manner, the sincerity of his voice and the beauty of his three poems" (Thompson, Triumph 37).

After the first two public readings, Robert Frost was cognizant of the unease he felt before an audience and in dread of the nervousness which caused his hands to tremble, his stomach to turn, and his voice quaver. Those first

listeners were also aware of the pain the poet was going through and Katherine Lee Bates, who heard one of his first readings, observed later that "the reading was evidently so difficult for him that I wondered how he would be able to keep it up" adding that she wondered how "so sensitive a poet can bring himself to face an audience at all" (Thompson, Triumph 72).

Critic Louis Untermeyer, describing the first time he heard Frost read--in Malden, Massachusetts in 1915 at a small gathering--notes the poet "read badly, too conscious of being on exhibition and unsure of the sort of role he should play" (Pritchard 114). Untermeyer describes "the proper Bostonians, fashionably dressed, listening with a mixture of curiosity, skepticism, and tolerance" and Frost "declining to comment on his work, reciting, or, as he called it, 'saying' a couple of lyrics and a few of the monologues from North of Boston" (Pritchard 114). At this reading, Frost "refused to be quaint," was "deeply offended when someone introduced him as 'our farmer-poet'" and his reading style is described as "underplaying, actually throwing away, line after line" with Untermeyer concluding that Frost's "readings, like his poems, were the essence of understatement" (Pritchard 114).

By 1920, Frost had developed a platform manner that was charming and humorous. He would read his poems and discuss his theories on poetry, punctuating his remarks with witty turns of phrase, all the while projecting the image of a

"plain New Hampshire farmer" whose poetry and theories were "down to earth" (Thompson, Triumph xii). As his fame increased, his readings would often consist of teasing and tantalizing his audiences as he learned to relax on stage. Eventually, he grew to love performing for the attention and fame it brought him.

The performances by Frost after he returned from England led to something as important to him as public recognition--a position on the faculty of a university. The first appointment was at Amherst College a few months after his return (January, 1917) when North of Boston had become a best-seller. From this time on, Frost would be aligned with a university as writer-in-residence and teacher, moving on to Harvard, Dartmouth and the University of Michigan before returning to Amherst at the end of his career, and establishing a base in the academic world. By establishing this notion of writer-in-residence--which was not in universities before Frost--and having a fixed income and academic base from which to work, Frost became the forerunner of the "university poet" in America who teaches at a college while also visiting other universities to read his poetry.

After the first couple of scattered readings, Frost did a short "tour" of readings, covering Franconia, the Boston area, Hanover, and Exeter in New Hampshire and in New York before the Poetry Society of America. As his popularity as an author increased, his readings extended to Philadelphia

at the University of Pennsylvania, the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard, and at Dartmouth. He describes his activities during this time with the phrase, "I am become my own salesman" (Thompson, Triumph 80).

In addition to the publicity and promotion generated by his public readings, Frost had another reason to continue and expand them--money. With four children and a wife, Frost found the book royalties insufficient and the public readings served as a good supplement to his income. His base at a University allowed him another income so that he would not have to wear himself out travelling like Vachel Lindsay had done. However, he did manage to always do several readings a month for a number of years.

In 1922, Frost ventured south for the first time to New Orleans, Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio and Waco, Texas. This was another step in the direction of becoming a national poet who performed all over the country. At this time he was clearly more at ease and in control on the platform. He recited his own works--usually from memory--explained some of the history and characteristics of modern poetry, talked about other poets and quoted some poems he did not even write. His sense of humor shone through all of this as he charmed his audiences. For example, at a reading in Waco, a reporter at the event notes:

After reading his poem about his own cow that almost jumped over the moon while elated with apple cider, he carefully pointed out that Amy

Lowell seemed to think his cow must be a tragic cow, and the jump a tragic jump. Mixing up his readings with gay reminiscences and caustic asides on other modern poets, the Yankee won his Southern audience completely. He kept returning to Amy Lowell's interpretations, and after he had read his blank-verse narrative concerning the irate farmer who dumped a load of hay on his boss, Frost reminded his listeners that Miss Lowell had called this one a "grim tragedy." (Thompson, Triumph 212)

By this time Frost was clearly beginning to enjoy his public performances and William H. Pritchard notes in his biography, Frost: A Literary life Reconsidered, "When given a large and agreeable captive audience in some college auditorium or other, he was not about to deny himself the pleasure of entertaining them and himself at Amy Lowell's or whomever's expense" (142).

In The Years of Triumph: 1915-1938, the second volume of his definitive three-volume biography of Robert Frost, Lawrance Thompson writes of a reading at Bryn Mawr, where Frost began by teasing his audience, pulling out a short, fat book for which he had cut a flamboyant dust jacket to fit in order to disguise the title. The book was the Oxford Book of English Verse edited by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. He told the group that "the current excitement over 'the new poetry' had caused him to look carefully at a few poems" and

he "wanted to share his discovery by reading one of these poems." The first poem Frost read "brought gasps of delight from the girls." He asked if they would like to hear another from the same author and the audience responded positively. So he read another poem, again to approval, before asking if they would like to hear "just one more." After the third poem, Frost asked if anyone in the audience could name the author. They could not but were all anxious to know and so he told them: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Groans from the audience followed and, when they had subsided, Frost "teasingly asked the girls to decide for themselves when they had been correct in their evaluation," prodding them further by asking if their "tastes and insights [had] been wrong when they had liked the poems....Or had their prejudices been right when they had reacted to the unpopular name?"

At this point, Frost went on to discuss his scheduled topic, "Metaphors" and praised Longfellow's "fresh uses of metaphors" in the poems he had read to them "also honoring Longfellow's quiet refusal to snap metaphors like whips." The poet then pointed out some examples of poor metaphors used by philosophers before giving some examples of metaphors employed by critics and interpreters who attempt to describe the motives of poets. According to Frost, "Some critics liked to say that some poets, trying to 'escape' from life, wrote their poems as forms of retreat, after they had been wounded by life. Other critics claimed that the realistic

poet deserved most praise because he used poetry as a means of 'grappling' with what bothered him in his private or public experiences." Frost then offered a definition of poetry using a metaphor from some of his reading in science. He said poetry is "tropism" and "that tropism may be defined as an orientation of an organism, usually by means of growth rather than movement, in response to external stimulus." He continued that tropism "may be growth-toward-light, an aspiration toward light," concluding that poetry "might be defined as aspiration."

Frost then used the metaphor of a housefly to look at the word "escape" two different ways. He noted that if you wanted to get rid of a roomful of houseflies, you should darken the room and let a small crack of light appear at an open window. The flies will go through the crack, not from a desire to escape, but because they are attracted to the light, "they aspire toward it." At this moment, Frost was ready to make his point. He said:

Aspiration is belief, faith, confidence. There are of course many different kinds of belief. First there is one's belief in one's self and in one's abilities, before any performance has justified such belief. Then there is the belief in someone else, as expressed when one falls in love. Beyond that there is the belief in others and in a society organized along the ideal of democracy. Finally, there is the belief in God.

Poetry may deal metaphorically with any one or all of these beliefs. A poem may be an unfolding of an emotion which is at first purely implicit. It may begin merely as a vague lump in the throat, and out of that tension the images of a poem may be used for purposes of passing from the implicit to the explicit. The poem itself might be the quiver of the transition from belief to realization. (Thompson, Triumph 293)

Then Frost read some of his own poems, illustrating his talk and using examples of images with "metaphorical hints of aspiration." Here he used "Birches" and "by the time he finished, the girls were captivated, although some of them were not exactly sure they understood the points he had tried to make." Biographer Thompson then states:

At this stage in his career as a performing bard, Frost increasingly enjoyed teasing and tantalizing his audiences by making bold statements which meant much to him, and also by aiming his remarks just high enough over the heads of his listeners to make them stretch for his meanings. (Triumph 293)

Robert Francis in Frost: A Time to Talk, notes that in the 1950's "when Frost spoke from the platform, one felt that it was the audience's wordless response on which Frost depended for his next word" and that this meant "for both

audience and speaker constant drama and surprise" (3). This also meant, according to Francis, a "never-absent nervousness" for Frost because "to achieve spontaneity he had to take risks" (3). Francis continues:

Most men have to prepare what they have to say. Having prepared, some of them speak well. Frost no more bothers to prepare than he bothers to brush his hair. His whole life has been his preparation. Since he can't be caught off guard, he doesn't bother to guard. He has trusted himself so far so long that he now differs from us in kind as well as in degree. He has a dimension of his own. When he speaks, we do not criticize what he says and how he says it. He is. If he stumbles, his stumbling is more eloquent than our dancing. (79)

William Pritchard observes that by 1921, Frost had "developed his lecture-reading appearances into an extremely winning operation" and that this Frost "bore little resemblance to the ill-at-ease figure Untermeyer remembered from that early reading at Tufts in 1915" (141). Part of that winning way was Frost's playfulness and the poet once said that "Poetry is a kind of fooling that you got to get the hang of, and I go around playing that. You cannot preach about it; you get in a little wisecrack and you read a poem and so on" (Lathem 161).

Frost admitted that he "never wrote out a lecture in my life" (Lathem 240). Reginald Cook, discussing Frost's performances, states:

Like most men who speak much in public, his words are performers; his hands, prompters; and his talk, experience dramatized--the performance is a play acted with vocal emphasis, facial expression, gesture, pauses and sotto voce asides. A fine storyteller in conversation as in poetry, he releases his ideas by artful disclosures, and, by leavening the tall talk with wit, he eliminates all threat of solemnity. It is not surprising that he has established himself as a popular poet--popular in the best sense of the word--in an age when poetry is suspect as a pretentious plaything of academic critics. (212)

Frost's poetry works well in performance because the poet realized early the value of speech rhythm in poetry. The first realization came in late 1893 and early 1894 as he studied Shakespeare and realized that dialogue in the plays was most effective "when the thread of thought and action was not snarled into a maze of metaphor and adjective" (Thompson, Early 155). He had heard the voice from a printed page first "in a Virgilian eclogue and from Hamlet" and his writing from that time on consisted of "images to the ear" (S. Cox 109). The revelation that "an interplay

between the basic rhythm of the metrical line and the natural intonations of the spoken sentence" was the basis for the greatness in Shakespeare's poetry led him to resolve to try to achieve these qualities in his own works (Thompson, Early 155). In some of the early criticism from friends and editors, Frost was told his poetry "sounded 'too much like talk,'" which proved to be a backhanded compliment. Here he realized he had succeeded in capturing an essence of Shakespeare's greatness as his words conveyed the tones of the human voice that linked poetry to the human experience (Thompson, Early 167). The phrase "too much like talk" stuck with him and from this time on became a goal.

During his time as a teacher of high school students, Frost developed his theory of poetry based on the conviction that "talk" was the most effective poetry in terms of drama and that sentences should remain "lean and sharp with the give-and-take of conversation," where thought and action are not lost in "a maze of adjectives and metaphors" (Thompson, Early 361). Frost began to call his theory "the sound of sense" and explained it in a letter to a former student of his, John Bartlett, written while the poet was still in England. He writes:

The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words . . . Those sounds are summoned by the audile (audial) imagination and they must be positive, strong, and definitely and unmistakably

indicated by the context. The reader must be at no loss to give his voice the posture proper to the sentence . . . It is the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound--pure form . . . if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre. Verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the metre furnished by the accents of the polysyllabic (sic) words we call doggerel. Verse is not that. Neither is it the sound of sense alone. It is a resultant from those two . . . Never if you can help it write down a sentence in which the voice will not know how to posture specially. (Thompson, Early 418-419)

In another letter to John Bartlett, Frost elaborates further on his theory of aural poetry. He states:

The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the sentence sounds and they were the fastest readers. Eye readers we call them. They can get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his work . . . the sense sound often says more than the words. It

may even as in irony convey a meaning opposite to the words. (Thompson, Early 435)

Frost describes the eye reader as "barbarian" and states the ideal reader is one who goes "no faster than he can hear the lines and sentence in his mind's ear as if aloud" (Greiner 274). Frost was always intent upon catching the ear of his reader with his poetry. He states:

There are only three things, after all, that a poem must reach--the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart or the mind. It is the most important of all to reach the heart of the reader. And the surest way to reach the heart is through the ear. The visual images thrown up by a poem are important, but it is more important still to choose and arrange words in a sequence so as virtually to control the intonations and pauses of the reader's voice. By the arrangement and choice of words on the part of the poet, the effects of humor, pathos, hysteria, anger, and in fact, all effects, can be indicated or obtained. (Barry 12)

Frost was always interested more in sounds than the actual words and told Sidney Cox, "It was never my aim to keep to any speech, unliterary, vernacular or slang . . . What I have been after from the first, consciously and unconsciously, is tones of voice" (111). But it was the talking voice, not the singing voice, Frost was interested

in; critic Elaine Barry explains, "Although poetry for Frost was not 'an inferior and less capable music,' yet for him its essence lay, constructively and meaningfully, in sound" adding that, for Frost, "sound was the great artistic catalyst, and its function was mysteriously epistemological" (12).

Barry also points out that Frost "was not naive enough to think that the capturing of tones of voice was anything more than the 'raw material of poetry,'" observing that the poet "was no simple tape recorder" (19). And critic John Robert Doyle, Jr. points out that "what Frost has actually done is reduce his poems to "the illusion of conversation, not to the level of actual conversation" (15).

Frost had discussed this theory of "the sound of sense" with a number of poets and newspaper writers and the early reviews of his second book, North of Boston, reflected his theories when the reviews appeared in the London Times Literary Supplement, The Nation, The Bookman, The English Review, Poetry and Drama, Poetry, London Outlook and others (Thompson, Early 451).

The idea of performance by the poems themselves--achieved through means of technical mastery--appealed to Frost and he compared the poet to an athlete, stating, "most of all the kinship between poetry and athletics depends upon the demands of both kinds of performances to maintain form" and "I look at a poem as a performance. I look on the poet as a man of prowess, just like an athlete. He's a

performer. And the things you can do in a poem are very various" (Greiner 272, Lathem 232). Reginald Cook, discussing this idea of performance in a poem, describes a talk by Frost interspersed with the poet's comments:

Three factors make a poem a performance. "The first thing in performance is evidence of self-surprise." Any prepared notes or outlines are suspect to him. "If it [the poem] is thought out first and expressed last, I dismiss it," he said. The second factor in performance is the difference between what he called "a cool morning clarity and a midnight auto-intoxication." He chuckled, "I suppose I know what the latter means. I've written both ways." "Cool morning clarity" is like the leaves on the tree proliferating in spring; it is the brightenss and freshness of growing, expanding things: The third factor is when the poem "ramifies," branches out, and still keeps its direction; or, as he said, "When it shoots branches and still is a network." A single straightness, or concatenation, is not what he means by performance. (45)

At the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard in March, 1936, Lawrance Thompson in The Years of Triumph notes that Frost was initially greeted with "boisterous applause" which "seemed to frighten" him. He did not use any notes

and seemed "to grope for words and ideas, as though he were not sure of himself" as he began the lecture. But after eliciting some laughter from some caustic remarks "about some ways in which the present age sought new ways to be new" he quickly "established his winning platform manner." Thompson observes that "Like Mark Twain, Frost had learned to enthrall by deliberately interrupting himself with well-timed silences, and whenever he paused, the expectant hush of the entire audience was extraordinary. By the time he completed his performance--a truly professional piece of acting--he was called back repeatedly to read one more poem" (444-445).

But William H. Pritchard points out that these Harvard lectures "symbolized a deepening split between those who thought of Frost as the century's greatest poet," the one who appealed to those who were not "connoisseurs of poetry," and others who "condescended to his limited merit" (201). These latter, according to Pritchard, would have preferred Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, or Auden. Although the poetry itself was a major reason for this division amongst poetry critics and admirers of Frost, Frost's popularity, achieved in large degree from his public performances, certainly added fuel to the flame.

Frost himself felt a suspicion that "I haven't pleased Harvard as much as I have the encompassing barbarians," which meant the group "outside the Harvard literary culture" (Pritchard 202). Reginald L. Cook notes that "Frost's

popular appeal has cost him adherents among the intellectual aesthetes" (208).

The basic difference between Frost and poets like Eliot and Pound is one of audience. Cook states about Frost:

He is certainly not a professional scholar-poet like T. S. Eliot who addresses either the intellectual or an elite group of practicing poets. He writes for the lovers of poetry who read for pleasure and enlightenment...His appeal is a popular one. We might say that his poetry belongs to the schools as well as to the people.  
(210)

Unlike Eliot, Pound, and a number of other poets in the twentieth century, Frost did not attempt formal criticism. He never really pursued prose writing and "most of his practical criticism, like his critical theories, occurs offhandedly--in letters, marginalia, conversation, or interviews" (Barry 9).

Critics and academics are generally appalled by popular poets and popular poetry, somehow feeling they must lack an essential aesthetic quality in order to appeal to the masses. These same critics are often upset at the performing poet who is popular and who spends time performing poetry to large audiences. Pritchard, writing about Frost's final years, states:

Surely there was something less than heartening in the spectacle of an old man being listened to too often, by too many people--most of whom cared little about poetry and cared about his only because they thought it wholesome country-American. (242)

Pritchard also notes that "The final two decades of his life were those of a man whose productions as a poet, for the first time in his career, took a position secondary to his life as a public figure, a pundit, an institution, a cultural emissary" adding that "he had become the goodest greyest poet since Walt Whitman" (241). Pritchard states further that "It is fair to say that from that point on, his writing, or at least his publishing of poetry, became occasional rather than habitual" although "as the poems dried up, his reputation expanded" (241). Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem in Selected Prose of Robert Frost note "his increased enjoyment in the role of the celebrity, especially in old age, blunted his enthusiasm for the time-consuming project of publishing a book of prose" and that Frost "was more interested in the growth of his metaphors than in bringing them to book" (9). Pritchard observes further that in Frost's final years, "the need to have all the honors he could get became more intense as the poems grew less frequent, less substantial" (247).

Frost himself was well aware of the dilemma of being both a private and public poet and stated, "Someone might

say mockingly, what began in felicity and all the privacy and secrecy and furtiveness of your poetry is ending in a burst of publicity"; still he continued to devote "intense energy toward making sure that his work did not lack publicity, and of the most favorable kind" (Pritchard 242).

But publicity is not necessarily bad for the poet and his poetry and the popular performer can be effective in attracting people to poetry who would not ordinarily read or listen to it. Reginald Cook observes about Frost's appearances:

He has also been effective in making people like poetry by personal radiation. There is a rare and irrepressible appeal in his personal magnetism...A smart showman, he knows how to capitalize on his art without cheapening it...he holds the audience whom he has attracted, not because the poetry is light, but because the showman is able. (212)

Edward Connery Lathem observes that the poet "won renown as a poet and public figure" and that, although the fame was "based essentially upon his literary achievement," it also existed "as something separate, a recognition which was, at least in part, independent of that achievement" (xi).

Frost's fame was separate from his poetry, although the fame of the man and the poems he wrote were certainly linked. But the public performances generated coverage by

the press and Frost received much media coverage which discussed the man but not the poems. These performances gave Frost exposure to the public, who accepted him as a poet even when they may have never read his poems. The poems were the reason Frost was on the platform, but once on the platform, the poems were overshadowed by the poet, whose readings generated images of a kind, down-to-earth grandfather figure, a farmer who was part of the American hard-working agrarian tradition, and a speaker filled with wisdom and good sense.

As Frost's celebrity grew from his performances, so did his confidence in himself as a performer and poet. And as his popularity expanded, the crowds coming to hear him swelled. During a lecture at Harvard, over a thousand came to a room that seated only 300. According to a member of the audience:

He began to speak, informally, colloquially, easily--taking his own time to find the just word, the right anecdote. His head is wrinkled in a dozen lines, his hands massive, his brow large... His talk is pure homespun, but it has a firm bite, a sure sense of timing. (Thompson, Later 26)

Frost returned to Amherst in 1949 where "his only function was to talk" (Pritchard 244). Here, for approximately two weeks in the fall and a similar amount of time in the spring, the poet would give one large public

reading as well as some smaller appearances, read at a fraternity house and go to some dinners at faculty member's homes (Pritchard 244-5).

At a poetry reading at Amherst, Frost told the audience he was going to read "some new poetry, some old poetry and talk a little bit." He continued:

People ask why I bother to talk. It is to show my courage. When I first read poetry here, I knew that if I just read poetry somebody might get too rapturous, so after I got through reading poetry, I talked a little on a technical level. You know how it is. It was easy enough for me to lean on a book and talk. (Thompson, Later 151).

In his final years, according to Thompson, Frost "was surprised by the ease with which he now approached his public appearances" after his years of dread and loathing and acute nervousness. He said, "My fear of these things beforehand has largely left me...Something strange has come over my life. I shall never be the scared fool again that I used to be. Nothing can more than kill me." His schedule in his later years was to sleep late and fix himself a breakfast of a raw egg, orange juice and coffee or milk after rising. He would work for a few hours on a new poem or lecture until his secretary arrived with a lunch basket. In mid-afternoon, Frost would work in his garden, take a walk, fool with his chickens or dog, or visit with a guest,

walking and talking until well after midnight (Later 26, 66).

Honors continued to come his way in the last third of his life, beginning with the Pulitzer (his fourth) awarded to A Witness Tree, published in 1942, and on March 26, 1954, when Frost turned 80 he was feted at a White House reception by Dwight Eisenhower. There were also numerous honorary degrees from universities all over the country.

At Oxford, in 1957, when he received an honorary degree, Lawrence Thompson, who was with Frost, reports that the poet told those assembled, "I'm not here to make exorbitant claims for poetry, lest they seem personal, but one thing must be said about poetry--it's the ultimate. The nearest thing to it is penultimate, even religion. Poetry is the thoughts of the heart." Frost continued that "It's a thought-felt thing. Poetry is the thing that laughs and cries about everything as it's going on--and makes you take it. A momentary stay against confusion." After his talk he read "It is Almost the Year Two Thousand," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Tree at My Window," "The Road Not Taken," "Mending Wall," "Never Again Would Birds' Songs Be the Same," "Provide, Provide," "The Star-Slitter," "Choose Something Like a Star," "One More Brevity," "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length," "Birches," "The Gift Outright," "Departmental," and, finally "A Considerable Speck" (Later 239).

This appearance by Frost illustrates that, although Frost was very much a public person by this time, he knew that his fame was grounded in his poetry. He continued to make his poems the central focus of his life and his public appearances while, at the same time, he transcended the poetry as a public figure. Frost always seemed to know that without the poems he was not a poet; therefore, he put the spotlight on his poems and poetry when he was on the platform. But he was also aware the spotlight continued to shine on him after the poems had been read.

Frost was a man who knew much personal tragedy in his life. One of his children died as an infant and Frost was told that if he had called the doctor earlier, the child could have been saved. This hung over Frost's head and he sometimes accused himself of murder in alluding to this. A far greater personal tragedy occurred in March, 1938 in Florida when his wife died. After her death he mused that "Pretty near every one of my poems will be found to be about her if rightly read." He was sixty-five at this time and "did not see how he could . . . maintain the balanced and detached exterior he had always been able to summon for his public appearances" after her death (Thompson, Later xv). But her death caused him to travel around the country and perform his poetry even more because, according to biographer Lawrance Thompson, "now that he was deprived of Elinor's customary approbation, he pursued with ever greater energy the approbation of the world at large" (Later xvi).

Since he had already achieved his childhood dream of achieving honor and glory as a poet, "he made a conscious and unconscious decision to achieve heights of distinction that had never been achieved in America" (Thompson, Later xvi). Thus as he entered his seventies and eighties, he became even more popular and sought after.

Perhaps the greatest moment in Robert Frost's life as a poet/performer occurred in January, 1960 when he recited "The Gift Outright" at the Inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. He had tried to read a poem he had composed for the occasion but his failing eyesight and the blinding sunlight made that impossible. After some awkward and embarrassing moments, Frost "managed to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat by reciting magnificently by heart 'The Gift Outright'--turning the occasion into the public high point of those years" (Ridland 241).

When Frost died, in January, 1963, he left behind an estate valued (at that time) of a quarter of a million dollars. In 1949, when a reporter from the International News Service asked if someone could make a living at poetry, Frost, then seventy-four, had emphatically replied, "No!" He continued: "When you're very young, you think you can. Then you write poetry because you have a weakness for it, like a weakness for wine, women, and song. Then you gradually find out that you can do it if you do it by hook or crook, I've stayed at poetry by doing odds and ends"

(Lathem 127). A major part of those "odds and ends" was being a performing poet.

Frost remained active on the platform until the end. In the fall of 1962, at the age of eighty-eight, he gave readings at Holy Cross, Trinity, Mount Holyoke, Amherst, and Yale, traveled to Washington, D.C. for the National Poetry Festival; attended the dedication ceremonies at Kenyon College in Ohio; received the Edward MacDowell Medal at Hunter College in New York; received an honorary degree in Detroit; attended the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of Poetry Magazine; gave a public reading at Greenwich, Connecticut; and was at Dartmouth after Thanksgiving for the dedication of the new arts center (Lathem 293). He loved being a public person and a public poet and his final days were filled with these activities. To many, he was the essence of a poet and his poetry was known all over the world. And it was, in large measure, because of his performances that he achieved such heights for himself, his poetry, and poetry in general.

Because he was a great poet, Robert Frost became a performer; because he was a great performer, he became a public person. And because he was a public person, more people knew about him and his poems; therefore, his reputation as a poet increased. For Frost, the poetry was always the central focus of his life but, for many in the public, it was Robert Frost who was best known, not the poetry. It is safe to say that, in the end, the public knew

Frost much better than it knew his poems; still, it was the poems that began the process of his becoming a performer and public person. For Robert Frost, the concept of the poet as performer is equal parts "poet" and "performer" and the performances of Robert Frost were great and memorable because they were built on the firm foundation of his poems.

## T. S. Eliot

On April 30, 1956, fifteen thousand people heard T. S. Eliot lecture at the University of Minnesota. The lecture was "The Frontiers of Criticism" and Eliot traced contemporary literary criticism back to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, presenting two principal causes for the rise of New Criticism: the rise of the academic critic and the establishment of "the relevance of philosophy, aesthetics, and psychology" to literary criticism (Kirk 397). Were fifteen thousand people interested in literary criticism? No, of course not, but they were interested in seeing and hearing T. S. Eliot, one of the most famous poets and critics of the twentieth century. Here, the poet as performer is essentially a concept of celebrity or recognition: the poet as Public Person. Because T. S. Eliot was such a well known poet, people wanted to see him; Eliot then had to be a "performer," fulfilling a role his reputation created.

It is impossible to deal with poets and poetry in the twentieth century and ignore Eliot. His influence, and the influence of his poetry and criticism, is so great that nearly every major poet of this century has felt the force of Eliot's persona, criticism, and poems, particularly "The Waste Land." Although Eliot was barely adequate as a performer of his own poetry, the dramatic intensity of his poems lends itself to performance. And, of course, in his

final years he did assume the role of the Public Man, the dean of poetry, who travelled throughout the world giving speeches, lecturing on criticism, reading selections from his own works, and lending his name to various poets and poetry in order to further them/it.

Eliot always felt an attraction to drama and the theater, but that did not extend to performing on the stage himself. He did not do well speaking in front of audiences and, when he did speak, it was usually as a lecturer and critic, discussing other writers or presenting his theories on a variety of topics. Rarely did he read his own poems before large audiences, and then it was only later in his life after he had firmly established himself as a poet. He did read before small groups of friends and acquaintances in homes. He knew poetry should be dramatic and spoken, but was unable to do that with his own voice and presence. Although he loved the idea of drama and incorporated it into his poetry, he was probably too inhibited to be an effective performer.

Eliot knew the importance of drama in poetry and always felt the influence of the theater on his work. In his essay "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" he states, "What great poetry is not dramatic?" and begins his essay, "Poetry and Drama" by noting that "Reviewing my critical output for the last thirty-odd years, I am surprised to find how constantly I have returned to the drama" (40, 75). In his essay "The Three Voices of Poetry" he adds:

I have read that there is a dramatic element in much of my early work. It may be that from the beginning I aspired unconsciously to the theatre . . . I have, however, gradually come to the conclusion that in writing verse for the stage both the process and the outcome are very different from what they are in writing verse to be read or recited. (98)

Here, then, Eliot says that poetry should be dramatic but that there is a difference between writing plays and writing poetry. In Eliot's later criticism, particularly "Poetry and Drama," he seemed primarily interested in fitting poetry into the theater, not necessarily the theater into poetry. Perhaps that is because, in his own life, he was a poet first and a dramatist later, so his own odyssey is that of a poet trying to adapt his writing--and poetry in general--to the public theatre.

A discussion of drama infers a discussion of acting and actors as well. With poetry, this means that either the poet is the actor or that he creates dramatic personae in his poetry who speak to an audience. Eliot had strong dramatic tendencies and biographer Peter Ackroyd quotes V. S. Pritchett, who described him once as "a company of actors inside one suit, each twitting the others" while critic Edmund Wilson, observed that he "is an actor and...gives you the creeps a little at first because he is such a completely artificial, or, rather, self-invented character" (118, 199).

Auden notes a "variety of characters which seemed to exist within" Eliot while Ackroyd summarizes "when the poet seems most himself, he is an actor watching his own performance" (Ackroyd 118, 80). Ackroyd also observes that Eliot and his first wife, Valerie, "both possessed a strong theatrical streak" and relates a story of Eliot inviting the Sitwells over for dinner where they observed him wearing pale green face powder "to accentuate his look of suffering, so that he might more easily provoke sympathy" (115, 136). Virginia Woolf also observed face powder on Eliot. Biographers and writers are fond of noting Eliot playing several different "roles" in his life: successful businessman, poet, critic, churchman, social man about town, publisher, and man of letters. Clearly, Eliot emerges as a person with strong dramatic tendencies in his personal life; it is only natural this would manifest itself in his poetry.

Eliot himself was wary of his own (or any other poet's) personality dominating the poetry. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" he states "The poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality" and, later in the same essay, states "Poetry is not turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (9, 10). He elaborates on this burial of individual personality in "The Metaphysical Poets" when he states that the "poets in our civilization . . . must be difficult . . . The poet must

become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (248).

Eliot's personal history shows an early attraction to poetry and desire for recognition. He was born Thomas Stearns Eliot in St. Louis, Missouri on September 26, 1888 into a distinguished family of nineteenth century American aristocrats. His father, Henry Ware Eliot, was a businessman (he manufactured bricks) and "drew cats" while his mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns Eliot "wrote poetry on themes of prophecy and doom" (Ackroyd 21). Eliot began writing early; after his first term at Smith School in January, 1899, he produced his own magazine, The Fireside, which featured adventure stories, rhyming verses and puns, and some jokes. When he was twelve, the young Eliot heard Kipling's "Danny Deever" and also read "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," translated by Edward Fitzgerald. Later, he compared these experiences to a "conversion" because "when he read those 'bright' lines he knew that he wished to become a poet" (Ackroyd 26).

In the summer of 1910, just before he entered Harvard, Eliot bought a notebook during a family vacation in Gloucester, Massachusetts and transcribed the poems he had been writing. He called this book Inventions of the March Hare and before that wrote in a notebook Complete Poems of T. S. Eliot. He continued adding to this notebook until his trip to England in 1914. In 1913, Eliot was a teaching

assistant in the philosophy department at Harvard, having made the decision to become a philosopher, and in 1914 received the Sheldon Travelling Fellowship to go to Merton College at Oxford to complete his dissertation on F. H. Bradley. After this move, he only returned to his native country for visits and eventually became a British citizen.

In London, Eliot met Ezra Pound, who was only three years older than Eliot, but had already published five volumes of poetry. Pound asked Eliot to send him some poems and Eliot sent "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" along with some others and Pound responded with "This is as good as anything I've ever seen" (Ackroyd 56). Pound immediately contacted Harriet Monroe at Poetry and, from Pound's enthusiasm and insistence, she printed "Prufrock" in her magazine in June, 1915.

At the invitation of E. R. Dodds, Eliot joined a small literary group known as the Coterie. Before this group he recited "Prufrock," his first poetry reading in England. Meanwhile, Pound was promoting the poet by sending out his poems to a number of people. After the initial publication of "Prufrock" in Poetry, "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" were published by Wyndham Lewis in Blast, "Portrait of a Lady" was published in Alfred Kreymbor's Others, and five poems were published in Pound's Catholic Anthology. This all occurred in the latter half of 1915, which marked the beginning of Eliot's career as a poet. It was also

during this year that Eliot met and married his first wife, Vivien Haigh-Wood (Ackroyd 58, 61).

In order to earn more money, Eliot resigned from teaching at High Wycombe school and moved to Highgate Junior school, where he would teach Latin, French, German, mental arithmetic, drawing and swimming. He also began work as an extension lecturer and became a book reviewer, first for the International Journal of Ethics and then on the literary pages of the New Statesman. He finished his dissertation in 1916, Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley, but never received his doctorate from Harvard because he did not attend the graduation exercises.

Under the University of London Extension Board, Eliot gave tutorial classes on Modern English Literature from Tennyson to George Meredith during the winter months. He continued these classes for the next three years. At the end of 1916, he resigned from Highgate Junior School, intending to earn his living by lecturing and book reviewing but, unable to earn enough from these activities, took a position at Lloyd's Bank in the Colonial and Foreign Department in early 1917. Thus began his public career as a successful businessman. Too, he began writing poetry again "as if he needed the discipline, or protection, of a 'proper' occupation before he could feel at ease with his own creative instincts" (Ackroyd 78).

Four months after Eliot began his career as a banker, Prufrock and Other Observations was published and for the next nine years he was a banker at the same time he was experiencing his most fertile, creative period as a poet. It was during the time of his life behind a desk as a bank official that he wrote "The Waste Land."

Ezra Pound was the person most responsible for Eliot's first book of poems. Pound collected and organized the material, then took the typescript to Harriet Shaw Weaver of the Egoist. There were 500 copies of the book printed, financed by Pound with money from his wife. The press reviews in England "were characteristically short and dismissive" with "the major complaint being that this was verse rather than poetry because it had no conception of 'the beautiful'" (Ackroyd 79).

In December, 1917, Eliot went to the home of Lady Colefax to read some poetry and in November, 1918, he visited Leonard and Virginia Woolf for the first time at Hogarth House in Richmond. He had brought with him some of his newly composed quatrain poems and read them here. They decided to publish them, although Virginia Woolf's impression of him was that he was "enormously slow and elaborate of speech" while "underneath the orotundity she suspected intolerance" (Ackroyd 90).

In April, 1919, three months after Eliot's father's death, Knopf agreed to publish his poems in America. In June, 1919, Poems by Eliot was published by the Woolfs in

England. During the period 1916-1919 Eliot began jotting sketches and fragments which would surface later, in much revised form, as "The Waste Land." In 1919 he also began to write for the Athenaeum, which assured him a larger readership than the Egoist, and did reviews for The Times Literary Supplement.

Eliot had risen up to the first ranks of literary journalism because of his reviews within five years after moving to London and by the beginning of 1920 his poetic works could be read in both England and the United States. He was collecting his essays and intending "to turn such a volume into a definitive statement about standards in modern poetry" (Ackroyd 98). These essays, under the title The Sacred Wood, were published simultaneously in America and England and firmly established Eliot as a major critic of poetry. He also wrote long pieces for the Observer, New Statesman, and The Times Literary Supplement.

A young don at Cambridge, I. A. Richards, "took the role of critic and explicator" of Eliot's poetry (Ackroyd 100). This academic connection with Eliot's poetry "was a formative factor in the steady advancement of its reputation," according to biographer Ackroyd (100). T. S. Eliot was always aware of a literary reputation and understood how to create one. He realized the importance of being mentioned regularly in the newspapers, and in his own criticism he was cognizant of "the need to make the right impression," which explains his "air of scholarship which

was, in part, only assumed" (Ackroyd 101). Biographer Ackroyd observes further that "certainly he had read much less than his admirers imagined" (101).

Eliot began work on the Criterion in 1922, a literary magazine begun by Lady Rothermere, whose husband owned the Daily Mail. It was in the Criterion that "The Waste Land" first appeared. It was published in The Dial a few months later and in book form by Knopf in America and then, a year later, by the Woolfs under the Hogarth press. Eliot had come to Hogarth House in June 1922 to read the new work. According to Virginia Woolf, who related the incident in a letter:

He sang it and chanted it and rhythmized it. It has great beauty and force of phrase; symmetry; and tensity. What connects it together, I'm not so sure. But he read till he had to rush--letters to write about the London Magazine--and discussion thus was curtailed. One was left, however, with some strong emotion. The Waste Land, it is called; and Mary (Hutchinson), who has heard it more quietly, interprets it to be Tom's autobiography--a melancholy one. (86)

Eliot left his job with Lloyd's Bank in 1925 and began work as an editor at Faber & Gwyer. The contract also contained the stipulation that this firm would publish Eliot's work. This move was significant for several reasons

for Eliot and biographer Ackroyd notes he now had a place for his work "where he would be free from the exigencies of editors and from that difficult combination of luck and perseverance which marks the ordinary course of a writer's publishing career" as well as being "in a unique position to determine the nature, and the timing of his own writing" (152).

Although Eliot himself did not perform his own poetry publicly until late in his life, an inherent dramatic intensity--a basis for great public performances--is in the poetry from the time of his earliest published work. When reading "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the dramatic intensity is immediately apparent in the second and third lines when Eliot writes "the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherised upon a table." The use of "shock" as an element of drama is also used in the brief scene, "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michaelangelo" which could be part of a play or movie inserted for (obviously) dramatic effect. A particularly revealing passage is "there will be time/To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet," which is the role of an actor. Further down, a dramatic self-revelation occurs as the man describes himself as others see him (the awareness of an audience in everyday life) and sums up his own questioning with the rather melodramatic lines, "Do I dare/Disturb the universe?" (Collected 4).

A key to theatrical drama is action and Eliot provides it in "Prufrock," but the action is primarily internal--inside the thoughts of Prufrock. Too, he uses concrete, everyday images as props--coffee spoons, yellow smoke, a shawl, perfume--to create his scenes. The biblical allusions also add a sense of drama: there is one from Ecclesiastes which begins "There will be time to murder and create" and the allusion to Lazarus "Come from the dead." There is also another character in the poem--a key to conflict--who is a mysterious "she" and to whom the poet finds "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" There is an allusion to the supreme dramatist, Shakespeare ("Prince Hamlet") and, finally, to the ultimate dramatic experience, death, in the final words, "we drown" (Collected 4, 6, 7). The poem is almost a play (actually, it seems more like a cinema verite movie) with its interior monologue, confrontation with the everyday in an emotionally charged situation, and a man coming to grips with the world, particularly through a relationship (or lack of one) with an unnamed "She."

In "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," Eliot again creates a "character" to observe. In this case, it is Sweeney, a more physical character than Prufrock, who "spreads his knees/Letting his arms hang down to laugh" at the beginning of the poem, creating a dramatic personae in the first lines. Nature enters with the Raven, the "stormy moon," "Gloomy Orion and the Dog" along with "zebra" and

"giraffe" images. One can almost see these flashing across the screen in some little avante garde movie house. Then another character emerges "in the Spanish cape." This is an obvious allusion to a theatrical presence and even a bit of slapstick as she "Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees/Slips and pulls the table cloth/Overturns a coffee-cup" after which she "yawns and draws a stocking up." Another character-- "The silent man"--appears as well as a waiter and "Rachel nee Rabinovitch" and a scene emerges of eating fruit, then some more action as "the man with heavy eyes...Leaves the room and reappears/Outside the window." A religious allusion ("The Convent of the Sacred Heart") and one from Greek drama ("Agamemnon") occurs before the poem ends in a quiet anti-climax ("liquid siftings fall/To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud"). There are many elements of drama here: costumes, characters, action, sounds, props; the overall effect is almost like presenting diverse scenes from a larger story (Collected 49, 50).

In "The Waste Land," the drama is both intense and discursive. Again, there are numerous characters, action, sounds, sights, the mingling of the abstract with the everyday, and allusions (to drama, to London, the Bible, other languages and cultures) in a pastiche that seems at times more like a movie or experimental play than a poem. Although there is not a "plot" in the traditional sense, there are actions and themes running through the entire play (the Quest, disintegration of civilization, the apocalypse

of contemporary life, the exotic mingled with the commonplace) which heightens the dramatic effect. At the end of the poem, as at the end of a gripping drama, the reader is saturated, exhausted, having been bombarded with more than he can grasp, more than he can assimilate and comprehend, but feeling like he is somehow satisfied. At least he has been moved and (a tribute and trademark of a great drama) wants to see it again and tell others about it. What more can an audience want? Even the final line ("Shantih shantih shantih") seems directed toward a letting down of the emotions in such a way that the audience (reader) is moved to stand on their feet and applaud the closed curtain. If "dramatic" embodies "having the power of deeply stirring the imagination or the emotions" (as defined in the dictionary) there can be no doubt that "The Waste Land" is dramatic.

In the Four Quartets, Eliot refines his concept of dramatic poetry. The first poem, "Burnt Norton," begins with some lines excised from his play, Murder in the Cathedral ("Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future,/And time future contained in time past") (Collected 175). Ackroyd notes that "this was the first long poem in which he used the emphases and cadences of speech . . . [he adopted] the tone of someone addressing an audience, speaking out loud rather than to himself. In "Burnt Norton" we see the poet as orator" (230). The biographer also observes:

He was deliberately adapting his dramatic experience for use in poetic composition, since for the first time in his "pure" poetry he was addressing an audience. His emphasis on the "common style" suggests that he is no longer interested in talking to himself but to others, and Four Quartets is at one level an oratorical performance . . . poetry is married with public exhortation. (270)

Eliot showed his growing academic respectability by giving the Clark Lectures at Cambridge between January and March, 1926. In 1927, he wrote about thirty long reviews or articles for the Dial, the Nation, the Athenaeum, the Times Literary Supplement, and others. In the autumn of 1928, Eliot invited the Woolfs, Mary Hutchins, and E. McKnight Kauffer to his home, where he read some poems he had recently written "in his curious monotonous sing-song" and discussed with those assembled their views on his new work (Ackroyd 176).

In 1929 the first book devoted to Eliot's poetry, The Talent of T. S. Eliot by George Williamson, was published and the "process was beginning here which is unique in twentieth-century poetry: of a poet setting the context and the principles for the description and critical evaluation of his own work" (Ackroyd 177). This really marked the beginning of the "Eliot era" in poetry. It began with the pioneering work of Ezra Pound in poetry which Eliot made

accessible to a much larger public. He also introduced, through his editorship at Faber and Faber (the name was changed in 1929), not only Joyce and Pound to the public but also poets like Auden, Spender, MacNeice, George Barker, Vernon Watkins, Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn.

In 1933, Eliot gave a series of radio talks on the BBC, "The Modern Dilemma," where he emphasized the importance of Christianity in the modern world. He also left his first wife and moved for a year to America where he was the Charles Eliot Norton professor at Harvard. The Norton lectures were later issued in a book titled The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism. This established a trend for his criticism for the rest of his life: books were composed from spoken addresses. Eliot took on a number of lectures for this reason although "he felt surer of himself behind a typewriter than in front of an audience" and "often confessed that he was not a particularly good lecturer" (Ackroyd 196). Although he had given a number of lectures by this time, "he found it a difficult task, and his nervousness about such a performance would affect him some days in advance" (Ackroyd 196). Unlike Robert Frost, Eliot never became comfortable with lectures and readings and, unlike many other performing poets, he never could project himself adequately in performance, nor did he enjoy trying.

Eliot gave a number of lectures in America. At the University of Southern California and UCLA in California, in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins University, in St. Louis,

Buffalo, and at the University of Virginia he spoke about literature and criticism while at the Poetry Society in New York he read from his own works. He continued giving lectures on poetry and criticism the rest of his life, in England and America, but his creative energies turned towards the theatre and, after 1934, he devoted himself to writing plays. This had been an ambition of his since the 1920s, but it was not until this time that he channeled his creativity towards this end, beginning with The Rock and Sweeney Agonistes.

The most obvious example of the dramatic urge in Eliot was his attraction to the theatre and his commitment, at the end of his career, to his role as a playwright. For Eliot, a man who always craved respect from himself and others and who did not find self-respect in poetry alone, the theatre was a way of being socially useful and creative at the same time. He had success here and even saw The Cocktail Party broadcast on television and Murder in the Cathedral made into a movie. Eliot also revealed his dramatic tendencies by joining the Anglican church and actively participating in the services. It may be argued that he was strongly attracted to the pagentry, ritual, and performance of the church service: drama at its highest and most pure. In "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," Eliot states:

The only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is a High Mass well performed...If you consider the ritual of the Church during the cycle of the year,

you have the complete drama represented. The Mass is a small drama, having all the unities; but in the Church year you have represented the full drama of creation. (35)

Although this essay was written with various "characters" putting forth differing points of view (and this view may not be Eliot's totally) at least it may be said he was aware and appreciated the drama inherent in the Church. For a man with such an obvious desire for the dramatic, this had to be a strong attraction and cause for some inherent satisfacton, both aesthetic and spiritual.

Poetry, theatre, and religion all require a strong sense of drama in their performance in order to succeed. T. S. Eliot, who was very deeply engaged in all three of these areas in his own life, had that strong sense of drama inherent in him that is essential for the public success of a poet, a playwright, and a priest. It is impossible to separate totally the poetry from the plays or from the religion and capture the spirit of T. S. Eliot; therefore, it is necessary to group all of them under the terms "performance" and "theater" in order to understand Eliot and his inner drive.

It has been noted by various writers and actors that great actors often have no strong personality of their own; the key to their acting ability (and ambition) is that they easily--and convincingly--assume the identity of a character or role to play. Eliot, in his poetry, assumes the role of

a character(s), making his poetry itself a performance although Eliot himself was not a very good performer when he read his own work. Still, he did perform his poetry and his performances are exemplary of the performances of most poets in the latter half of the twentieth century: in front of a predominately academic audience at a university, interspersing observations, comments, and lectures amidst the poems read. In another sense, T. S. Eliot's whole life was a performance. He played the role of a successful businessman, publisher, editor, critic, poet, playwright, gentleman, religious man, and man of letters. He referred to himself as a classicist, a royalist, and an Anglican (or Anglo-Catholic). Analyzing this, a classicist is someone who lives with the mind--an intellectual--which is certainly a role Eliot sought and cultivated; a royalist is someone who believes in pomp and circumstances as this is a role the nobility often play; and an Anglo-Catholic has the sense of drama that only the Church can bring, the ritual that is almost theatre enacted at each service for an audience of believers.

Linked closely to the concept of drama in poetry is the issue of music and in his essay, "The Music of Poetry," Eliot states, "The profound difference between dramatic and all other kinds of verse [is] a difference in the music, which is a difference in the relation of the current spoken language" (28). For Eliot, music is a key element in poetry. But what is music? It is certainly rhythm, tone,

and meter, but it is form, style, harmony and spirit as well. It is also an order and shape for a work of art, and he was intensely concerned with order in poetry as well as society.

Ezra Pound had a profound influence on Eliot's poetry during the early years of Eliot's life in London. In Dionysus and the City, critic Monroe K. Spears notes that Pound's "practical criticism always stresses sound and cadence, and he repeatedly professes belief in an 'absolute rhythm' attainable in poetry" (136). Pound himself states in an essay that "poetry withers and 'dries out' when it leaves music, or at least an imagined music, too far behind it" (Spears 136). The proof of the validity of Pound's critical theory lies in his editing of Eliot's "The Waste Land." According to Peter Ackroyd, "Pound had an extraordinarily good ear, and he located in the typescripts of 'The Waste Land' the underlying rhythm of the poem . . . Pound heard the music, and cut away what was for him the extraneous material which was attached to it" (119). The result was that the poem "was sung and chanted by undergraduates--they heard the music, too" because Pound, in his editing, "mistook or refused to recognize Eliot's original schema and as a result rescued the poetry" (Ackroyd 120).

The concept of music in poetry was essential for Eliot, but he held a broad, diverse view of the function of music. In "The Music of Poetry," he states:

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Some poetry is meant to be sung; most poetry, in modern times, is meant to be spoken--and there are many other things to be spoken of besides the murmur of innumerable bees or the moan of doves in immemorial elms. Dissonance, even cacophony, has its place; just as, in a poem of any length, there must be transitions between passages of greater and less intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole. (24)

Eliot also notes, in "Poetry and Drama," that "We must never emulate music, because to arrive at the condition of music would be the annihilation of poetry, and especially dramatic poetry" (43). Eliot, then, rejects the romantic notion of poetry as being limited to harmony and calls disharmony, or discord, music too. He is also wary of sound over sense, insisting that "the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning. Otherwise, we could have poetry of great musical beauty which made no sense, and I have never come across such poetry" ("Music" 21).

Eliot's emphasis on music may be read in the titles to some of his poems: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," and "Four Quartets." Here, the poet is putting his poetry in the same context as music, saying they are (in essence) the same, that he is not just writing a poem, he is writing a song. Of course, the song

is not a three-minute pop ditty heard on Top 40 radio (although there are some allusions to popular songs in Eliot's work) but rather a classical work with an extended, complex melody (theme) woven through a series of passages and movements.

Eliot alludes to music in a number of his poems:

"Beneath the music from a farther room" and "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each./I do not think that they will sing to me" in "Prufrock" and "The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery" in "Burnt Norton" (Collected 5, 7; 176). But his most diverse use of music and musical allusion occurs in "The Waste Land" where he uses music from popular songs ("O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag," "Good night, ladies," and "London Bridge is falling down falling down"--actually a nursery rhyme), as well as allusions of music to life ("Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song," "The music crept by me upon the waters" and "fiddled whisper music") all the way to an example of playing music in a technological society ("puts a record on the gramophone" (Collected 53-64)). Of course, these illustrations of "music" being mentioned in poetry only show an interest from the poet, but do not truly illustrate the music within the poetry. That requires the poems to be read aloud so the rhythms may be heard, felt, and experienced as the device for carrying the poetry along.

In "The Music of Poetry," Eliot cautions that "however far it may go in musical elaboration, we must expect a time

to come when poetry will have again to be recalled to speech" reiterating his message that poetry is not music and should not try to be (in the purest form) although poetry must use music--in the form of rhythm, sound, movement, order, spirit, and beat in order to be effective (33). Peter Ackroyd states that Eliot had "an artistic vision which made use of the primeval drum beat...[and] was interested in those contemporary artists who simplified 'current life' and transformed it into something rich and stranger" and, in doing so, inspired a generation of poets (113). Monroe Spears, writing about modern poetry, states:

The revival of poetry as an aural and performing art has been important, and the restoration of a close relation between poetry and music. The bond of emotional participation among the audience and between them and the performers . . . is part of a genuine and persistent movement. (269)

This infusion of emotion--which is the very essence of both music and poetry--is the catalyst for blending music and poetry. Both Pound and Eliot knew this and attempted a musical spiritualness in their poetry so that it would be assured of moving readers as well as providing a force to keep the poem moving.

Ezra Pound was an important influence on Eliot, particularly during Eliot's early years in England and critic Graham Hough observes that Eliot "was for a time

dazzled by Pound" (53). The two shared a disdain for poetry in the popular culture and preferred the view of "tradition" in poetry and society instead. This concept of "tradition" and "order" was important to Eliot and in T. S. Eliot: His Mind and Personality, S. S. Hoskot states:

The doctrine of Tradition justified his rejection of the present world and of the personal self which was part of it . . . just as in the poetry he had made every attempt to conceal himself behind a forest of allusions and quotation, and disclaimed all association with the contemporary world by overtly assuming an attitude of detached superiority. (275)

Although there are similarities in the works of Eliot and Ezra Pound, the most striking similarity between the two men and their poetry is one of attitude. Simply put, the two poets are adamantly hieratical in their approach to poetry, elitist to the point that they have made poetry criticism a necessary part in the study of poetry. After Eliot and Pound, no longer was it possible for the layman to simply read any poem by any poet and deduce a meaning; he had to be educated in the nuances and subtleties and invest a significant amount of time and effort in order to fully understand the poem/poet. In doing so, they took poetry from the street (metaphorically speaking) and put it in the Sanctuary, accessible only to the high priests whose

elaborate rituals and training are necessary before the Sanctuary can be unlocked.

Eliot and Pound did this by writing poetry that is basically inaccessible on first reading or by simply reading without the help of explication. And the reason these poets wrote this way was because of their own elitism, "classicism," and commitment to poetry being hieratical. These are the common bonds between these two men and they are strong bonds, enabling them to be not only poets with a shared vision of poetry and audience, but, for most of their lives, close personal friends as well.

Eliot and Pound composed poetry that is obscure because of the intense personal vision of each man which he injected into his poetry, the various personae each took in/with the poetry, their use of other languages within each poem (often several languages, mixing classical and contemporary), and by their allusions to a number of sources (both classical and contemporary). The net result is that these very learned, well-read, classically influenced, multi-lingual, royalist, elitist, hieratical writers demanded their audience be as learned, well-read, classically influenced, multi-lingual, royalist, elitist, and hieratical as they are. Needless to say, it is difficult for readers to carry all this intellectual luggage into the reading of a poem unless they are poetry critics.

As a "performer," Eliot lacked the necessary dramatic skills to project his personality--or a facet of his

personality--from the stage to an audience successfully for most of his life. Only in his final years, when he had become a public figure and realized that people came to see him as a celebrity and institution rather than a poet, critic, playwright, or anything else he had accomplished, was he effective from the stage. Only when he was self-confident enough to stand before an audience with his reputation surrounding him like a halo, tossing off obligatory remarks, some poems, and critical observations, was he ever comfortable as a public man. Still, the "urge to drama was a profound instinct" for Eliot and critic R. Peacock notes this urge was important because the poet "was searching for the canvas, the landscape of manifold human conflict, which would be an adequate representation of human involvement, and which he would impregnate with his interpretations of existence" (98).

The notion of the poet as performer seems on the surface to be irrelevant in the case of T. S. Eliot, but on a deeper level it is integral to the understanding of Eliot and his work. His poetry is dramatic and therefore performance-oriented, he was himself a dramatic person (or one who had strong dramatic tendencies), and he was attracted to the theatre and drama both as entertainment and a vocation. For these reasons, T.S.Eliot is a striking example of the poet as performer.

## Conclusion

What kind of a person is a performer? Glenn Wilson, citing psychological studies, states that "performers tend to be exhibitionistic and impulsive," attributes that are "largely a reflection of constitutional (neurological and biochemical) facts," and exhibit a strong need for social approval and achievement. In The Psychology of the Performing Arts he states some people are "predisposed to public exposure and performance because they have powerful emotional feelings in combination with an absence of the inhibitions" which restrain and restrict behavior in others. Wilson concludes that "it is personality that causes performers to gravitate towards the theatrical life" (134-135).

Vachel Lindsay obviously had the innate personality of a performer. From his first public readings in high school to his final days as an itinerant poet, Lindsay needed performances to fulfill an inner drive. Robert Frost did not have such an inner drive early in his life, but as he began performing after his success as an author, he grew to love the stage. In his final years Frost was a consummate performer, becoming a public figure who not only read poetry but also dabbled in politics, visiting foreign countries as a cultural emissary and being feted at the White House. For T. S. Eliot, no inner drive to perform publicly seems to

have been born in him, nor did he develop one later in life after he had become a well-known poet and critic.

The idea of the poet as performer is really two ideas: the person as a poet and the person as a performer. Some poets, like Vachel Lindsay, are drawn to both poetry and performance. By the end of Lindsay's life it was hard to separate the poet from the performer, although the need for performances seemed to dominate the need to write poetry during his final years. Other poets, like Robert Frost, begin and remain essentially poets, but grow to love performing as an outgrowth of being a poet. For Frost, performance was a way to make a living as a poet as well as make his poems known. Although it may be argued that in his final years the performances overshadowed his poems, the fact remains that Robert Frost was always a poet first and he knew it. If the public did not grasp this or misinterpreted and thought of him more as a public person who read poems, that was not his fault. And, as he entered his seventies and eighties and his most productive years as a poet were behind him, the lure of being a public figure, honored and revered, appealed to him; he should not be faulted for this.

T. S. Eliot began as a poet and remained a poet all of his life. Although he gave a number of lectures, particularly towards the end of his life, Eliot's public appearances never overshadowed his role as a poet and critic. For Eliot, the public appearances were something to

be endured, not enjoyed. He used them for a practical reason--to develop ideas and lectures which would become essays and books--rather than an outlet for an inner drive to perform. Yet, for Eliot, the poetry itself performs and the poet, by using elements of drama in his poetry, becomes a performer.

In The Performing Self writer Richard Poirier defines performing as "an energy in motion, an energy which is its own shape, and it seldom fits the explanatory efforts either of most readers or even of most writers" (xv). Poirier states that, for writers, "It's performance that matters--pacing, economies, juxtapositions, aggregations of tone, the whole conduct of the shaping presence" adding that "if this sounds rather more brutal than we imagine writers or artists to be, then that is because performance partakes of brutality" (86-87). To illustrate his point, Poirier quotes Robert Frost discussing performance and poetry in a letter: "What do I want to communicate but what a hell of a good time I had writing it? The whole thing is performance and prowess and feats of association...Scoring. You've got to score" and again when the poet states, "My whole anxiety is for myself as a performer. Am I any good? That's what I'd like to know and all I need to know" (90, 92). For Frost, the poem itself must perform on the page to be successful. Eliot and Lindsay felt this too, although the latter often seemed to view the poetry and the public performance as one.

When Robert Frost read his poems, or T. S. Eliot delivered his lectures, it was usually before an audience at a university. Lindsay, too, read at universities, but not as much as Frost and Eliot; his platform appearances appealed more as entertainment and Lindsay always felt like an outsider with academics. But for Frost and Eliot, it was the university, and primarily the English department at the university, which sponsored most of their platform appearances and provided the core audience for their performances as well as their poetry. This link between performing poets and English departments has continued in the twentieth century although there are some fundamental problems in this marriage.

Most poets teach at universities in order to support themselves. And they generally teach in English departments, which leads to some mixed feelings among their colleagues. In his chapter in To Keep Moving: Essays 1959-1969 on "Writers in the Universities," originally published in 1965, teacher/poet Donald Hall observes:

Though English departments must have their poet, they don't have to like him too. The writer finds considerable hostility, though most of it resides just below the surface of politeness. Some of the trouble is mere jealousy. The writer publishes without struggle and gets paid for it. The writer more often spends a Guggenheim year in Europe.

The writer saves up his lecture fees in order to take a term off to write. (88)

Hall elaborates on this theme further in his 1986 article in the American Scholar, where he offers an explanation about why so many "literary professionals [are] hostile to poetry readings." He states:

English departments harbor yet another source of hostility to the poetry reading, and to contemporary poets--economic envy. Lawyers from the law school, business professors from the business school, engineers, economists, mathematicians, physicists and chemists all do consulting; they take a day off from teaching, fly to Boston and make one thousand dollars. But teachers of Latin and of Renaissance painting fly nowhere, and in English departments, only the writers make money beyond their salaries. Hostility to readings derives partly from envy--envy mostly of money, but envy also of the supposed sexual favors of imagined devoted youth. Naturally, envy wears the costume of lofty, literary purity. (73)

An additional conflict with poetry in a university's English department emanates from the fact that contemporary poetry has lost its "intellectual respectability" (Shetley 431). Critic Vernon Shetley, writing a book review on

poetry anthologies in the Yale Review points out that in recent years the audience for poetry has grown "while teachers of literature have ceased to read it" (431). Shetley observes that "each English department has a member who 'does contemporary,' and whose business it is to 'keep up' with contemporary poetry," but when speaking to colleagues, "the language of literary theory is likely to be the only common tongue available" (429). These aren't the only problems and conflicts facing poets in America.

Poetry, like every other field in American life, has its politics, and the politics of poetry often leads a number of poets to be published because of who they know while others languish because of lack of profitable contacts. Judson Jerome, who edits series of annual Poet Markets, observes that "Literature is, among other things, a social network" and that since so few poetry editors of small presses are concerned with making money, doing what they do as a labor of love, "they allow themselves the alternative rewards of doing good turns for friends and developing mutually beneficial relationships" (Poet's Market '88, 9).

Robert Frost used a network of contacts with influential critics and reviewers to promote himself as a poet, resulting in his being included in a number of prominent anthologies, winning prestigious awards, and always having a number of invitations from universities to come to their campus and read. Eliot, too, benefitted from

a network of contacts, gained from being the editor of some influential literary journals as well as the poetry editor for a major publisher. This network, which began with Ezra Pound, Eliot's first promoter and allie, eventually included a number of prominent poets, critics, and reviewers. Vachel Lindsay remained an outsider to academe, although he had a network of contacts to secure bookings. However, Lindsay remained too self-centered, an extension of his emphasis on performances, to endear himself to influential critics and academics.

These politics in poetry are reflected in anthologies of poetry, whose editors are usually academics and who usually publish academic poets, virtually ignoring popular or performing poets. The editors justify their selections by saying they are concerned with the best in terms of literary quality and merit and not popularity. But the result is a definition of literary quality based on the editor's tastes and the politicking of poets/friends, critics and academe in general.

Judson Jerome, advising poets in Poet's Market, understands and appreciates the necessity for personal contacts in the poetry world. He concedes that "All of us in the literary world are scornful of 'career mongering,' yet all of us practice it to some degree" (Poet's Market '88, 8). He elaborates:

It's like any other kind of personal salesmanship:  
You have to do it subtly and skillfully for it to

work. Most literary people are resistant to naked egotism and self-aggrandizement, the 'hard-sell' of the street drummer. Most are responsive to sincere appreciation and sensitive understanding. You get 'in' by becoming capable of demonstrating your ability to appreciate and understand others--and if your work merits it, you may get some appreciation, understanding others--and if your work merits it, you may get some appreciation, understanding, and finally, recognition in return. (Poet's Market '88, 8)

But Donald Hall presents another side of this argument. He states that sometimes during a campus visit for a reading "I discover that I am invited not because I am so admired, alas, but because I am considered useful--to recommend my host for a Guggenheim, to write a review, to print poems in a magazine for which I edit, or to write a blurb for the jacket of a book" ("Poetry" 73). These politics spring from the financial gains from the poetry readings and Hall writes "Where there is money, there is corruption, even when the money is small. The poetry reading can become a commodity for trade" ("Poetry" 73). Hall then goes on to relate about getting a letter from a poet on another campus suggesting an exchange of readings. But Hall did not like the other's poems and felt uncomfortable with the situation, then "Suddenly I realized that he proposed an impropriety: that

we each use our influence to spend the taxpayer's money (or endowment income) for the other" ("Poetry" 73).

It seems ironic that so much emphasis today in the criticism of poetry is placed on the written word while the performances are basically ignored, especially since poetry comes from an oral tradition. Yet, though critics deal with the written word, poetry still must somehow keep touch with its oral tradition. Jacob Drachler and Virginia Terris point this out in their book, The Many Worlds of Poetry:

Not until the eighteenth century did books become a major vehicle for the communication of poetry. For ages before that, poetry had been spoken, or chanted as histories, legends, dramas; as battle cries, work songs, lullabies, and game rhymes; as exalted psalms and superstitious incantations. Then, in the era of the book and magazine, the art of poetry underwent a highly conscious literary development--not all of it good, of course. but at its best, poetry never lost its closeness to the breath, the voice, the ear--to the nature of singing speech. (241)

But critics are suspicious of the oral tradition, preferring the fixity and permanence of the written word. In his essay on "Homer," Albert B. Lord quotes J. Notopoulos, who notes:

One might even say that, with writing, a new idea of permanence is born; oral communication is shown for what it is--inaccurate and shifting. Writing has a godlike stability, and to anyone with an eye for the future, its significance is scarcely to be mistaken . . . If one seeks the motivation for the transference of oral verse to written form it must lie in the disseminated knowledge of writing itself, in its disintegration of the belief that unwritten songs never change, and in the promise of real fixity (Lord 75).

In today's technology, that "fixity" is not just the written word but sound and video recordings as well. A number of poets have done recordings of their work as well as interviews which have been taped. Public television and public radio have been especially good in recognizing poetry and trying to present it to the American public in a way that insures its integrity as well as attempting some aspects for mass appeal. There are also some companies which have been recording poetry and performers for a number of years.

Caedmon Records, begun in New Jersey and now based in New York, is a commercial record label dedicated to spoken-word recordings, especially by poets reading their own works. They sell these albums (available on both record and tape) to schools, libraries, bookstores, and record stores where classical albums are sold as well as a few sales to

regular record retail outlets such as those found in malls and shopping centers. Through the years, Caedmon Records has recorded and released records by a number of poets, including Dylan Thomas, Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Margaret Atwood, William Butler Yeats, Dame Edith Sitwell, Louis MacNeise, Robert Graves, Gertrude Stein, Archibald MacLeish, E.E.Cummings, Marianne Moore, William Empson, Stephen Spender, Conrad Aiken, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Richard Wilbur, Ted Hughes, Robert Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ogden Nash, Sylvia Plath, Muriel Rukeyser, Anne Sexton and Judith Viorst. Some of these poets were recorded during a live performance before an audience, but most were done with the poet reading in a studio or empty hall into a tape recorder (Caedmon Catalogue).

The Library of Congress also has a series of recordings done by poets and has preserved performances of poets reading their works on both audio and video tapes. This series was begun by Robert Penn Warren during his first tenure as Consultant in Poetry for the Library of Congress in 1944-1945. Warren used the Music Division's Recording Laboratory to record thirteen poets and three novelists. His successor, Louise Bogan (1945-1946) obtained money from the Bollingen Foundation to expand this program, producing five albums of contemporary American poetry read by the poets. During T. S. Eliot's visits to America, she persuaded him to read enough of his works to compile an

entire album (Goodrum 165). Since that time the Library has continued to record poets reading their works and has released a number of albums of these recordings.

The poet/performer is subject to a dichotomy in the world of poetry. The performances provide an income, an audience response to poetry, and a chance to take poetry to the public and achieve some popularity. On the other hand the poet/performer must contend with critics who tend to evaluate poetry solely by the written word. On the other hand, it is the literature that is immortal. The poet dies, the poem lives on; the performance vanishes, the book remains.

The concept of celebrity is another red flag for those in English departments and others in the literary world in regards to poets and poetry. There seems to be an underlying belief that whatever is popular is crass, whatever is commercially successful is aesthetically suspect. Therefore, the notion of a poet seeking any kind of celebrity-status causes many to shudder. Yet it is the reputations of people that often determines our interest in them and their work. As Glenn Wilson notes:

There is little doubt that the reputation of a playwright, composer or performer will significantly influence our appreciation of their work. Other things being equal, we perceive greater artistic merit in the person whom we believe has been previously acclaimed. (68)

Wilson also notes the other side of that view: "If somebody has been puffed up in advance beyond the limit of credibility, audiences and critics may react even more negatively than they would otherwise have done, denouncing the artist vituperatively as failing to justify his or her reputation" (68).

What emerges, then, is two wholly different--yet linked--roles for the poet. First he must write great, lasting poetry that will stand alone for a reader who will never see, hear or know anything about the poet because the poem must be able to survive after the poet is gone. The other function is to become a "celebrity" so that attention will be drawn to the poetry as well as the poet and resultant book sales, as well as demand for readings and performances, will increase.

In the world of poetry, a poet must achieve this type of recognition in order for attention to be drawn to his work. And this concept of "celebrity" is gained easiest by the poet who is a performer. For it is on a stage in front of an audience that the poetry can take on a life of its own and the poet can establish a persona, create name recognition, immediate respect, and celebrity status. If successful, he will be invited to read at other universities as well as other forums where poetry is presented and he will be paid for his performance. He will also be paid for his poetry because such appearances usually create some sales for the poet's books.

Beginning poets are encouraged by many established poets as well as poetry societies and organizations to perform their poetry as an important first step towards becoming a known poet. A flyer from the American Poetry Association admonishes that "Poetry reading is a performing art, and you will learn to become an entertainer as well as a poet." It gives practical advice to novice readers, such as interspersing serious poems with humorous ones, using comedy, not reading for too long, and letting the audience interpret a poem instead of explaining it to them ("Poet's Guide").

This flyer stresses the performance aspect of the poetry readings and acknowledges that if a poet reads in public, there must be an awareness of audience and performance beyond the commitment to poetry. The advice stresses that a good performance is not necessarily presenting a series of great poems, but balancing comedy with serious poems, using humor so as not lose an audience with the heavier material, and above all looking at the public reading as a separate endeavor from the writing of poetry. This emphasis on entertainment and acknowledgement of the restrictions and limitations a live audience presents a poet often disturbs those who emphasize the written word and feel poetry should be for quiet, solitary reading and not public performance. But the poets who perform know they must approach the public performance with the audience in mind or else they will not have a successful public reading.

The poetry, then, becomes a vehicle for the poet to become a celebrity or achieve recognition--a starting point for the promotion process. But, in the end, the poems must stand on their own; thus, the role of poetry is to be good and lasting but in such a pluralistic society full of sub-cultures, the only way for the poetry to be recognized is for the poet to be recognized.

There is a myth that great poetry will always be recognized, somehow, some way, some time. This is patently wrong--a lot of great poetry is lost because so much competes for our attention and because the poet or the poetry somehow never becomes exposed to us. We are a part of a celebrity-oriented culture and those in poetry cannot ignore this, even though they tend to disregard or be condescending toward this role for poets and poetry. That is not to say that poetry should only be a product--it must obviously be much more than that--but those in poetry must recognize there is a marketplace and if poetry is to survive it must acknowledge this market.

The counter-argument to this is that not all poetry fits in the marketplace and not all poets are comfortable in this milieu. Monroe Spears quotes poet Robert Lowell, who states, "I know too that the best poems are not necessarily poems that read aloud. Many of the greatest poems can only be read to one's self, for inspiration is no substitute for humor, shock, narrative, and a hypnotic voice, the four musts of oral performance" (238). True, but the acceptance

of some commercially successful poet/performers will tend to help these people--as John F. Kennedy once said, "a rising tide lifts all boats." Unfortunately, the opposite seems to be occurring--the poet/performer appears to be in a sort of disrepute and the future of poetry rests in the hands of commercially unsuccessful poets.

If poetry is to be commercially viable, have an impact on the culture, and make enough money for a poet to survive by being a poet, it will be because of the poet/performer. It is the poet who is a performer, who makes poetry significant beyond the walls of academe, who reaches an audience with an interest in poetry but without a lifetime passion (or occupation) with it. In many ways, the poet/performer is the layer between the poet and the public and, though many would argue that widespread public acceptance and consumption would denigrate poetry, the simple fact remains poetry needs a public. And, as Samuel Johnson once noted, "He who pleases many must have some species of merit" (Novak 9).

The poet as performer has played a vital role in the history of poetry with poets like Vachel Lindsay, Dylan Thomas, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and Allen Ginsberg performing their poetry from a stage. If poetry is to have a prominent place in American culture in the future, it will be because of poets who are also performers. The impact of the poet/performer on other poets, the audience's perception of the poet/performer, and the reason some non-performing

poets are critically acclaimed are all subjects for further study in this field.

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