Mary Heaton Vorse
Garrison, Dee

Published by Temple University Press

Garrison, Dee.
Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/59699

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2145884
In the 1890s, Mary Vorse knew that only determined resistance would alter the preordained course of her life. She was expected to enter a conventional existence as wife and mother. The one way to expand that limited future, she decided, was through devotion to work.

For a woman whose parents could afford to support her indefinitely, the natural choice of occupation was study in the arts. Yet that choice was circumscribed as well. Vorse had little musical ability. Polishing literary skills might keep her long years at home, still subject to parental demands. The best option would be to work as an artist; her half-brother was already studying painting abroad. Thus, in 1893, at age nineteen, she persuaded her parents to enroll her in a Parisian art school, the Academy Delecluse.

Art students, poets, and writers from all over the world came to the Parisian Latin Quarter in the nineties, lured by its relaxed morals, cheap lodging, and famous salons. The legendary Bohemia of the Paris of the 1840s had largely disappeared, but its memory still inspired an international army of able and defiant young. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, hundreds of women of polite heritage appeared in Paris to study art. But whereas young bourgeois male students could still find good opportunities for sin on the Left Bank in the 1890s, the women students, segregated in female art classes, were more hard put to engage in perilous adventure.¹

The few women artists who had achieved notice before the nineteenth century were almost without exception related to better-known male artists, for women were otherwise denied access to studios and formal art
training. By the mid-1800s the growth of the middle class had brought a corresponding explosion of demand for works of art. This stimulated the formation of public art schools and cleared room at the top for some women artists. Yet the famed École des Beaux-Arts, the national art school run by the Académie Royale, remained closed to women through most of the nineties. Still, women who could afford the price of tutelage were admitted to the private ateliers of the French masters as early as the 1870s.

At these private academies, men and women were not only physically separated, but also were accorded quite different treatment. The female students, generally composing about one third of the total student body, were charged fees two to three times higher than those paid by men. Women were presumed to be both inferior artists and fickle dilettantes, and thus a drain on the master's time. Whereas male students were given two criticisms a week, the women received a weekly visit from the master, who—running from seat to seat—attempted to comment on as many as 250 female-produced works within a space of two hours.

But the hardest struggle fought by aspiring women artists in the late nineteenth century—and the main reason for their delayed entry into art training—was the battle over the nude. Woman's presumed delicacy forbade her the sight of a nude model, especially a male. At a time when the most esteemed genre of art depended on the artist's ability to portray the human body accurately, life drawing classes were closed to women. Deprived of the opportunity to create works of "genius," women were shunted into the "minor" schools of portraiture, landscapes, still life, and animal scenes. In the 1870s, women first were allowed to sketch nude females, and then later, children. In transition to the dreaded, though fig-leaved male, women were for a time offered unclothed sheep and cows as models in the academies. When at last women were allowed full privileges as art students, commentators assured the public that females who gazed on the male body remained chaste and sane.²

Of course Ellen insisted on accompanying Mary to Paris. Despite all the protective mechanisms her mother devised for her, Mary felt a wicked release. Certainly attendance at a Parisian art school was confirmation of her deviance. She had never known such discipline or talked with so many women of different cultures. She relished her reckless devotion to work, a preoccupation that she knew set her apart from other women of her age. Again, she was allowed wider liberty than most young ladies of her background. Once a shocked family friend found her alone with a young man sipping tea in an outdoor Parisian café. Vorse's delighted memory of this scandalous breach of propriety reveals as much about the limited
nature of her revolt in Paris as it does about the expectations imposed
upon women of her class.3

While in art school, Mary enjoyed her first romance. She was courted
by Robert MacCameron, a twenty-seven-year-old midwesterner studying
art at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under the master Jean-Léon Gérôme.
MacCameron, who would later achieve some recognition as a portraitist
before his early death in 1912, was often on the verge of starvation during
his student days in Paris. When Mary returned briefly to Amherst in
1893, he wrote her lengthy, self-serving letters in which he discussed
his perception of her strengths and weaknesses, as well as his “low vile”
extploits with fisher-girls. He professed his overwhelming need for her, yet
also his inability to need anyone, including Mary.

MacCameron claimed to admire her independent spirit. He encour-
gaged her determination “not to become a housewife and nothing else,”
her “wish to speak to the world of intellect as well as passion.” When
he experienced her “powerful spirit, struggling within . . . its effeminate
prison,” he wrote her, “I feel like weeping with you that the gods have
not made you a man.” Nevertheless, her undue self-sufficiency threatened
his virility. “I rejoice in your weaknesses,” MacCameron reassured him-
self. “Each cry you utter of freedom is softened and subdued by a magical
charm. . . . You have one great sin that will always be with you . . . You
fight it, but though you live 200 years, never will a beard grow upon your
face.”

During their brief encounter, Vorse’s letters to MacCameron were
composed, her tone no doubt affected by his final admission that “strong
women are repulsive to me. . . . Let a woman be educated. . . . Let her
be talented above men . . . but never let her gain that power when she
will say, ‘We need no men to protect us.’ ” Unsatisfactory as MacCameron
was, his acceptance of her career hopes was encouraging. Hence Mary
continued the correspondence, addressing him as a wiser kindred spirit to
whom she could reveal her self-doubts and career ambitions. “My com-
mon sense tells me that all I wish is impossible,” she wrote him in 1896,
“but there is that which tells me I will succeed, that I cannot fail. I threw
away all my toys today, that my hands may be free to stretch toward the
moon.”4

The skirmish between Mary Vorse and her first serious suitor illus-
trates several recurrent themes in her relationships with men. She seemed
drawn to strong-minded, even dominating and insensitive masculinity,
proclaiming all the while her determination to remain free of any man’s
controls. Her tension sprang from the contradictory convictions that then
dominated much of her thought. Vorise’s partial allegiance to femininity bound her to an ideal that she was personally unable to realize. She wished to stand as a model of selfless womanhood; she simultaneously wanted to act as an autonomous individual. Vorise sought to actualize in her early fiction the ideal concept of the relationship of the sexes, but her stories written in the nineties are riddled with the negative strains of her real-life perceptions. Her first writings are a testimony to the female experience, to the modes of entrapment, betrayal, and exclusion devised for spirited, intellectual women in late-Victorian America.

Whisked home to Amherst by her parents after her short stint in Bohemia, Mary savored her home-town reputation as a New Woman. Her mutiny, still more imagined than actual, was directed against the meager concerns of New England gentility. “Amherst never changes,” she wrote upon her return. “The town was definitely split into cliques, along church lines. . . . It is an awful thing to live in a town of admirable women, and when they aren’t admirable, then they’re capable.” As her mother told the subdued neighbors, “Mary will probably marry young, as most of the women in our family do. If she doesn’t have fun now, she never will.” Mary hardly needed this reminder of impending domestic shackles. She shrank anew from her mother’s “petty cares of material existence” and held to “windy ideas of independence and career.”

The inevitable clash between Mary’s needs and Ellen’s demands could no longer be postponed. Mary had plans for further art study before finding employment. Within forty-eight hours of returning home, Mary wrote, “instead of a brave spirit starting out in life,” she had been made to feel “like a bad and preposterous little girl.” Her parents did not oppose her desire to work. They simply ignored it. Ellen let silence smother her daughter’s “visionary little scheme.”

Worst of all, gentle Hiram also failed Mary. Although she sensed a perfect understanding between herself and her father, she at first feared to approach him about her wish to work. She was stopped “by a certain look of fragility which had come over him in recent years.” Finally Hiram advised her not to defy Ellen, teaching Mary at last that his relationship to her mother “was not as to an equal, but as to the Queen of Persia.”

Mary imagined herself as having been pushed into “the army of the defeated,” girls like herself, “whose parents had been stronger than they, who had settled down to wait for marriage, forever desiring that they might have had their try in the world. Why should it be allowed so freely to
boys and not to girls?” she brooded. Ellen’s unwillingness to lose her to a
career, Mary knew, was more than equaled by her willingness to lose her
via the role of marriage. “One was natural and right, and the other was
unnatural and wrong, not only in my mother’s eyes, but in the eyes of the
entire community.”

Mary’s ultimate “desertion” of Ellen was a bitter scene. Twenty-two and
determined, Mary induced her parents to enroll her in a New York City art
school, but only after Mary threatened that she would go with or without
her mother’s blessing. Mary had joined another host, “a smaller force, the
army of women all over the country,” who are “out to hurt their mother,
who have to, in order to work,” the “strange army of all the girls who in
my mother’s time would have stayed at home and I wonder what necessity
sent us all out?” Mary wrote. “More and more and more of us coming all
the time, and more of us will come until the sum of us will change the
customs of the world, and as we change the world, the world is going to
change us.” Mary paid a price for her victory. Ellen’s attitude toward her
underwent a subtle, but permanent, change. It was as though Mary had
turned out to be such a different person from the daughter she had always
imagined that Ellen turned away, not in anger, but in dismissal. Ellen
never forgave Mary her elopement into adventure.

Sent to the city to room with a family friend, Mary Vorse was free for the
first time from direct parental supervision. “I am an escaped bird, flying
through the clear air of heaven,” she crooned. Her passion for exploration
drove her from the Parisian Latin Quarter to the nearest pale imitation of
Bohemia in America—the Art Students’ League of New York City.5

In the United States, the first group to call itself bohemian had gathered
about the leading personalities who met in the 1850s at Pfaff’s, a Ger-
man beer cellar on lower Broadway in New York. Here Walt Whitman
came to be admired by literary men who cherished their reputation as
erotic sinners, free of both middle-class morality and money madness.
They honored Edgar Allan Poe, their patron saint, and Henry Clapp, the
founder of the pioneer American Bohemia, who deliberately died of drink.
The real end of the Pfaffians came with the Civil War, just as the later
Bohemia of Greenwich Village would dissolve with World War I. Soon
there were only a few survivors of the once romantic assemblage.

Until the nineties there was no distinctive New York group of artistic
rebels visible enough to elicit envy and fear from the staid. It was then
that James Huneker inspired his circle of musicians, writers, painters, and
newspapermen to attend the midnight parties at Luchow’s Restaurant,
and to turn these festivities into something of a media event. Huneker
first sought release from conformity as a music student in Paris, before moving to New York in 1886, where he became the city’s leading music and drama critic. Van Wyck Brooks claimed Huneker taught the young what they were forbidden to learn in college. Henry L. Mencken, no piker himself at shocking the public, said of Huneker, “If a merciful Providence had not sent James Gibbons Huneker into the world, we Americans would still be shipping union suits to heathens, reading Emerson, sweating at Chautauquas and applauding the plays of Bronson Howard. In matters exotic and scandalous he was our chief of scouts, our spiritual adviser.” Huneker’s racy publication, *M’lle New York*, and its successor, the *Criterion*, openly questioned the intelligence of New York’s elite. Huneker introduced French literature and art to the deviant intelligentsia, and hobnobbed with anarchists and immigrants. Thus, by 1895, bohemianism, a city product, breathed again, not only in New York, but in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. Youthful American literati gleefully shook loose their Victorian bonds.

The rebellion was only mildly libertarian, in comparison with the Parisian model of the past or the 1912 Greenwich Village that was to follow. The 1890s revolt was naive and pretentious, the pose of young native thinkers who were, for the most part, as sexually prim and unquestioningly patriotic as the respectable society they claimed to oppose. Lacking a firm socialist or feminist component, the Bohemians of the McKinley era chiefly busied themselves with literary heresy, heavy drinking, and intellectual snobbery. Yet here can be found the beginnings of the cultural and political left of the early twentieth century. Influenced by East Side immigrants and serious social workers, groups like Huneker’s established the milieu in which New York artists and writers could gather encouragement for their future assault upon literary and political bastions.

In 1896 Mary Vorse gained entry into this exciting world of the art gentry when she began her studies at the Art Students’ League, located on West 57th Street near Eighth Avenue. The league was established in 1875 by young men with advanced art theories in protest against the conservative establishment, which ruled at the National Academy of Design. By 1894, five of the league’s eleven officers were women, and women composed the majority of its over eleven hundred pupils. In sex-segregated day and evening classes, men and women studied sketching, modeling, and painting. No less than eleven classes worked from the nude or draped model. Worried parents were told that the league’s classes were never “scenes of
riotous fun and horse-play, such as still occasionally break out at [the] . . . studios in Paris. . . . There is no instance recorded of anything happening at the League which would tend to disgust women students. Care is taken to have as models the most respectable persons in the profession, and the antecedents of the pupils are inquired into before they are accepted.”

William Dean Howells, then the chief of American literature, ridiculed the female students of the Art Students’ League in his 1893 novel, The Coast of Bohemia. Howell’s heroine, Charnian Maybough, compensates for her deficiencies as an artist by her decorous attempts to be radical. Her pretensions include heroic efforts to smoke cigarettes and to clutter her studio with appropriate abandon, although her mother’s maid is sent to clean the apartment each morning. Maybough lives her double life in innocent disorder.

Howells’s interest in the changing ideal of womanhood was characteristic of the period. In 1894, with the publication of Constance Cary Harrison’s novel The Bachelor Maid, the Bachelor Girl began to replace the New Woman as the target for Victorian concern. Whereas the New Woman had been granted grudging admiration by many authors, the Bachelor Girl—a woman who preferred the single life—had gone too far. A spate of articles and novels hysterically reported that the Bachelor Girl was a mere transitory phenomenon, for surely women could not live without love, and could not find love without marriage. Hardly anyone had ever met a New Woman, Vorse observed satirically in an unfinished manuscript written in the mid-nineties, although people sometimes heard that someone’s sister was a lawyer, or a reformer, or attended suffrage meetings. Conversely, “everyone in a large city knows a Bachelor Girl, although they do not speak of themselves that way.”

Godey’s Magazine reported the worrisome number of female bachelors near Washington Square in a series of articles in 1895 and 1896. Looking much like mannequins, women artists and writers were shown propped up in studios excessively furnished with pillows and stuffed monkeys. The Arena in 1898 hopefully predicted that “feminine Bohemianism” would be a failure. These pathetic females “weary of the endless struggle and the bitter disillusionment of [their] Bohemian existence,” and longing “for the sweet repose of home,” fell easy prey to unprincipled men, the Arena warned.

Vorse’s understanding of the Bachelor Girl was more practical. Although admitting the difficulty of a woman’s battle to earn a living, Vorse argued in 1897 that the Bachelor Girl found a life of uncertainty preferable to the controls of home, where she was apt to be treated as a little girl,
while her brothers were being defined as men. Self-support, Vorse wrote, was women’s only road toward “liberty and a chance to work out their own individuality. After four years of comparative freedom at college, where a girl has perhaps been at the head of her class, it is humiliating to go home and to be told by one’s mother, ‘Mary, go and put on your rubber at once.’” From her own experience Vorse learned that conventional mothers often bred their own antithesis. Ambitious young women like Vorse emigrated to the city to opt for the single life of freedom, and for the destruction of lineage ideals.

Through 1897 Vorse continued her studies at the league. She was under the tutelage of Frank Moore Colby, with whose family she roomed. Colby, whom her parents had known as a history professor at Amherst College, moved to New York University in 1895 as a professor of economics. Colby squired Vorse into the world of newspapermen and artists gathered within Huneker’s circle. Huneker’s talented second wife, Clio, was also a friend at the Art Students’ League. “I am part of the avant garde,” Vorse rejoiced. “I have overstepped the bounds!”

Just beneath the surface of her exultation, however, lay a strong disquiet. After four years of devotion to art, Vorse could not blind herself to the unexceptional quality of her work. Her surviving sketches show lifeless peasant girls and sharp-nosed women, as stolid as they are still. As the wayward daughter of wealthy parents, her limited artistic ability could be indulged both by academic teachers who needed her patronage and by observers who expected her fancy would be ended by a responsible marriage.

Coerced into accompanying her parents on a summer and fall tour of France and Switzerland in 1897, Mary mourned the difficulty of work amid the dislocation of travel. Her isolation during this period enabled her to confront her art with more honesty: “When I come into my room and see my work lying around,” she wrote in her diary, “my sense of my own futility overwhelms me. After so much work, that is all I can do.” By September she had decided to give up painting: “I don’t like to think even to myself how great a reevaluation this means. . . . I cry all night.” But a paying job still seemed the only escape from maternal domination. Mary reached the joyless decision to seek work as an illustrator when she returned home.

The displacement of energy from dreams of artistic success to the practical reality of finding a job with a living wage apparently increased her awareness of men, stoking her desire “for impossible and forbidden” things. Mary considered the “certain reckless irresponsibility that a woman
of bad life must feel." She concluded "that would be worth paying a large price for." Mary was twenty-three in 1897. Her parents and her friends were beginning to worry, as Colby frequently reminded her, that she might never marry and find her place.

Mary was ready to fall in love. In the early winter of 1898 she met Albert White Vorse, a thirty-two-year-old newspaperman and aspiring author. After his graduation from Harvard in 1889, Bert Vorse had worked with the Children's Aid Society in Boston, then briefly tried his hand at business with the Pennsylvania Railroad in Philadelphia. In 1892, as editor of the Philadelphia Press, he was chosen to go on the relief expedition to Greenland in search of the explorer Robert E. Peary. The expedition would prove to be handsome Bert's highest adventure, one he wrote and talked of for years. Even his later activity as a charter member in the Explorers' Club and Aero Club seemed anticlimatic after the arctic odyssey of his youth. Travel to an exotic land and the hospitable Eskimo culture, with its notorious matrimonial infidelities, was an enlightening experience for the son of a Massachusetts minister. In September 1897, he moved to New York to take a job as dramatic editor of the Illustrated American and to join Huneker's coterie.

Bert was much like Mary. He fancied himself a Bohemian, and in important ways did defy the rules of his conventional upbringing. Yet he was thoroughly middle class. His Harvard classmate Hutchins Hapgood remembered him as "a dark vivid man with a lively temperament, more sensuous than mental, with a passion for boats and the sea." Like Mary's father, Bert was a gregarious fellow, and unorthodox enough to win Mary's attention. Yet his easygoing charm sprang from a self-indulgence that together with his concept of manliness would eventually strain the emotional bond between them.13

Bert and Mary were married secretly after a five-week courtship. Bert recalled his proprietary delight at finding Mary—despite Parisian art training—still a virgin: "From our first walk on the pier . . . and then that afternoon at Riverside Park . . . afterwards the few days of doubt and then the famous Friday, then the ferry ride and the Hungarian restaurant and after that the little moment in the parlor and in the passageway where you hesitated and I pushed you . . . and then, and then, my surprise, for I was surprised the next morning when I saw certain things. An exquisite feeling of preciousness. . . . I am so proud that I may write you this without reserve, my darling. . . . It is my right as well as my privilege to say it."14

Afire sexually, she reveled in the bliss of her "first studio latch key."15 They lived together for a month in New York before she returned to Am-
herst in the spring, where she would pretend to be awaiting marriage in October. Mary had been rash enough to marry secretly, but she was unwilling to disturb her parents with the news of her hasty decision. Amherst ethics required a long engagement, partly to quiet any possible rumors of pregnancy, but, more important, to ensure that the union was based on adequate acquaintance. In those days, marriage was most often forever.

From Amherst, Mary wrote Bert of her thwarted desire to work. He consoled her: “Suppose you had worked in the teeth of your parents. You would have cared more for your work than for me. You would rather hold me highest, wouldn’t you dear? Please say so, for I am so happy in believing it.” Mary’s reply was not reassuring: “If I had worked in the teeth of my parents, as you say, they would respect me more and I would be independent now and would stay where I chose most of the summer. As for my caring more for work than for you, it would have made no difference only I would have been able to do more and you would be prouder of me.”

Bert Vorse was slight, mustached, and masterful. His fiction often betrayed his fondness for women with “soft, clinging hands” who were both submissive and daring, willing to serve as backdrop for his dashing maleness. Bert believed himself a lover, a maverick, and a writer. He would enjoy real success at the first two endeavors.

During the six months that Mary awaited him in Amherst, Bert attempted freelance writing, sold a few stories, and lived in romanticized poverty. Sleeping with her topaz necklace in his hand, he fought sexual frustration through hard-drinking nights with other newspapermen like Hutchins Hapgood and Lincoln Steffens from the Commercial Advertiser. Bert’s correspondence to her was loving and sensual. Mary scoffed at her mother’s opinion that sex twice a week was excessive. She wrote Bert that she was “horribly scared to think to what frightful excess we had gone, and all my fault.”

Mary told her parents of her engagement on the day the Spanish American War began. Bert volunteered for combat duty with Theodore Roosevelt. He “couldn’t do less,” he wrote her, “for how should you feel if someone should ask in years to come if your husband fought for his country, and I hadn’t? . . . It’s better if one is going to fight to be among the first.” Mary was terrified. She begged him not to go. A long series of letters followed in which he chided her for her lack of courage and she finally agreed: “The worst would be if my love had caused you not to be a man.” Bert must have enjoyed the exchange. He failed to inform her that Roosevelt had meanwhile refused Bert’s offer to join the Rough Riders.

16

Bert Vorse was slight, mustached, and masterful. His fiction often betrayed his fondness for women with “soft, clinging hands” who were both submissive and daring, willing to serve as backdrop for his dashing maleness. Bert believed himself a lover, a maverick, and a writer. He would enjoy real success at the first two endeavors.

During the six months that Mary awaited him in Amherst, Bert attempted freelance writing, sold a few stories, and lived in romanticized poverty. Sleeping with her topaz necklace in his hand, he fought sexual frustration through hard-drinking nights with other newspapermen like Hutchins Hapgood and Lincoln Steffens from the Commercial Advertiser. Bert’s correspondence to her was loving and sensual. Mary scoffed at her mother’s opinion that sex twice a week was excessive. She wrote Bert that she was “horribly scared to think to what frightful excess we had gone, and all my fault.”

Mary told her parents of her engagement on the day the Spanish American War began. Bert volunteered for combat duty with Theodore Roosevelt. He “couldn’t do less,” he wrote her, “for how should you feel if someone should ask in years to come if your husband fought for his country, and I hadn’t? . . . It’s better if one is going to fight to be among the first.” Mary was terrified. She begged him not to go. A long series of letters followed in which he chided her for her lack of courage and she finally agreed: “The worst would be if my love had caused you not to be a man.” Bert must have enjoyed the exchange. He failed to inform her that Roosevelt had meanwhile refused Bert’s offer to join the Rough Riders.

26 = 1874–1910
Awaiting formal entry into matrimony, Mary was, as usual, conflicted. She longed to be with Bert and wished she were prettier. She felt affronted at the thought of losing her own name, and then gloried in its loss, for “I belong to you,” she wrote him, “and so absolutely. . . . Our name is what is dear to me.” Yet she also intended to be free of wifely duties and woman’s role: “I don’t want to belong to . . . any institution or a church. I want the whole world to play in and be free to come and go, without a by-your-leave to anyone.”

Bert arrived in Amherst with a new hat, new clothes, and seven dollars. They were married by his father, in Mary’s home, on October 26, 1898.

One can be sure that Mary’s mother was modishly attired for her daughter’s wedding. She might have urged Mary—probably without success—to heed the Amherst newspaper’s advice to women “to wear gloves, with sweet oil inside, at night to whiten the hands.” The Amherst press that week advised ladies that false hips and bustles were offered in the dry goods store to “supply the curve of the hip which fashion now demands,” while an adjacent article by Senator H. W. Blair claimed that Frances Willard’s life proved that the “long-time serf relationship” of women to men was a thing of the past. There was also a gleeful report of an Indian uprising put down by U.S. troops in Minnesota—with dozens of the redskins slaughtered—alongside a complete account of the local Sunday School lesson. War-lust news was prominent, at the same time that striking miners in Illinois were denounced as murderous savages. For the fashionable, the newspaper noted that gowns of heavy black knotted silk with deep fringed edges were in vogue for evening wear. Grapes, cherries, and bows were preferred trimmings for millinery. “Cuban Red” was the most popular color for hats, perhaps to complement the bloodshed at San Juan Hill.

During her first marriage, Mary Vorse would come of age as an author, while painfully moving toward a more realistic assessment of matrimony and of her relationship to a world that set such formidable blocks in the path of intellectually aggressive women. But at this point in her life, Mrs. Mary Heaton Vorse was as inharmonious a brew of old and new as the society of the 1890s reflected in the Amherst press. She was at once a compliant wife, an adoring daughter, and a woman who dreamed of fame and unfettered achievement.