



CRITICISM

VOLUME

69

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 69

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Poetry Criticism, Vol. 69

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Thomson Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Thomson Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

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Each *PC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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John Ciardi

1916-1986

American poet, essayist, translator, and editor.

INTRODUCTION

A highly regarded poet and essayist, Ciardi is well known for his poetry for both adults and children, as well as his poetry textbooks. His poetry is often based on personal experience, narrated in the first person. His children's verse, enormously successful, is both humorous and irreverent.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ciardi was born June 24, 1916, in Boston, Massachusetts, to Carminantonio and Concetta DeBenedictus Ciardi, both immigrants from Italy. The fourth child and only son, Ciardi was three years old when his father, an insurance agent, was killed in an automobile accident. Two years later, the family moved to Medford, Massachusetts, where Ciardi attended public school; he graduated from Medford High School in 1933. He worked for a year, earning the money needed to further his education, and then enrolled in Bates College in Maine, studying pre-law. In 1935, midway through his sophomore year, he transferred to Tufts University, where he met the poet John Holmes; Ciardi graduated *magna cum laude* from Tufts in 1938. Holmes encouraged Ciardi to pursue graduate studies at the University of Michigan, where he won the Avery Hopwood Award in poetry and began writing the poems that would make up his first collection, *Homeward to America* (1940). He received an M.A. from Michigan in 1939 and a year later began teaching English at the University of Kansas City. Ciardi left his teaching post at the beginning of World War II to join the U.S. Army Air Corps, where he served as an aerial gunner on a B-29 based in Saipan. He was discharged in October of 1945 as a Technical Sergeant, having received the Air Medal and Oak Leaf Cluster, and returned briefly to his teaching position in Kansas City.

In July 1946, Ciardi married Myra Judith Hostetter; the couple had three children: Myra, born in 1952; John, born in 1953; and Benn, born in 1954. Shortly after his marriage, Ciardi left Kansas City to teach at Harvard and a year later he also accepted a position as lecturer on poetry at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.



Around the same time he took on several editorial positions, such as poetry editor of Twayne Publishers and editor of the highly-acclaimed anthology *Mid-Century American Poets* (1950). In 1953 Ciardi became Lecturer in Creative Writing at Rutgers University, was promoted to associate professor of English a year later, and to full professor two years after that. In 1956 Ciardi began a twenty-one year association with the *Saturday Review*, serving as poetry editor under editor Norman Cousins and putting an end to the magazine's practice of offering bland, mostly favorable reviews of virtually all poetry. He also hosted a weekly program on word origins on National Public Radio called *A Word in Your Ear*. In 1961, in order to devote more time to his writing, he resigned from teaching at Rutgers, although he continued to serve as Bread Loaf director until 1972.

Ciardi received numerous awards for his poetry in addition to the Hopwood Award, including the Oscar Bluumenthal Prize (1943), the Eunice Tietjens Memorial Prize (1944), the Levinson Prize (1946), the Harriet

Monroe Memorial Prize (1955), as well as the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children (1982). He also received honorary doctorates from a number of colleges and universities, among them Bates College, Kalamazoo College, Wayne State University, and Washington University. Ciardi died of a heart attack in Edison, New Jersey, on March 30, 1986.

MAJOR WORKS

Ciardi's first volume of verse, *Homeward to America*, consists of poems about the Great Depression and the impending war. His second volume, *Other Skies* (1947), deals with the opposition between innocence and hard-won experience and is divided into four sections representing the prelude to World War II, military training, combat experiences, and the aftermath of the war. This was followed by the 1949 volume *Live Another Day* (which included several poems that had appeared earlier in *The New Yorker*), *From Time to Time* (1951), and *As If: Poems New and Selected* (1955). Since Ciardi wrote from personal experience, the events of the war that informed his early work gave way in his later years to poems about his family—his wife, his mother, his children—and sometimes about the more mundane trappings of modern life in the suburbs, such as the power mower. The collections *I Marry You: A Sheaf of Love Poems* (1958) and *Person to Person* (1964) contain many of Ciardi's most popular poems on family life.

His children's poetry, popular with young readers but criticized by some educators as too violent and irreverent, is included in the collections *The Reason for the Pelican* (1959), *The Man Who Sang the Sillies* (1961), *Someone Could Win a Polar Bear* (1970), and *Fast and Slow: Poems for Advanced Children and Beginning Parents* (1975).

In addition to his poetry, Ciardi also produced, along with Miller Williams, a highly successful textbook on the interpretation of poetry called *How Does a Poem Mean?* (1960). In 1963 he collaborated with James M. Reid and Laurence Perrine on a second poetry textbook titled *Poetry: A Closer Look*. He also published a number of books that demonstrated his love of the English language, such as *A Browser's Dictionary and Native's Guide to the Unknown American Language* (1980) and *Good Words to You: An All-New Browser's Dictionary and Native's Guide to the Unknown American Language* (1987).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Ciardi's career as a poet spanned almost five decades and critics have remarked on the evolution of his work

over the years from the youthful poetry of the graduate student and the young soldier in his first two volumes to the more mature work of his later years. According to Edward Krickel, Ciardi's first book "is a mixture of originality and influences," but exhibits many of the elements that characterize his later work. John Frederick Nims notes that Ciardi rarely revised his early poems for inclusion in later collections; for example, the pieces from the award-winning *Homeward to America* never appeared in any subsequent books. "Whereas some poets have done extensive rewriting of early poems, Ciardi simply rejected—or at least refused to reprint—what he came to consider imperfect work," reports Nims.

Critics have often commented on the personal dimension of Ciardi's poetry, with scholarly opinion divided on the effectiveness of this style. Winfield Townley Scott praises the technique: "From the first Ciardi has had that basic instinct of the lyric poet, to personalize the extraneous. To let it come through himself." Miller Williams also views it positively, suggesting that "not every poet can appear as himself in his works and interest us in what he is saying about experiences that in a special autobiographical sense are still his," but he clearly considers Ciardi the exception. Krickel, in his analysis of *As If*, maintains that Ciardi "has discovered once and for all how to use the personal yet not to bore or disgust a reader who has his own problems with his own subjectivity." But praise for Ciardi's personal style is not unanimous. Edward M. Cifelli reports that Ciardi's good friend Dudley Fitts complained about "too much talk about yourself and family" in the manuscript of *Person to Person* that Ciardi had sent him for his comments. According to Cifelli, though Ciardi was "stunned" by his friend's criticism, he changed nothing and the collection was very well received by critics and poetry lovers alike.

Ciardi's tendency to appear in his own poems, often as a divided self, has been discussed by several critics. Nims maintains that Ciardi's "Tenzon" is "a dramatic example of the poet quarreling with himself." Krickel, commenting on the wide range of poems in *As If*, maintains that what unites the individual pieces is Ciardi himself, "not Ciardi as poet but Ciardi as subject for the poet, his thought, his feelings, his impressions." According to Scott, Ciardi is "the observer of himself and his surroundings," and Miller Williams refers to Ciardi's poetic stance as "at the center and yet seen from the center." In his poem "On a Photo of Sgt. Ciardi a Year Later," the poet is, according to Williams, "the man who in every sense is both subject and object."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Homeward to America 1940
Other Skies 1947
Live Another Day 1949
From Time to Time 1951
As If: Poems New and Selected 1955
I Marry You: A Sheaf of Love Poems 1958
The Reason for the Pelican (juvenile poetry) 1959
Thirty-Nine Poems 1959
Scrappy the Pup (juvenile poetry) 1960
I Met a Man (juvenile poetry) 1961
In the Stoneworks 1961
The Man Who Sang the Sillies (juvenile poetry) 1961
In Fact 1962
The Wish-Tree (juvenile poetry) 1962
You Read to Me, I'll Read to You (juvenile poetry) 1962
John J. Plenty and Fiddler Dan (juvenile poetry) 1963
Person to Person 1964
You Know Who (juvenile poetry) 1964
The King Who Saved Himself from Being Saved (juvenile poetry) 1965
An Alphabestiary: Twenty-Six Poems 1966
The Monster Den; or, Look What Happened at My House—and to It (juvenile poetry) 1966
This Strangest Everything 1966
A Genesis 1967
The Achievement of John Ciardi: A Comprehensive Selection of His Poems with a Critical Introduction 1969
Someone Could Win a Polar Bear (juvenile poetry) 1970
Lives of X 1971
The Little That Is All 1974
Fast and Slow: Poems for Advanced Children and Beginning Parents (juvenile poetry) 1975
For Instance 1979
Selected Poems 1984
The Birds of Pompeii 1985
Doodle Soup (juvenile poetry) 1985
Echoes: Poems Left Behind 1989
Poems of Love and Marriage 1989
 "Mummy Took Cooking Lessons" and Other Poems (juvenile poetry) 1990
Stations of the Air: Thirty-Three Poems 1993
The Collected Poems of John Ciardi 1997

Other Major Works

Mid-Century American Poets [editor] (poetry) 1950
How Does a Poem Mean? [editor] (textbook) 1960
Dialogue with an Audience (essays) 1963

Poetry: A Closer Look [with James M. Reid and Laurence Perrine] (textbook) 1963
Manner of Speaking (essays) 1972
**The Divine Comedy* [translator] (poetry) 1977
A Browser's Dictionary and Native's Guide to the Unknown American Language (dictionary) 1980
Good Words to You: An All-New Browser's Dictionary and Native's Guide to the Unknown American Language (dictionary) 1987
Ciardi Himself: Fifteen Essays in the Reading, Writing, and Teaching of Poetry (essays) 1989
The Selected Letters of John Ciardi (letters) 1991

*This work includes *The Inferno*, *The Purgatorio*, and *The Paradiso*.

CRITICISM

Winfield Townley Scott (essay date winter 1949)

SOURCE: Scott, Winfield Townley. "Three Books by John Ciardi." *University of Kansas City Review* 16, no. 2 (winter 1949): 119-25.

[In the following essay, Scott comments on Ciardi's *Live Another Day*, *Homeward to America*, and *Other Skies*.]

What I want to try here is an assemblage of notes on John Ciardi's poems. Not *A Note*. I am not a qualified quarterly critic. Nor do I think so young a poet as Ciardi is ready yet for systematizing, semantics, or the New Criticism, even if I were capable of the attempt.

Yet it is a good time to look him over. His third collection, *Live Another Day* (Twayne Publishers), rounds out a decade of publishing begun with his Hopwood Award book, *Homeward to America* (1940), and continued with *Other Skies* (1947). Furthermore this new book carries a "Foreword to the Reader of (Some) General Culture," contains his maturest poetry to date, and possibly reveals what kind of poet the established John Ciardi will be. But I shall leave till last his statement of principles. Totting up the poetry against the statement might promote a confusion of what Ciardi thinks about poetry with what I think about Ciardi's poetry.

For my reader of (some) general culture it is only fair to say that I am a friend of the author. This adds a complication. Under the circumstances it is not easy to

be fair all the way—to the reader or to the subject. Because one wants, however pathetically, to serve truth: on the supposition that to do so is fairest to everyone.

Well, anyway, even in friendship one is under no obligation to admire every kitten the cat brings forth; and, similarly, every poem the poet has written. Naturally not. Forgive me my friendships as I forgive yours and we can forget them from here on. What I am most anxious to avoid is something entirely different: the fear of being wrong. That is the fear of exposing one's ignorance and insensitivity and unintelligence before the bar of Ultimate Judgment. I have suffered it so often that I make an open resolution of condemning it here. Ciardi—you will find this in his poetry—does not believe in Absolutes. Neither do I. The point is to send Ciardi's readers to a re-reading, to send him new readers—for his work is worth this—and for me to resolve or antagonize your own findings.

II

The stresses of his new book, *Live Another Day*, indicate marked development of an intellectual poet. These accumulate in the three poems with which the book closes: the "Letter to Virginia Johnson," the "Letter to Dante," and (really another letter-poem) "A Guide to Poetry." They are not the best poems in the book. But that, with a young poet, is not necessarily the basic question. New poems which are not so good as other poems are often transitional poems. In them the poet is working toward something neither more nor less mysterious than himself. And since all of Ciardi's poetry is woven out of the belly of "personal record" these are a consistent development.

They exhibit qualities found throughout Ciardi's poetry. They bring to a head the tendency toward wit, an off-the-top-of-the-mind yet serious playing with concepts of contemporary experience. Although not thoroughly remarked, this is a dominant tendency in recent poetry; from Auden to Viereck. The verse is, I suppose, more in the tradition of the 18th century than any other. Byron (and who noted he is really an 18th century poet?) shares the tradition too, and such a pre-Auden era poet as Leonard Bacon has at times served it very ably in a generation much nearer our own.

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Let me extenuate, in terms of Ciardi's language. He is extraordinarily adept in employing the imagery of our times; all those things, whether of laboratory or airport or city street, which mark the ways in which our mid-twentieth century America looks, sounds and acts. And his vocabulary is contiguous. Again and again his language, as he uses it, seems a set of fine tools. He can employ it with concentration, or he can employ it casually. It is the latter glibness which, I should guess, he must most guard against.

"Vale" in the new book illustrates in its cataloguing of "Goodbyes" what I mean: a clever but slight and everywhere-anticipated assemblage of an academic year's ending. It is pleasantly observant while neither moving nor revelatory. It is amusing but not—by "a fine excess" or any other way—surprising. Yet an equally simple style a few pages later in "Prologue for a Play" strikes plain, memorable lines of Everyman's wishes:

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To be released from life and yet not die,
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Already I have suggested consistency of organic growth in John Ciardi's work. In *Homeward to America* certain dispositions of the later books are readily discoverable; and I should like to tick off some of them, for they are interesting.

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It begins Ciardi's knack of the almost epigrammatic, summary conclusion:

. . . We have invented nothing:
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There is the attraction of the contemporary scene, names and places and gadgetry, and political atmospherics (depression and pre-war). By page 16 the plane appears and with it a line made prophetic by Ciardi's later war experience which fills his second book—

I wait impatiently my turn across these clouds.

The memoir-poem, which he is fascinated by, appears in **"Letter for Those Who Grew Up Together."** A few pages farther on, the tragedy of war is first sounded, with reference to the civil war in Spain. Immediately following, political injustice is slated in a Yeatsian piece more relevant now than when it was new—**"To One 'Investigated' By the Last Senate Committee, or the Next."**

All these reflect a specific era recorded by a sensitized young man. From the first Ciardi has had that basic instinct of the lyric poet, to personalize the extraneous. To let it come through himself. (The more or less objectifying propagandists in full cry during the '30's went down dated as poets because they had not this instinct.) These first are the poems of a youth of "foreign extraction"; poor; lonely and lost enough to suit the American literary tradition; charging toward his own identity, as toward his real birthright, through a greed for books and learning.

The inklings of hortatory looseness are present—

Yes, Barcelona is three thousand miles
From where I write and I have not been there
To count the swollen dead . . .

and so on. (We have all erred thus.) Some of the poems are slight. Many are made of mood-music. The forms are generally irregular—but the ear is generally good.

There is some anti-romance going on. At least, the mind tends to have the last word on *l'amour*. Baleful prophecy thunders over both love and its season in **"Spring Song."** And if planes appear as "silver hawks" it is now, in retrospect, only to remind us that such imagery is to be turned upside down in the maturer poems of *Other Skies* where

Jam-faced yet the urchin cherubs gun
The throttle of the clouds . . .

Other Skies is Ciardi's testament of war: going off to it, living through it, coming home from it. I have swiped the phrase "personal record" not from Conrad but from the jacket of that second book: it is perfectly accurate. It applies, as I have said, to all his poetry: through himself. War experience was of course bound to be a tremendous chapter. And what does he say?

Our innocence shall haunt our murderous end
Longer than statues or the tabled walls

Alphabetized to death. Shall we pretend
Destruction moves us or that death appalls?
Are we the proud avengers time returned?
—We dreamed by all the windows while time burned.

I too have some questions, the central one of which is whether first rate poetry can emerge from the attitude reflected in Ciardi's questions?

Without question, *Other Skies* is a part of the important poetic record of the war. Only Karl Shapiro's and Randall Jarrell's verse ranks with it. The work of each is already selecting itself out, so to speak; but moments in the best of it stay in the mind. Parenthetically I would say that of the three, Ciardi's verse has so far most richly readjusted to civilian life. But as to the war poetry, if it is not going to be "in the pity" will there be much poetry at all? For example, Ciardi's **"Ritual for Singing Bat,"** which plays with the idea of the boy's actual death; or the **"Elegy Just In Case,"** which toys with the idea of Ciardi's own possible death.

Of such poems one may ask whether the unsentimental approach is a suspiciously inverted sentimentality? Certainly the wit is ineffective; one test. But is it Ciardi's fault or the fault of war? For whom is a war poet writing? For the civilian who is out of it and will not understand anyway? For others in combat?—but is there need for that? and if there is, can any other way than bravado-comment be allowed? For is not emotion useless or dangerous, or an act of supererogation on the poet's part? And so there is repression? and something not quite real—not quite poetry—for what we called "real life," meaning in our lame joking: outside of war?

Where feeling was captured it still vibrates:

The boys are flowers: they strew themselves in seed
And spring again, anonymous and pure,
For the same tears to follow the same deed
Of bending in the wind, and soon and sure
Fold, fall, and fade from what they could not cure.

New words for an old idea (what else is poetry?), and the same again in the reminiscent poem called **"First Summer After a War."** And callousness shifts to that legitimate method, understatement, in the magnificent mingling of joy and grief beginning

On the tallest day in time the dead came back,

the poem called **"V-J Day."**

The suppression of emotionalism in poetry of "personal record" genre is a threat to its potency. Where Ciardi yields to it, in war poems and others, I suspect he is also exploring the methods of his art. Through a series of "Birthday" poems, but in many more not obviously connected, he has pursued the development of his own

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It begins Ciardi's knack of the almost epigrammatic, summary conclusion:

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opening up that large question of poet and audience to which there is no perfect answer. There is a lot of sickness in modern poetry. There is a lot of sickness in the audience too: mal-education, laziness, indifference, also a resistance to new art common to all generations.

Indeed it is a very large question and a continual one. Yet it may be that we are on the verge of a new vitality in poetry; at least of a different trend. By mid-century we should develop something else—better or worse—than the dominant poetry of the first fifty years. There are poetry wars raging, lately, as they have not in a long while. That is healthy. Stupid may ride with bright on all sides. Yesterday's reactionary may be tomorrow's new voice (though I will devote prayer against some possibilities). A good row may not write poems but it clears the air—after awhile; it creates excitement, it increases this audience Ciardi is talking about. And if in fact a brightly contemporary, more direct, yet intelligent and educated kind of verse obtains in the next few years, Ciardi's central place amidst it is obvious. Meanwhile he is worth attention, no matter what else happens.

Edward J. Gallagher (essay date December 1968)

SOURCE: Gallagher, Edward J. "Ciardi's 'Tenzzone.'" *Explicator* 27, no. 4 (December 1968): Item 28.

[In the following essay, Gallagher offers a brief analysis of Ciardi's poem "Tenzzone."]

"Tenzzone"

Soul to Body

That affable, vital, inspired even, and well-paid
persuader of sensibility with the witty asides
but, at core, lucent and unswayed—
a gem of serenest ray—besides
being the well-known poet, critic, editor, and
middle-high 5
aesthete of the circuit is, alas, I.

Some weep for him: a waster of talent. Some
snicker at the thought of talent in him. He leaves
in a Cadillac, has his home away from home
where the dolls are, and likes it. What weaves 10
vine leaves in the hair weaves no laurel for the
head.
The greedy pig, he might as well be dead—

to art at least—for wanting it all and more—
cash, bourbon, his whim away from whom.
He's a belly, a wallet, a suit, a no-score 15
of the soul. Sure, he looks like a boom
coming, but whatever he comes to, sits to, tries
to sit still to and say, is a bust. It's booby prize

time at the last dance whenever he
lets a silence into himself. It grinds 20
against the jitter in him and dies. Poetry

is what he gabs at, then dabbles in when he finds
hobby time for it between serious pitches
for cash, free-loading, and the more expensive
bitches.

I give him up, say I. (And so say I.) 25

There are no tears in him. If he does feel,
he's busier at Chateaubriand than at asking why.
He lives the way he lives as if it were real.
A con man. A half truth. A swindler in the clear.
Look at him guzzle. He actually likes it here! 30

Body to Soul

That grave, secretive, aspirant even, and bang-kneed
eternalist of boneyards with the swallowed
tongue
but, at dream source, flaming and fire-freed—
a monk of dark-celled rays—along
with being heretic, ignorant, Jesuit, and who- 35
knows-what skeleton, is, alas, not wholly you.

I've watched you: a scratcher of scabs that are not
there. An ectoplasmic jitter. Who was it spent
those twenty years and more in the polyglot
of nightmares talking to Pa? If I went 40
over your head to God, it was over your head.
Whose butt grew stiff in the chair the nights you
read

whose eyes blind and wrote whose nerves to a dither?
And who got up in the cold to revise you by
light?
You're a glowworm. A spook. A half-strung zither 45
with a warped sounding box: you pluck all right
but if what whines out is music, an alley cat
in moon-heat on a trashcan is Kirsten Flagstad.

Yes, I like it here. Make it twenty times worse
and I'd still do it over again, even with you 50
like a monkey on my back. You dried-out wet-nurse,
think you're the poet, do you? You're wind that
blew
on ashes that wouldn't catch. You were gone
the instant I learned the poem is belly and bone.

I gave you up. Like a burp. For a better weather 55
inside my guts. And, yes, I want it all—
grab, gaggle, and rut—as sure as death's no breather.
Though you wouldn't know, being dead as
yesterday's squall
where the sea's a diamond-spilling toss in the bright
brace
of today's air, to glitter me time and place. 60

—JOHN CIARDI

It seems to me that the parenthetical portion of line 25 of John Ciardi's "Tenzzone" is meant to represent an impulsive and passionate interruption by the Body of the Soul's discourse. "Tenzzone," of course, is a modern descendant of medieval debate literature, but it is rendered unique by its compelling tension, the vigorous antagonism of the speakers, the intense rhetoric, and the prevalent *ad hominem* type of argument. As the Soul's

thought out of his own experience. As an artist he has properly sought to objectify the expression and thus raise its significance. So far, so good. He accomplishes his objective an enviable number of times. Only when typicality drains the color of his own voice do the sleek tools of his language take over; simplicity murmurs into stylelessness, and poems slide together slippery and journalistic. His difficult course runs between personal-ity and impersonality.

But let us not ask, Where's Ciardi? He keeps emerging, unmistakably the observer of himself and his surroundings—in complete control, and not vaguely shifting amidst the furniture. The wit flashes in **“Ode for School Convocation”**—

. . . Surely a glance can tell
The President's reticent rationed dodging,
The paraded faculty's slight foolishness,
The parents' bluff at understanding, the boys' real
bewilderment.

How exact, how good, that is! More mordantly the wit plays, like a Sinclair Lewis turned poet, in the **“Ode for the Burial of a Citizen,”** or stabs a line of horror in the quick remark—memories of funeral wreaths on one's boyhood street—that “The doors had been waiting always for their blooms.” He is at his best, in short, when he performs in just the way his sardonic final line of *Other Skies* puts it:

The camera photographs the camera man.

Succinct finality again, one of many in *Other Skies*. The forms have tightened to a favored iambic pentameter and a penchant for a five-line or six-line stanza, often rhymed. But rhymed or unrhymed, a stanza which usually avoids ruminant monotony by tight-packed, nervous statement. The style achieves authority in the massively-dense poem **“To Judith Asleep”** which opens *Live Another Day*.

This is a very beautiful poem, a superb example of Ciardi's work at highly concentrated efficiency. Though he remarks in his new book that metaphysics “must end in boredom or neurosis,” elsewhere he resolves “to keep the symbol but to shoot the bird;” and in **“To Judith Asleep”** there is passionate blending of the real and the idea. Only its fourth stanza trembles a little in enumerative detail, yet it contains the loveliest image in a poem assertive with valid rhetoric.

Why is the rhetoric valid? Because it is tense with sexuality. The authentic emotions of the man contemplating the naked, sleeping body of his wife against the frightening concept of death, is unquestionable in terms of experienced love and unquestionable as a specific for the generality of art. The image which fires that fourth stanza also illustrates the rich tone of the whole poem—

. . . and your white shell
Spiraled in moonlight on the bed's white beach;
Thinking, I might press you to my ear
And all your coils fall out in sounds of surf . . .

Further on, in **“Three Eggs Up,”** the emotionless play nullifies a mingling of the commonplace and metaphysics, but almost immediately afterwards he achieves complete success with such mingling in **“Metropolitan Ice Co.”** Here is the childhood-memoir poem—of a wall calendar and its pictures; here the mind plays with facets of that memory; expert use of exact, humble detail is filed into an incision of a life, and the whole is rounded with characteristic summary—

To be ourselves is our own aftermath.

I should also mention, in this new book, such typical inter-weavings, knittings-together, as **“Sunday Afternoon Near the Naval Air Base.”** Here we link back to the war poems of *Other Skies* and even come full circle to a phrase or two in *Homeward to America*; for now civilian-Ciardi watches the new aviator as

. . . awed as children are
At his pure motion, but I cannot guess
What tokens will be on his battle dress
When all his Sunday practice goes to war.

This, and such pregnant phrasing as the “huge forgetting” of the Easter Island stone faces, reminds us that here is the poet of the first book; sadder, wiser, more intellectual and more substantial. It has been a real, indigenous growing, and it would seem to avoid definition as yet.

III

Still, in his “Foreword to the Reader of (Some) General Culture,” Ciardi lines-out the kind of poetry he admires and the kind of poet he wants to be. This reader—this desired reader—“knows some of the poetry of the past and values it, and would like to know more about the poetry of his own times, but has found over and over that the books he picks up to read simply baffle him.” Ciardi wants to communicate to such a reader; he wants to leap over specialization.

“One cannot,” he goes on, “bring the poetry to the audience: the audience must be brought to the poetry. The poet must write to his own standard of excellence. If this necessarily implies puzzling his audience at times, there is no help for it. But neither must one make a virtue of this loss. And by loss I mean any failure of communication. . . . Stravinski does not ask me to be Stokowski before permitting me to find pleasure in his compositions. I would not ask any of my readers to be Kenneth Burke.”

I shall not attempt a paraphrase of Ciardi's case; it is better read, whole, in his book. And it must be obvious, from this brief touching upon it, that Ciardi is again