

Notes on An Interview with John Ciardi

by Anne Wolfe

While on the staff of Rider University's literary magazine in the Fall of 1972, I scored a live interview with poet John Ciardi. It wasn't difficult to make contact with him. After all, he lived in my home town of Metuchen, New Jersey, I grew up with his children, and we attended the same church. After the interview, I scribbled some notes to myself about my impressions of him and put them away in a place so safe, so secret, they disappeared. Now here they are, over thirty years later, having surfaced in the chaos of a recent family move.

I remember the brief hysteria I felt during two terse phone conversations I had with Mr. Ciardi. Twice we had made appointments for interviews, and twice he had to cancel due to last minute bookings elsewhere. Time was drawing nigh for his winter relocation to Florida, so I had given up on him with some sense of relief, especially after hearing he charged \$1,000 for one-hour speaking engagements (when it was alleged he often checked his watch). When Mr. Ciardi called *me* to arrange a third appointment, I was honored and scared (*and also delusional*). The interview was a coup. I was sure it would boost the circulation of the college literary magazine, get the attention of the English professors who had never noticed my shrinking-violet self in their classes, and further my own cause in the small-time campus literary world. And, of course, if Mr. Ciardi was impressed with his courtesy copy of our magazine, he just might just dash off a thank-you note praising my poems.

(You can see where this is going.)

His parting words on the phone to me were, “It will be a pleasure, Miss Herron,” and I rushed to the town library to devour his poems, anthologies, and texts in preparation for our meeting.

From his books I was able to discern his basic poetic “do’s and don’t’s” as well as a kind of philosophy on teaching poetry in the classroom. His love poems to his wife, Judith, plus various feelings about his participation in World War II gave me much food for some diversity in questions that were, in my opinion, poignant and relevant to capturing the total man.

I arrived at his home in Metuchen for the interview prepared to meet the aging, sentimental idealist whose eloquence would bring tears to my eyes, I was in for quite a reversal. In fact, the only thing I had correctly anticipated was his eloquence.

As I entered his spacious living room, I was immediately hushed by a museum-like reverence for the multitude of art works displayed throughout the room. Especially impressive was a huge stone raven perched on the stairs, conjuring the ominous “Nevermore” of Poe’s narrative poem. When I remarked about it he corrected me, saying it was merely a statue of his wife without her red hair. With that quip, my confidence drained. This guy was no softie.

I quickly sat down on a long velvet sofa facing the door and waited for him to pull up a chair nearby while I prepared the tape recorder for whatever was to happen next. But nothing happened. Without saying a word, Mr. Ciardi chose to sit in a leather chair far across the room near the fireplace, where he could neither be heard nor seen easily. He and I were then facing the same wall some distance apart. Assuming that his poetic

sensitivity had not yet kicked in at that point, I slid to the edge of the couch and placed the mike between us on the floor.

I questioned, he answered. And suddenly, he became the poet-scholar I expected, with beautiful analogies, allusions, and metaphors spilling gracefully onto the tape. My questions appeared one-dimensional when flattened by his insights and experiences. I was awed and disillusioned completely.

The reason for my disillusionments were many. As he rolled out lengthy sentences full of profound insights on the poet's craft, I heard undertones of resentment and bitterness on the subject of today's poetry. (*Remember, this is 1972.*) Having been an elitist poet of the post-war days, he was full of criticism of the new simplistic poetic trends, especially the rise of confessional poetry, which he seemed to consider an embarrassment to the honor of his craft. He also mentioned that he was no longer interested in aiding young poets because they were invariably lazy about writing seriously. They looked instead for easy ways to become published without developing their talent. (*Um, well, okay, so this meant don't hit him up for an endorsement of my as-yet-unwritten Pulitzer-prize winning book of poems.*)

Poetry to him is an employer who demands much before he pays anything. He mentioned that his entire living had been supported by his writing talents, a fantastic achievement for any poet. But he arrived only by spending hours, days, months buried in the stacks of a library, where, he insisted, one must live to collect the best allusions, subjects, and useful trivia for great poems.

As the interview continued I remembered his lectures at Metuchen High School when I was a student there, how he often read his poems for school assembly programs. I

also recalled his daughter, Myra, and his sons, Benjie and John, Jr. Myra was musically talented. We sang in the church choir and played in the school orchestra together. She was destined for a more liberal, self-expressive world beyond high school, while Benjie and John were trouble-makers. In fact, John was caught wandering in a neighborhood near mine, scaring residents by appearing at their windows with a candle held to his face, like some sort of demonic peeping tom.

Somehow, I could not reconcile the children with the man who was so disciplined and so harsh on today's young poets.

After the interview, I thanked him profusely and vowed *not* to send him any copies of our second-rate literary magazine nor to pester him with any of my poems. I exited through his back door, stopping to admire a half-finished abstract on his garage door, which he said he commissioned from one of Myra's girlfriends. And in that moment he became John Ciardi the human being, Myra's father, a supporter of student artists (people like me) yearning to become something more.

Ultimately, his voice on tape turned out barely audible due to the poor logistics of the mike and our distant seating arrangement. I labored long, hard hours over the transcription to catch the meat of his wisdom, and considered his thought that poetry was indeed a tough employer.

Back in my car after the interview, I felt free again with my own thoughts, and one of them was this. John Ciardi, the public man and the poet, was extremely complicated. But then, I guess, so were Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and I could go on....