

MRS. LINDBERGH, MR. CIARDI, AND THE TEETH AND CLAWS OF THE CIVILIZED WORLD

For someone like myself, who likes to consider himself a hearty magazine reader, 1957 promised to be a lousy year right from the start. You remember that near the end of last year, without warning, *Collier's* and *The Woman's Home Companion* locked their doors and shut down their presses. Then in the early hours of '57 both *The New Republic* and *The Army, Navy, Air Force Journal* were suddenly dropped from the newsstands. As though this weren't enough, on January 12th an unexpected blast set *The Saturday Review* quivering; for a moment one could hear timbers separating, bookspines cracking down the middle, the twin pictures of William Dean Howells and Sarah Orne Jewett crashing from the wall. Like towered Ilium, *The Saturday Review* seemed toppling from one man's treachery: the man, Poetry Editor John Ciardi; the treachery, his review of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's "The Unicorn and Other Poems." Fortunately Ilium still stands, but I hesitate to imagine what might have been if Norman Cousins, the congenial SR Editor, had not sped home from his European travels to act as a kind of literary Dag Hammarskjold; perhaps SR readers, armed (as the righteous generally are armed) to the teeth, might not only have blitzed SR headquarters with correspondence, but plunged into the wreckage to haul off Ciardi's bloody body, with the result that Rutgers University would have found itself minus a poet-in-resi-

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dence, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference minus a chairman, Dante minus a translator, and Mrs. Ciardi minus a husband.

Actually I exaggerate, for as it turns out John Ciardi, like his boss Norman Cousins, was in Europe during January; in Rome, in fact, and therefore safe from all but the Italian subscribers to *The Saturday Review*. Even if worse had come to worse there are probably plenty of good hiding places in Rome.

I must admit that if on the morning of January 12th I had been John Ciardi I would not have expected worse to come to worse, nor would I have thought to scurry about in search of a catacomb for myself. Probably I would have been strolling in the clean, green Roman sunshine, my mind unstained with visions of blood, especially my own. True, my review of "The Unicorn" was to appear today; true, I had called the book "offensively bad" and the poetry "inept, jingling, slovenly, illiterate"; but would this stir SR readers to revolt? After all, even *The Woman's Home Companion* occasionally got its ire up about bum kitchen gadgets and non-absorbent diapers, and I don't think (me now, not Ciardi) that I'm reasoning unjustly to say that what diapers were to the defunct *Companion*, books are to *The Saturday Review*. No, I could not (Ciardi again) imagine that while I crossed the Piazza del Popolo, hundreds of SR readers were jamming letters into mailboxes all over America damning me for what they felt to be an attack not upon "The Unicorn and Other Poems" but upon Mrs. Anne Morrow Lindbergh herself.

To have been blind to this consequence was, I see now, a failure of the moral imagination. Since I rather value my moral imagination, I spent several evenings this spring carefully re-reading the more than forty anti-Ciardi epistles that appeared in the SR letters column. As a result I think that now I understand what it was in Ciardi's review that touched off (according to Norman Cousins) "the biggest show of reader protest in the thirty-three year history of *The Saturday Review*."

First of all, what infuriated a good many SR readers is that the thing was so damned unchivalrous; the sharpest lance I find

hurled at Ciardi's armorless head is simply that he is not a gentleman. The sharpest lance, but by no means the only one: for every reader who would put Ciardi outside of Chivalry, there are two more who would banish him from the realm of Common Decency. According to this group he has every qualification of a cad; he is nasty, vituperative, and egotistic—the last, writes one correspondent, because he uses “I” thirty-six times in his review. I have done some counting myself and discover that the writer of this twenty-six word communiqué cagily avoids falling into the trap of using the first person singular even once. There is still a third group of anti-Ciardians who do not attack the Poetry Editor from beneath the banners of Chivalry and Common Decency, but take what I prefer to call a Biographical-Psychoanalytic Approach: he is, they surmise, young, bitter, inexperienced, and jealous. I hasten to add—that is, one hastens to add—that as yet I have discovered no significant geographic trends: the Common Decency letters, say, from South Dakota, the Chivalry letters from Virginia, etc. Rather the cries of “cad,” “egotist,” “squirt,” are heard from all over the land, from Nashville, Tennessee to Buffalo, New York; from Chula Vista, California to Evansville, Wisconsin. In the midst of this nation-wide protest it was rather bracing to find that it was the letter from the late Senator McCarthy's home state that, in a sweeping mood of reconciliation, called for SR to present their readers now with “an unbiased review of [Mrs. Lindbergh's] book. . . .” As the Wisconsin correspondent went on to say, “May we suggest one of the critics who felt her volume was one of the year's best poetry works?” It seems to me that this is the kind of open-mindedness Wisconsin needs.

Had all the letter-writers been so just I might not feel called upon to say what I must say now; however, in all fairness to Mr. Ciardi I submit that there are two letters SR should not have printed, one from Orange, New Jersey, the other from Cambridge, Massachusetts. On the surface the Orange, New Jersey letter appears to be no more hostile an assault than the one from

Chula Vista, California. However to get to the truth one need only practice a little elementary logic. First: a quick glance at an Esso roadmap shows that though there is a great deal of space between Orange, New Jersey and Chula Vista, there is only a thumb's distance between Orange and New Brunswick, New Jersey. Next: as we know, John Ciardi is not only Poetry Editor of SR but a member of the English faculty of Rutgers University. Last: as you may or may not know, Rutgers is located in New Brunswick; Orange, you remember, is only a commuter's distance away. Need I say anymore? Except that a letter to a *national* magazine seems a cranky, vile way for a student to retaliate for a failing grade!

As for the Cambridge, Massachusetts, letter, which uses the old irresponsible dodge of a pseudonym, all I can say—that is, all one may say, is that if there is someone at Harvard who has something to say let him say it openly! To hide behind the obviously phony Scandinavian monicker “Name Withheld” seems to me unworthy of a University student or a University teacher—especially one who might be a bit, shall we say, jealous of Ciardi's editorial position?

I single out these letters because they seem to me guilty of Ciardi's own crime: hitting below the belt. I trust that in tomorrow's mail the *Chicago Review* will not discover an avalanche of letters damning *me* for picking on New Jersey and Massachusetts. I harbour no personal grievance against either state; in fact, though I now live in Chicago, I was born and raised in Newark, New Jersey, and except for a bad episode in the third grade, have only the fondest memories of the place. As for Massachusetts, many great men have come from there and I would be a damn fool not to admit it.

One last, rather personal, point: to those letter-writers, particularly the women, who hold that the attack on Mrs. Lindbergh was ungentlemanly, I would like to proffer my sympathy: surely a woman in public life should not be subjected to the kinds of mud-slinging and belly-punching that characterize the

public life of men. In my lifetime, for instance, I have read the poetry of Sappho, Emily Dickinson, and Marianne Moore; I have heard speeches delivered by Clare Booth Luce and Mrs. Roosevelt; I have listened to arias sung by Madame Callas, and when anyone of them has made even a big-big error I've just let it go and haven't even raised a finger. I mean I think it's so wonderful that they can even get out of the house, let alone *do* all those things.

If to iron out is to forgive, then perhaps my few remarks will secure in the hearts of a few SR readers absolution for both Mr. Ciardi and *The Saturday Review*; perhaps some of those subscriptions cancelled in the first furious moments of January will now be resumed. I hope so. As I mentioned earlier, I myself am quite a magazine reader, and the prospect of another periodical even weakening is to me rather upsetting. As it is, the sudden demise of four or five of the old standbys has led me to fill the idle hours re-reading past issues of some of our current publications. In fact only last night I happened to be leafing through the February 23, 1929 *New Yorker* that was lying on the coffee table and, coincidentally enough, came across a brief note about the same Mrs. Lindbergh Ciardi reviewed in January. In the winter of 1929 she was Anne Spencer Morrow, Wellesley junior and fiancéé of Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh, and the few words *The New Yorker* had to say were actually a warning to any stray fellow who might be interested in winning Miss Morrow's heart: he had better keep his mouth shut, said *The New Yorker*; one syllable of affection to the future Mrs. Lindbergh and they predicted "the whole civilized world would be on him tooth and claw: 'You leave Lindbergh's girl alone!'"

I don't mean to sound like a defender of poor old Ciardi but I've had one final thought. It just occurs to me as I read this tooth-and-claw business that if Mrs. Lindbergh is going to get herself in this kind of rumpus every twenty-eight years or so, maybe somebody ought to write *her* a letter.