
Raymond Yanek

CIARDI, JOHN (ANTHONY) (1916–1986)

Poet, critic, and anthropologist John Ciardi is best remembered as a child's poet and the translator of Dante's Divine Comedy—his rendering of The Inferno (1954) remaining one of the most poetically energetic and accessible in English. Ciardi strove to write verse concerned with the lives of everyday people, verse that is neither condescending nor willfully obscure, combining wit, formal virtuosity, and humanistic pathos.

Born June 24, 1916, in Boston, Massachusetts, to immigrants Antonio and Concetta Ciardi, he spent his early years in a working-class neighborhood steeped in Old World Italian mores and custom. His father died just sixteen days after Ciardi's third birthday, leaving his mother to raise him with the financial help of his three older sisters. Excelling as a student, Ciardi was promoted early from the fourth to the sixth grade, gratifying his mother—who spoke little English—and setting a precedent for future intellectual accomplishments. Although his childhood was largely happy, it was rife with economic hardship and sibling rivalry, two facts perhaps at the root of the dark humor in his poetry.

As an adolescent, Ciardi was a physical laborer, digging ditches to save money for college. After a brief stint at Bates College, Ciardi transferred to Tufts, where he met his mentor, poet John Holmes, who inspired Ciardi to become a poet. Upon graduation, Ciardi applied for University of Michigan's $1,200 Hopwood Award. Under the tutelage of Professor Roy W. Cowden, Ciardi won the Hopwood, and strengthened his resolve to make poetry his vocation. While at Michigan, Ciardi honed his poetic craft, and in 1940 Henry Holt accepted his Hopwood manuscript, Homeward to America, for publication.

Ciardi served in the U.S. Army Air Forces from 1942 to 1945, seeing combat as a B-29 gunner during the Japanese air offensive. Returning stateside, Ciardi experienced further professional gains and publications. His Italian heritage served him well in his translation of Dante's Divine Comedy, which deftly captures both the beauty and the coarseness that marks Dante's work. Ciardi's translation of the final lines of Canto XXI looks forward to his children's poetry, particularly in his willingness to engage low comedy: "The demons stick their pointed tongues out as a sign / to their Captain that they wished permission to pass, / and he had made a trumpet of his ass." The wordplay in the final couplet—the verb "pass" suggesting both "to go by" and "to pass gas" is not in the original Italian, and thus is typical of Ciardi's desire both to translate faithfully and to craft interesting English poetry.


Ciardi's fame and income were supplemented by his association with the prestigious Bread Loaf writer's conference and his regular and provocative column for the Saturday Review. His popularity on the lecture circuit led him to become the host of CBS's Accent, a weekly television program. An uncommonly famous public intellectual, he was unabashedly boastful, a tendency that perhaps estranged him from younger poets who were largely unaware of his working-class roots.

Ciardi's children's verse has been criticized for inappropriate obscurity and a morbid sense of humor. In this respect, Ciardi anticipated—and perhaps paved the way for—American children's poet Shel Silverstein, who, like Ciardi, did not balk at featuring violence and ill-mannered children in his poems. Books like The Monster Den (1963) caricature the genteel fiction common in mid-century American children's poetry. Often featuring macabre humor, poems such as "Sit Up When You Sit Down," from Ciardi's You Know Who (1964), do not shrink from inflicting harm on their youthful subjects. Here the narrator threatens to beat a naughty child with "a stick" but discovers that all he has to do is show the child the stick, after which the child just knows "how to sit up when he sits down. / And now he's the very best boy in town."

"About the Teeth of Sharks," collected in You Read to Me, I'll Read to You (1962), concerns a narrator whose curiosity leads the "you" of the poem to be decapitated by a shark: "Still closer—here, I'll hold your hat. / Has it a third row of teeth behind that? / Now look in and . . . Look out! Oh my, / I'll never know now! Well, goodbye." Recalling the puns and jokes of A.A. Milne and Lewis Carroll, these poems illustrate the language play common in Ciardi's children's verse even as they highlight Ciardi's willingness to use the caricatured violence of playground poetry in the service of good-natured teasing.
Ciardi's surreal violence also imbues his adult work. "A Dream," from 39 Poems (1959), one of his best-known books for adults, begins with the speaker having his arm bitten off by the tiger he is dancing with, then hearing a dance instructor say to his class, "Note and avoid this dancer's waste of motion—more violence than observance," adding, as the suffering speaker dies, "Dancing, my dears, is a selection of measures." Like Theodore Roethke (for whom he wrote an elegy), Ciardi was intrigued by the rhythms and nonsense of playground chant, adapting these tendencies in his children's and adult poetry. Though written for adults, "A Ballad of Telegologies" suggests these roots "Says Father Marx, who gave the Law, / 'I must confess, I'm left in awe: / it comes to more than I foresaw.'" Yet Ciardi's emotional range is wide, as poems like "At My Father's Grave," "Inscriptions for a Soldier's Marker," and "Massive Retaliation" demonstrate.

Having authored more than twenty collections of poetry for adults, twelve for children, and the popular textbook How Does a Poem Mean? (1959), Ciardi was a stalwart public intellectual and artist, remaining in the public eye through poetry readings, lectures, and appearances on television. Ciardi died of a heart attack in 1986. He will be remembered as a poet who strove to make poetry accessible to all, adults and children alike.


Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

CLAMPITT, AMY (1920–1994)

Written between 1956 and 1994, Amy Clampitt's poetry inhabits a tradition that extends beyond the confines of American poetry. engaging historical trauma of various times and places. Two ideas are crucial to her poetics: that the American landscape offers an unparalleled sense of hope, and that the traumatic history of the twentieth century negates that hope.

Given Clampitt's apparently idyllic youth, such historical realities as genocide and exile may seem unlikely inspi-