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The University of Alaska Radio Forum Program with John Ciardi, 3/72

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Tom Duncan welcomes the audience to the program. On March 24th, 1972 the University of Alaska, Fairbanks was privileged to have guest speaker and lecturer, John Ciardi. Mr. Ciardi, a poet, spoke to an assembled group in the Great Hall of the Fine Arts Complex and was introduced by Professor Gordon Wright(?) of the music department.

A recorded excerpt of Professor Wright's introduction is played. Mr. Wright speaks of the relationship between music and poetry. Mr. Wright speaks of his first encounter with the Mr. Ciardi.

Mr. Ciardi speaks. He says he would like to talk about some of the ways in which poetry seems to happen. When it happens right, something human and important follows. It cannot be accessed directly, however. Indirection, he says, is the name of the game. He speaks of a poem, written by a late friend of his, called "Fiddle Practice": "*The sounding board is all the fiddle needs to speak alive; the learned heart less in love with singing than with how to sing. A scale can sculpture Bach or make the mountain move but love without arithmetic will fail. The vision must be got by indirection; the bow arm aimed at technical perfection.* " Mr. Ciardi cautions against the modern trend in poetry of simply letting out all emotion without any containment, spilling "brute soul". He says one of the fathers of this movement is Jack Kerouac. Mr. Ciardi feels that Kerouac's writing assumes that the reader will become Kerouac's psychiatrist. Mr. Ciardi gave up on Kerouac's psyche early on. The only way to read a work earnestly, humanly, and intelligently is to read the work selfishly; if the poem gives you an experience of selfish participation then that is it. Mr. Ciardi thinks that young writers are making a mistake when they feel that the reader owes them some debt of sympathy for trying. The poem doesn't really care what it costs to put it on the page. Mr. Ciardi thinks that somewhere in our human perversity we are all secretly glad that Keats died young. We rather like it when the poem is expensive. No matter the cost to the poet, what the reader gets off the page is an experience.

Mr. Ciardi says that most often when people set out to write important poems, they tend to become pompous and blind. It is a mistake of the bad writer to try to say too much. A woman once wrote to Mr. Ciardi at the *Saturday Review*, angry at him having rejected her poems. Her letter had a blue letterhead with a large white monogram on it. The letter said, in effect, that Mr. Ciardi rejected her poems because they were about God. Mr. Ciardi says that that is one way of defending yourself: "That irreligious so-and-so doesn't realize how close God and I are, and, therefore, he rejected my poems!" Mr. Ciardi does not often respond to these types of letters, but every once in a while he feels nasty and does. He did in this case, saying, "Dear Madam: No, I did not reject your poems because they were about God. I rejected them because I could not conquer a feeling that you were unequal to your subject matter." M. Ciardi sums it up: Critical perception often shuts off when you reach for huge subjects.

Mr. Ciardi says he will therefore start small by describing one of his poems called "Wigeonry." Mr. Ciardi tells a humorous anecdote about how he came up with the idea for the poem: while looking up the

etymology of the word “wideon” (perhaps from Latin “vipio”, a type of crane) he came across an unfamiliar word, “wickape” (also spelled “wicopy”) which was defines in his dictionary as the Algonquian word for “any of various native deciduous hardwood trees including *Tilia glabra*.” (Mr. Ciardi adds that after six years of looking, he finally saw a *Tilia glabra* last summer in northern Massachusetts.)
So, he has the idea for the beginning of a poem:

A widgeon in a wickape
In which no widgeon ought to be

He says the second line is to keep him from getting 500 angry letters saying, “You idiot! Who ever saw a duck roosting in a tree?” He says this is an important principle in poetry: never give the reader the right to feel smarter than you are. Readers are just as insecure as writers and, given the chance to one-up the writer, they will take it. And the writer will lose. Not a high critical principle, he says, but important because if the reader thinks the author is a fool then the author has lost that reader.
Mr. Ciardi adds another line:

A widgeon in a wickopy,
In which no widgeon ought to be,
A widowed widgeon was.

At this point he did not know where this poem was going but already, even with this tiny stub of a poem, Mr. Ciardi points out that he has a number of contracts to fulfill in this poem: the contract to alliterate and the contract to rhyme. He may rhyme AAB, CCB, DDE, FFE but it will be tighter if he rhymes AAB, CCB, DDB, FFB. Since it will be a short poem anyway, why not use the same rhyme the whole way through? Also, he says he cannot honorably end the poem without explaining how the widgeon got to be widowed. Through this frivolous example, he is trying to point out a non-frivolous perception: the poem is a series of contracts, run into by serendipity, which then must be very firmly and legally observed. The poem is an experience of discovering its own contract; as you write it, you are introduced to your obligations.
And, fulfilling these obligations, he finishes his poem:

A widgeon in a wicopy,
In which no widgeon ought to be
A widowed widgeon was.
While in a willow wickiup
A Wichita sat down to sup
With other Wichitas,
And what they whittled as they ate
Included what had been of late
A widgeon’s wing.
‘Twas thus, the widgeon in the wicopy
In which no widgeon ought to be
A widowed widgeon was.

If such obligations are not fulfilled then the poet is cheating. Mr. Ciardi discusses an example of a poet who was tempted to cheat but who did not by examining various drafts of Keats’ poem “The Eve of St. Agnes” in which, through many revisions, Keats comes up with a triad of adjective-noun combinations to describing Madeline undressing: “wreathed pearls“, “warmed jewels“, “fragrant bodice.” In earlier drafts he had put “bursting bodice” which does not match the tone of the poem and he also tried omitting the third adjective-noun combination before finally arriving on the three combinations that match in tone and elegantly solve his problem. He could have done it a different way, but it is important

to get the poem right for its own sake. Mr. Ciardi discusses another couple of points regarding this poem.

At this point the recording stops and the narrator, Tom Duncan, says we must leave Mr. Ciardi to rejoin him next week for the remaining half of his presentation.

The second half of the program begins. Tom Duncan says that during the first part of the program Mr. Ciardi discussed some of his poetry and general aesthetics on poetic writing. We return to Mr. Ciardi as he turns to focus on one of his own works. He speaks of and recites his poem about the figure of the old woman in mourning black that you see all over the Italian countryside:

Nona Domenica Garnaro sits in the sun
On the step of her house in Calabria.
There are seven men and four women in the village
Who call her Mama, and the orange trees
Fountain their blooms down all the hill and valley.
No one can see more memory from this step
Than Nona Domenica. When she folds her hands
In her lap they fall together
Like two Christs fallen from a driftwood shrine.
All their weathers are twisted into them.
There is that art in them that will not be carved
But can only be waited for. These hands are not
Sad nor happy nor tired nor strong. They are simply
Complete. They lie still in her lap
And she sits waiting quietly in the sun
For what will happen, as for example, a petal
May blow down on the wind and lie across
Both of her thumbs, and she look down at it.

He wrote the poem at least 20 years ago, so he thinks he is fairly dispassionate toward it by now. He hopes the poem does work, and if it does, it would illustrate the principle that "Less is more." He likes the quietness of the final image.

He points out that he could not have a petal in the third stanza had he not orange trees in the first stanza. Any petal that falls inside a poem has to fall from inside it. But the orange trees had been established, so he was free to use the petals in this way, though he did not know that is what would happen when he put the trees in.

Mr. Ciardi says that the first and second elements of a poem come from God-knows-where. The third element may come from God-knows-where, but it had better come from God-knows-where by way of the first two. Chekhov said, "If bring a cannon on stage, fire it!" Mr. Ciardi says that the corollary to that is "If you are going to fire it, make sure it is onstage!" He adds that you should get it onstage as inconspicuously as possible for later usage. It won't do simply to have it lit and ready to go off and have it go "boom!" the moment it appears. This interferes with the reader's ability to believe you. And if the reader stops believing you, you are done.

Mr. Ciardi next focuses on one of his poem which is currently unpublished, but which he says he thinks he is ready to let get published. It is about his Sears Roebuck lawn mower called "On the orthodoxy and creed of my power mower." It is about how the maintenance of the mower is like performing Catholic rituals and about how astonishing it is that such a raging, chaotic, noisy machine can leave a neat, quiet, tidy lawn in its wake.

All summer in power, outroaring the bull fiend,
It raves on my lawn, spewing
Into the dirty lung hung on its side.
Myself maddened by power, I ride
The howl of how new-mown sacks-full,
The powder bursts of gnashed mole runs
Till in one sweaty half day of the beast
My lawn is lined into tidy passages. So
Neatness from lunacy, the orderliness of rage,
Bedlam's Eden, all calm now,
The dead beast washed in cool light and stalled.

Again and again, all summer in power at a touch
It frenzies. At fall's dry last
I kneel to the manual, to the word, touch,
And pour extreme unctions that the locked life
Waken when called. And do call, year after year
In season, to the lunacy of power and am not answered.
I probe, prime, pump, and might as well pray
To headless stone gods. Nothing -
Nothing I know - wakens the power blast
Hidden in it, which is no cause of protestant
Conscience to be worked out between me and the source
But a priest-held power of maintenance.

Always at last defeated, I call, and its priest comes
With cups, knowledge, and the anointed touch
That does reach power and mystery. The beast
Gasps, shakes, wavers deep in itself, then
Roars to full resurrection, and here we come
To cure green again, our triumph of faith!
Which is, of course, that even the powerless
And inept may ride fit power once wakened
By the anointed man believed in
Deeper that conscience and defeat
Whole in his knowledge given, his touch charged,
The dangerous blind beast tame in service.

Mr. Ciardi points out that there are some light touches in the poem along with some serious ones. He observes that most nineteenth century readers want you to be all serious or all funny but not serious and playful at the same time.

Next, Mr. Ciardi focuses on a poem he wrote for Theodore Roethke. He shares some anecdotes about Roethke and bit of Roethke's background on Roethke's life and temperament. Ciardi's poem is modeled after Roethke's poem "The Saginaw Song" as a sort of tribute.

Ted Roethke was a tearing man,
A slam-bang wham-damn tantrum O
From Saginaw in Michigan
Where the ladies sneeze at ten below
But any man that's half a man
Can keep a sweat up till the freeze
Gets down to ninety-nine degrees.
For the hair on their chests it hangs down to their knees
In Saginaw, In Michigan.

Ted Roethke was a drinking man,
A brandy and a bubbly O.
He wore a roll of fat that ran
Six times around his belly O,
Then tucked back in where it began.
And every ounce of every pound
Of that great lard was built around
The very best hooch that could be found
In Saginaw, In Michigan.

Ted Roethke was an ath-a-lete,
(So it's pronounced in Michigan.)
He played to win and was hard to beat.
And he'd scream like an orangutan
And claw the air and stamp his feet
At every shot he couldn't make
And every point he couldn't take.
And when he lost he'd hold a wake,
Or damn you for a cheat.

Sometimes he was a friend of mine
With the empties on the floor O.
And, God, it's fun to be feeling fine
And to pour and pour and pour O.
But just to show we were not swine
We kept a clock that was stopped at ten,
And never started before then.
And just to prove we were gentlemen
We quit when it got to nine.

Ted Roethke was a roaring man,
A ring-tailed whing-ding yippee O.
He could outyell all Michigan
And half the Mississippi O.

But once he sat still and began
To listen for the lifting word
It hovered round him like a bird.
And oh, sweet Chirst, the things he heard
In Saginaw, In Michigan.

Now Roethke's dead. If there's a man,
A waking, lost and wanting O,
In Saginaw, In Michigan,
He could hear all his haunting O
In the same wind where it began
The terrors it could not outface,
But found the words of, and by grace
Of what words are, found time and place
In Saginaw, In Michigan.

Mr. Ciardi says that he believes that by the grace of words we find out things. Sometimes a poem is a definite, and even positive, way of learning something. Next, he recites "Three views of a mother" in which something he had always known focused in the course of the poem.
His mother came to America when she was 12 and didn't really join it but, instead, lived in her own bubble of memories. When Ciardi wrote the line, "I think, perhaps, this woman is my child," he suddenly understood what he had been feeling.
He says that having his mother become his daughter is not the worst type of relationship, but that there are better dynamics. This transition often happens to all but "truly intellectual women." Ciardi thinks this is a good argument for educating women.

Good soul, my mother holds my daughter,
The onionskin bleached hand under the peach-head.
Ti-ti*, she says from the vegetable world,* la-la.
A language of roots from a forgotten garden.

She forms like a cresting wave over the child;
It is impossible not to see her break
And bury the child swim up a girl
And the girl reach shore a woman on my last beach.

Ti-ti, la-la. *I will not fight our drowning,*
No the fall of gardens. I am curious however,
To know what world this is. The honeydew head
Of the child, the cauliflower head of the grandmother

Bob in the sea under the garden. Ti-ti, la-la.
The grandmother rustles her hands like two dry leaves
And the child writhes round as a slug for pleasure,
Leaving the trail of its going, wet on the world.

He skips the second part and reads the third:

Three rainy days and the fourth one sunny:
She was gone before breakfast. At three she hobbles back
Under a flour sack bulging full of mushrooms
Well, scolding will do no good. I see her eyes
Hunting for praise as she fishes up a handful
And hold then to the light, then rips one open
For me to smell the earth in the white stem.

I think perhaps this woman is my child.
But right now what do we do with thirty pounds
Of uncleaned mushrooms? If I let her be
She'll stay up cleaning them till one o'clock
And be all aches tomorrow. I get a knife;
And here we sit with the kitchen table between us,
One pile for root ends, one for the cleaned sprouts.

Her hands go back with her. I see her mind
Open through fields from the earth of her stained fingers.
"Once when I was a girl I found a fungus
That weighed twenty-eight kilos.

Mr. Ciardi inserts that that is obviously a lie- but memory exaggerates.

It was delicious.
I was going to Benevento for the fair.
I cut across the mountain to save time,
And there it was – like and angel in a tree.

"You don't see things like that. Not over here.
My father ran from the barn when I came home.
'Didn't you go to the fair?' he said. But I laughed:
'I brought it home with me.' He wouldn't believe
I'd carried it all the way across the mountain,
And the path so steep. I made a sack of my skirt.
He thought some fellow – I don't know what he thought!"

Ti-ti, la-la. *The memory works her fingers.*
"Oh, we were happy then. You could go in the winter
And dig the roses and cabbages from the snow.
The land had a blessing in it. In the fall in the vineyards
We sang from dawn to sunset, and at night
We washed our feet and danced like goats in the grape vats.
The wine came up like blood between our toes."

We finish at last, the squid-grey fruit before us.
"Leave the root clippings," she says. "They're for the garden.
See how black the dirt is. Black's for growing."
She sets her hoard to soak. "I'm tired now.

Sometimes I talk too much. That's happiness.
Well, so we'll eat again before we die.
But oh, if you could have seen it in that tree!"

Mr. Ciardi says he started writing children's poems for his children and has fallen in love with the process. Ciardi takes the children's poetry seriously and has a wonderful time writing it although the critics do not take children's poetry seriously.

There was a man who lived in Perth
He had about five dollars' worth
Of boys and girls at three for a dollar.

The less they were worth, the more they would holler.
The more they would holler, the less they were worth.

For two cents cash, I'd send you to Perth!

He reads another poem. He has decided that the last line should be dedicated to Sarasota:

Baxter Bickerbone of Burlington
Used to be sheriff till he lost his gun.
Used to be a teacher till he lost his school.
Used to be the iceman till he lost his cool.
Used to be a husband till he lost his wife.
Used to be alive till he lost his life.
When he got to heaven Baxter said,
"The climate's very healthy once you're used to being dead."

He reads one last poem, "Susie's new dog":

Your dog? What dog? You mean it? –That?
I was about to leave a note pinned to a fish to warn my cat to watch for a mouse in an overcoat.
So that's a dog. Is it any breed that anyone ever knew or guessed?
Oh, a flea terrier! Yes, indeed. Well, now I am impressed.
I guess no robber will try your house or even come through your yard.
Not when he knows you have a mouse - I mean a dog - like that on guard!
You have to go? I'm glad you came. I don't see a thing like that just every day.
Does it have a name? Fang, eh?
Well, I must warn my cat.

The program ends.