

been I shall allow a protest to go to you. Was your kindness to the Hiroshima Maidens only a matter of political expedience, or do you really possess sympathy for human suffering and human dignity?

MARY F. SARGENT.

St. Augustine, Fla.

ANOTHER TRY

WE THINK YOU OWE TO Mrs. Lindbergh's thousands of admiring readers, and to literature itself, an unbiased review of her book. May we suggest one of the critics who felt her volume was one of the year's best poetry books?

MAY FORDE.

Evansville, Wis.

CIARDI PEP

I BELIEVE MR. CIARDI has, in spite of the conceit that leads you into such absurdities as this review, pepped up the poetry department of *SR*.

MARION SMITH.

Grand Rapids, Mich.

WONDER OF THE YEAR

IT IS THE WONDER of the year to me how any one with the intelligence I supposed Mrs. Lindbergh to possess could allow such stuff to be offered to the public.

ISABEL BOYD

St. Petersburg, Fla.

THIRTY-SIX "I"'S

IN AN ARTICLE WHICH contains Mr. Ciardi's favorite word "I" thirty-six times, he only demonstrates that the most obvious example of inflation is his own self-importance.

WALTER HAYES.

Claygate, Surrey, England.

HEAT AND LIGHT

I BELIEVE THAT Mr. Ciardi's "Close Look" gave us a closer look at Ciardi than it did at the Unicorn. So much heat! So little light!

ELAINE W. COGSWELL.

Berkeley, Calif.

NO DIGNITY?

IT LEAVES ONE with a sense of degradation for having read it and printing it ill becomes the dignity of *The Saturday Review*. In the days of William Rose Benet one never had to be ashamed of the poetry page.

DANIEL R. HULL.

Woodbury, Conn.

REVIEWING PERSONALITY

MUCH AS I ADMIRE John Ciardi's honest, fearless, and often brilliant criticism I cannot help regretting that, in the case of Anne Lindbergh's book, he gives his readers the impression that he is reviewing the personality of the author and not the poems.

KATHERINE GARRISON CHAPIN.
Washington, D.C.



—Louise Dahl-Wolfe.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh.



John Ciardi.

THE REVIEWER'S DUTY TO DAMN / *A Letter to an Avalanche*

By JOHN CIARDI

A FEW weeks ago I reviewed in these pages (*SR* Jan. 12) Anne Morrow Lindbergh's "The Unicorn and Other Poems." My basic position in that review was stated in its first paragraph, which I quote here:

Mrs. Lindbergh's great personal distinction together with the popularity of her six earlier volumes, some of poetry and some of prose, may be taken as evidence enough that the present volume will sell widely. Poetry, nevertheless, is no reliable consort of either personal distinction or of bookstore success. Everyone is in trouble when he looks at the stars, and under the stars I am as humanly eager to grant Mrs. Lindbergh the dignity of her troubles as I am to enjoin my own. One of my present troubles is that as a reviewer not of Mrs. Lindbergh but of her poems, I have, in duty, nothing but contempt to offer. I am compelled to believe that Mrs. Lindbergh has written an offensively bad book—inept, jingling, slovenly, illiterate even, and puffed up with the foolish afflatus of a stereotyped high-seriousness, that species of esthetic and human failure that will accept any shriek as a true high-C. If there is judgment, it must go by standards. I cannot apologize for this judgment. I believe that I can and must specify the particular badness of this sort of stuff.

Then came the avalanche. As it happens I am sitting the year out on

a Fellowship to the American Academy in Rome and the avalanche descended on the New York office. The cable connects, however; the airmail has been flowing; and I have been receiving generous samples from the avalanche. *SR* tells me that hundreds of such letters have been received. The sampling that has been forwarded to me shows a remarkable consistency in language. The following phrases will serve to illustrate the whole range: "shocking . . . cruel . . . horrid person hitting below the belt . . . a mean low person . . . unfairness shouts aloud . . . totally unjust . . . gross discourtesy . . . lack of plain human decency . . . petty harshness . . . it leaves me with a sense of degradation for having read it."

The issues here—the first issues at least—are clear enough, but before addressing them, let me assure the avalanche of its own numerical strength and consistency. Of the hundreds of letters my review evoked, I have seen only two that might be called favorable. If there is reason in numbers, those who have been moved to object are certainly right. I am not yet persuaded, however, that the avalanches of indignation are an intellectual measure I can respect. If the excellence of poetry were determinable by a national election, I have no doubt that Edgar Guest would be elected the greatest poet in the English Language—by a landslide. I doubt that he is, and I doubt the pertinence of the present avalanche.

The first issue is clearly enough the ever-present *ad hominem*. I have at-

tempted to show by principle and evidence that Mrs. Lindbergh writes not simply bad poetry, but contemptibly bad poetry. The answer to that proposition, according to the avalanche, is: "You are a mean low horrid person." The avalanche may be right about me. But my character has nothing to do with the proposition I have put forth, and with the principles I have attempted to introduce as measures of Mrs. Lindbergh's poetry. These principles are not my invention. They would have existed in human reckoning had I never been born. Clearly, therefore, they do not depend on me for their validity. It may even be that I am unworthy of the principles I have offered for discussion. It is still the principles themselves that are at issue. If I have mis-stated these principles, let the statement be corrected; if I have misapplied them, let my procedure be challenged; if I have misused evidence, let my error be shown.

A second charge, already implicit in some of the phrases I have cited, is made explicit in the following passage from one letter:

Mrs. Lindbergh is (as everyone except Mr. Ciardi knows) a sensitive and intelligent person; she would have understood a more subtly worded criticism; and so would the readers of *The Saturday Review*, who are now more prejudiced against Mr. Ciardi than against Mrs. Lindbergh. . . . It is not necessary to use a sledgehammer to demolish a fragile shell.

I think this would be a valid criticism were it a fact that the premise of my review was to make Mrs. Lindbergh understand, or that she is indeed a fragile shell. I shall have more to say below about the fragile shell, but one of the main reasons for selecting *this* book for damnation in so many words was the very fact that it was obviously destined for considerable sale and general acclaim; that far from being a fragile shell, it was almost certain of solid sales and praise, as poetry goes. For better or worse I thought it necessary to make my disagreement strong enough to counterbalance the general vague approval the book was bound to receive elsewhere.

The fact that I have expressed myself as contemptuous of Mrs. Lindbergh's poetry is, as far as I am concerned, a necessary accuracy. I regret—I have already regretted it in my review—that my final considered judgment leaves me no other choice. I think these are slovenly poems. The title under which I sent in the review was "The Slovenly Unicorn." I do not understand why the title was changed by other *SR* editors. Slovenliness, I have always held to be the most contemptible of esthetic sins. I think I

have established the existence of slovenliness in these poems. If I have failed to establish the existence of such slovenliness, my charge must, of course, fall through. If I have established it, and if slovenliness is indeed (as I believe it to be) contemptible, what choice have I but to consider these poems contemptible? I am sorry if that conclusion hurts Mrs. Lindbergh, but I am even sorrier that she writes such stuff. I should, of course, be delighted to have her grasp my objections and profit by them. More urgently, however, I am trying to establish as a policy of this magazine that poetry is a serious, dignified, and disciplined human activity which is not to be debased in the name of a counterfeit sentimentality that will not bother to learn the fundamentals of its own art.

It is that line I mean to defend. That, and the proposition that the discussion must go by principle. I am not aware of any compulsion within myself to assault the character of persons not known to me, and I do not believe that I have done so. I chose to affirm principles. It is certainly significant to me that I was able to find only two letters in the total avalanche that showed even so much as an awareness that a principle was involved.

AN AVALANCHE, moreover, is not only a descending mass; it is a release

of stored-up forces. "Insulting," says one letter and then cites the "idiotic verse" I have chosen for *SR* since I became Poetry Editor. One letter speaks of "the animus which darkens" my criticism, then goes on to say that I "should have attacked Cummings and Eliot if what you crave is clarity of thought and meaningful use of words." One reader was moved to look up my own poems, and concludes that my recent poem to Dylan Thomas (*SR* Dec. 15, 1956) is no good. Another says practically nothing about the present review but gleefully reports having found an unfavorable review of my own last book of poems in the most recent issue of *The Hudson Review*. (You missed another in the *Yale Review* a few issues back.) One argues that it is all wrong to "dissect" poetry in this way because it is "too living a thing for close criticism." (I thought that particular bit of nonsense had been disqualified even as a topic for sophomore bull-sessions.) Another calls my review a "rude piece of writing" and goes on to school-marm me with the following: "I shall watch your pages for a poem by Mr. Ciardi and believe me if he doesn't make his ideas walk like good tin soldiers (with their vizors down) he'll come a cropper." (Dear Faithful Reader—I have had three poems in *SR* during the last year. I certainly hope none of them

(Continued on page 54)



Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

BIRTHYEARS

Below, in two alphabetical columns, are listed the names of forty American authors, two of whom were born in each of the years given in the third column. Elizabeth Mills of Springfield, Mo., asks you to assign the right years to the right authors, keying the first two pairs of parentheses on Column One and the second on Column Two. Birth certificates issued on page 55.

1. Thomas Bailey Aldrich	Stephen Vincent Benét	() ()	1807
2. Sherwood Anderson	Louis Bromfield	() ()	1809
3. Eugene Field	Willa Cather	() ()	1811
4. Hamlin Garland	Edward Eggleston	() ()	1819
5. Ernest Hemingway	T. S. Eliot	() ()	1836
6. William Dean Howells	Zona Gale	() ()	1837
7. Sinclair Lewis	Horace Greeley	() ()	1850
8. Herman Melville	Bret Harte	() ()	1856
9. Edna St. Vincent Millay	Lafcadio Hearn	() ()	1860
10. Eugene O'Neill	O. Henry	() ()	1862
11. Edgar Allan Poe	John Hersey	() ()	1874
12. Robert Sherwood	Elbert Hubbard	() ()	1876
13. Gertrude Stein	Ring Lardner	() ()	1885
14. Harriet Beecher Stowe	Abraham Lincoln	() ()	1888
15. Eudora Welty	Henry W. Longfellow	() ()	1892
16. Edith Wharton	Bliss Perry	() ()	1896
17. John Greenleaf Whittier	Elmer Rice	() ()	1898
18. Kate Douglas Wiggin	Mari Sandoz	() ()	1900
19. Tennessee Williams	Walt Whitman	() ()	1909
20. Thomas Wolfe	Richard Wright	() ()	1914