

June 28, 2003

Dear Norm,

I have known gone through MODEST GIFTS a few times now. Here are my general and specific comments, which will support each other to some extent. That is, I will try to give in my specifics examples that bear out a general comment

GENERAL:

- 1) The hand-written titles are not appealing or agreeable and gain nothing but the intimation that you have not wanted to take much time with this volume. Some are hard to read. The appearance and readability of the captions, all things being equal, should be as important as the legibility and typeface of the poems.
- 2) There are too many references to the 60s that will make the reader stumble. Do they even make Rheingold Beer any more? The fact that many of the drawings and their captions are topical: Reagan, Bush, Clinton, etc, only draws attention to this temporal divide. The 60s are not like the 00s and readers will be discomfited by the shifts. I'll give examples in specifics. In one poem, changing "television" to "internet" could be a clarification.
- 3) Generally, the "nesting" of poems within a series of drawings and vice versa works very well, so well that my principal feeling, earlier, that both the poems and the drawings had no sequential relationship, were scattershot, is now pretty much dissolved.
- 4) The volume is still too long, by about 10-15 percent.
- 5) The intro works well, as does the preface to the 1971 volume, although it will be noted that you changed "broadsword God ever gave you" to "the only broadsword God ever gave any good writer." I'd suggest that you note in the intro that you have changed poems, prose and drawing captions, although the situation with the drawings is different in that they have not been published previously.

p.2—Lennon/Modest gifts

SPECIFICS:

4- note here that some poems have been changed, the afterword as well.

6-12 wonderful run of drawings, self-reinforcing run

13-20 ditto, maybe even better

21 can't read caption easily (as two of my students noted)

21-26 just as good

Cocktail party: okay but didn't care for 30 or 31, love 32 and following poem; not sure doubling of "Beware" on 38-39 works; false teeth drawing (40) is one of your cleverest.

44 great poem "Repetition kills..."

- ✓ 47 the list of cures for virus Y S X is from 60s and the reference to "the Muslims" will really confuse—only a few readers will recognize that you are referring to the Malcom X-Elijah Muhammad Muslims; most will be unnecessarily upset by the word as you use it, especially since the drawings on 48-49 fit well into the current national context
- 50 Always liked "Togetherness"
- "Levels of Procurement" works very well up to 61 (wording of caption on 61 looks amateurish), but 62-65 need excision—66 is fine.

- ✓ "The Mediocre: poem on 68 refers to the "vacuum tube" which is as obsolete as the buggy whip and moustache wax. But "Seminars" (69) holds up well, as do "Static" and superhighways (70, 71)

72 Rheingold—can it still be purchased? The pun is dead

- ✓ 73 appears to be something missing in second poem: should "ba-" be "baby"?

75-76 asses: nice

77 "Eating in the Kitchen" I read this one to the kids—they all laughed.

p.3-Lennon/Modest Gifts

78-80 also among your best poems, drawing on 81 is very funny too

Unhappy Marriage—strong section

Drunken Marriage 89-95—don't see why it has to be separated from Unhappy Marriage—not much of a shift

Drinking to Eternity, 96-105—wish there were a few drawings of drunks—fuck-face Farninacci and crew, perhaps. An Irish face too, a derby

Intermission: 106-25 Has a few fine poems (especially “the worst to be said about mothers” but overall this section seems weak; it appears that you might have inserted all the stuff that didn't fit comfortably elsewhere. “Petals” don't do much for me Last two drawings 124-25 are excellent and should be retained.

Interplanetary, 126-36: first four drawings are excellent, next three pretty good too, esp. Salome. Poem on 134: suggest

✓ “internet” for “television”; “Genome” for “group-related”

136: dated reference, where is AIDS?

Additionally challenged: why is it a separate section? It fits

✓ with Interplanetary; I'd drop 144-46 (weak), and 148, rest are very good

Upper Classes (152-63): could this prime minister be Tony Blair? Yes, he could. All good stuff, but only two drawings! A couple more needed, especially given your feelings about the swinish rich.

Witches and Warlocks (164-72) no suggestions except that “deep in my dungeon” has been called an “old prison rhyme” Will anyone notice?

✓ 169: there is a stray apostrophe after witches in third line of poem. I know you like this poem but I'm still trying to figure out the significance of Carmen's ear crease.

✓ Camembert and Caviar (173-86), Should “it” be capitalized in third line of poem on 176? This is one of the strongest sections in the book. Priest drawing on 183 is superb; all topical;

p.4-Lennon/modest gifts

references work except "Merck and Merck" on 186. I'm not sure it is still in existence—pick a new drug company?

Lower Classes (187-208) printing hard to read on first three drawings 188-190)

- ✓ 193 drop this drawing; it pulls down the fine ones preceding it 197-98, move fuck face Farinacii and his friend to "Dinking to Eternity"

- ✓ I like everything up to 203, McCarthy poem: is it Charlie, Mary, Eugene? Who remembers the evil Senator? I like all the rest of this section a lot.

Hunting for Poems (209-232): good opening poems, drawing on 212 looks more like William Burroughs than a poetess. Perhaps this is an opportunity? Good drawings, esp. 215; caption needed for Ford Maddox Ford drawing on 217, or is it Wallace Stevens? Snake poem is lovely. Not crazy about drawing on 221—thin.

Drawing on 225: move to Interplanetary. Poem on 226—cow flops—is a beauty. Drawing on 230: can we have a better caption? Fine section overall, needs tweaking perhaps.

Politicians (233-41) Great opening drawing on 234, followed by a weak one on 235, and another beauty (Reagan) on 236; ditto for Clinton, Albright, Sharon and George W. Could you do a Rumsfeld?

Hemingway Revisited (242-250) Strange and powerful projection of Jake and Catherine into their futures. Did Jake get a new dick?

- ✓ Harbors of the Moon (251-65) space needed on 258 before "nada" 14 lines from bottom. Like all these poems. Wish there were a few drawings.

Appendix: Because you have changed some language I think you must announce this as you have said this is the very introduction to the 1971 paperback.

p.5-Lennon/Modest Gifts

I tried to give you the edge of my instincts in "Specifics," as well as the more considered comments in "General." Hope this is of use.

See you soon.

Best, Mike