

Levi Pennington

People

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Levi Pennington To Mary, December 2, 1965

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December 2, 1965.

Dear Mary:--

I have finished reading The Fortune Teller by John Holmes, a thing that I never expected to do. I found much of it interesting, and some of it I'd call poetry; but much of it I could not class as poetry by any definition that I'd be willing to accept. In my judgment you have written better things than the best of it, and you've never, so far as I know, written anything as bad as the worst of it.

You know of my requirements for "the heart of poetry." Very little of the "poems" in this book meet all the requirements. Some of it -- this is brutal criticism -- seems to me to fail on every point. I can't agree at all with the "blurbs" on the paper wrapper of the book, which praise qualities like craftsmanship, clarity, etc.

To me, in real poetry the words should be "overloaded", they should say more than the words themselves express. Kipling's The Story of Uriah well illustrates this. There is not a word about Uriah except in the title, but that tells much, to one who knows and who thinks. The first stanza says:

Jack Barrett went to Quetta because they told him to.
He left his wife at Simla on three fourths his monthly
screw.

Jack Barrett died at Quetta ere the next month's pay
he drew.

Simla was the resort in the Himalayas where the officers took their vacations to avoid the stifling, killing heat of the lowlands. Quetta was one of the worst places in that most deadly area. Jack loved his wife, and left her with three fourths of his monthly salary. He was a soldier, and had to obey orders, no matter how much he was entitled to his time at Simla; and so on throughout the poem.

Another example is Masefield's expression of his belief in determinism in "Mate, and the king's pawn played." The end of the game, "mate" is determined from the beginning, "the king's pawn played".

There are examples, maybe, of this overloading of words in The Fortune Teller, but they are not too easy to discover.

Poetry should be creative. It should come from the heart and mind of one who has found something new, in thought, emotion, expression or something. This newness should have done something to the writer, and it should do something to the reader -- he should not be the same as he was before.

Poetry should be musical. Breath, heart beat and other metrical features of the human organism seem of themselves to sug-

gest the most basic thing in music, rhythm. But there are other kinds of ^{music} beauty in poetry, rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia -- there is so much in this volume that had no more music than the ordinary newspaper item.

Poetry should be beautiful. There are so many kinds of beauty that perhaps one needs not go into that any further

And above all, unless it should be the creative element, poetry should be emotional. It may be intellectual, it may appeal the volitional element in the make-up of a man, but it should be able to make its appeal to the emotions, and these might be anything from love to hate, from gaiety to grief, any emotion you care to name.

Well, I did not find as much of these elements in The Fortune Teller as a man ought to put into a book of this size.

In the matter of the overloading of words, whether you agree with Holmes or not, he does at least try to say much in little at times.

Order does not grow out of order, but from wreck.

Art is just what the artists say. # (I may not have that word for word.)

Useless or used, there is no noble beast.

As to creativeness, I find a good deal of it. Some of his thinking is decidedly out of the ordinary, as ~~is~~ some of his modes of expression. The Eleventh Commandment I found decidedly interesting, and with some original thinking in it. Much the same for Prayer on the Night Before Easter.

As to beauty -- let's skip it. I'd not say there isn't any; I'd not lie by saying there is a great deal of it that I saw.

As to music, that varies from none to some. As one of the famous dramatic critics said of a certain actress, "She played the whole ^{musical} gamut, from A to B. Holmes can use both meter and rhyme when he wants to do it, stanzas as regular and as perfect in rhyme as Gray's Elegy or Tennyson's In Memoriam. Sometimes he uses lines as irregular as far as beat is concerned as an algebraic explanation of details of an architectural specification; and as far from rhyme as hail is from zero. Sometimes he has no meter, but he rhymes; sometimes he has meter but no rhymes -- he give me the impression at times that he definitely avoided rhymes on purpose. Sometimes there is neither meter nor rhyme except that he falls on one or the other as if by accident. And sometimes he seems to offer what is supposed to be rhyme but which is at best no more than assonance or consonance. In his poem that gives the book its title, The Fortune teller, he gives us quatrains in five feet, though sometimes you have to strain a bit to make it so, and the first stanza rhymes perfectly, fair, cards, there, cards. In the next stanza he serves notice that you cannot expect this to continue, for it goes do, fund, Fuego, hand. The next, soon, love, gone, deserve. And so on, hope, them, stop, palm; calamity, doom, me, same; wife, stranger, safe, die; unheard, taken, feared, broken; light, yesterdays, late, these; this, said, noise, dead. Maybe that last real rhyme was an accident for which we should not hold him to be to blame. The liberties he takes with rhyme is apparent in another "poem." The first

#Art may be whatever artists say it is.

two quatrains perfect rhymes, sway, rises, day, surprises; hangs, stops, bangs, drops -- but then miscellaneous, all, ridiculous, crue^l; then back to normal, moves, side, improves, decide; but don't let your simple heart believe (says Holmes) that I intended to keep right on rhyming; how's this for a finish, rewarding, ~~and~~ once, discarding, difference.

Enough of this discordant stuff about music. If I have not made it clear that I think Holmes could have done better if he had really tried -- don't they say that Gray spent thirty years polishing his masterpiece? If anybody tells you that any poem in this book will last as the Elegy has done, ask them to call on you a hundred years ago and see if you get the same opinion.

Holmes's satire is good. His Faculty Committee on Teaching should be read by many a member of any college's teaching force.

Let me quote just a few of selections which will show you some of the things that he said felicitously, indistinctly. I noted some more but I made my notes so poorly lying on my back and in pain that I can't read some of it, and I may miss a word occasionally that I shall try to quote.

You could see the
Dead trees out in the water stood up for how hard it is
To kill fish or get running water under control.

My gold vest watch runs back four three two unbury
My father who wore it.

All the loose ends of self are sticking out,
Grudges, appetite, self pity, intention, fear.

The day spills itself all over the bare floor.

Polishing the dull air until it burns.

Do we hear the shining or candor of hours?

At the cave's mouth a dwindle of partisans.

All grass pushes up
Under no one, no I.

I enjoyed going through the family album with Holmes, as I'd enjoy almost any ancestral album of any man who could tell me as interesting things about his ancestors; I traveled with him to the Gurnet, and was glad indeed that he did not get stuck in the sand; his description of his wife was interesting, but I think one of our poets of Scotch name and ancestry (whose name I never can remember) did a rather better job, in at least some respects; and I've already written on Prayer the Night Before Easter and The Eleventh Commandment.

And now that I have bored you sufficiently by devoting so much time to him, I wish I knew if he is related to Oliver Wendell Holmes, the poet and the really great doctor and teacher, whose work saved the lives of so many women; and to Oliver Wendell Holmes the great jurist, who was such a giant in the legal world and such a midget and stinker in his attitude toward his father.