



ON CRAFT: JEFF SHOTTS ON THE ART OF REJECTION

January 9, 2014

The Art of Rejection

An Editor Laments

“We all line up to ask each other for help.”
–Tomas Tranströmer, “Solitude”

I am an editor, and I am required to practice the art of rejection. It is an art I do not recommend others devote themselves to, but I am that art’s apprentice. There are no masters, and those who claim mastery are, in truth, practicing the arts of pity and condescension, and there are no places for them here.

The art of rejection, like the art of writing, requires submission, discipline, patience, failure. And as with the art of writing, the art of rejection runs parallel with the practitioner’s life, and may become it. Also like the art of writing, the only way to enhance skills in the art of rejection is by doing it, practicing it, studying it, revising it, embracing it, cautioning yourself against it. As the art of writing has its temples and studios, so too the art of rejection has its sacred spaces: the publishing house is its place of worship, the editor’s desk its dojo.

I have not come down from the mountain, but I will tell you what I know. If you also practice the art of rejection, I will listen to what you have to say. If you are a writer, turn back now. Write your novels, stories, essays, poems. Or if you choose to go on, you must forget everything that is imparted here.

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The first thing to be said is: by practicing this art, you will disappoint, can only disappoint, you will always always disappoint. Your most practiced rejection, however worded, however encouraging you fashion it to be, is still a rejection. It is still a disappointment.

The next thing to say is: the editor must disappoint. Practice this art long enough, and you will disappoint many. Hundreds, and then thousands. You will carry this with you. You will lament that you have to hone a skill that makes you detestable.

You will always have rejected many, many, numerous many more than you can possibly ever accept. You will hope that you will be thought of, if you are thought of, as the editor who accepted the work of this author, and this author, and this author too. But you know, in truth, that the odds are every bit as stacked against you as they are for writers. You may more likely be known, if you are known, as the editor who rejected the work of this author, and this author, and this author too.

There are archives amassing more and more evidence against you. We now know those who rejected the work of Anne Frank and Vladimir Nabokov, among many others. History will expose you. Your ignorance will be marveled at. Your rejection will eventually reject you.

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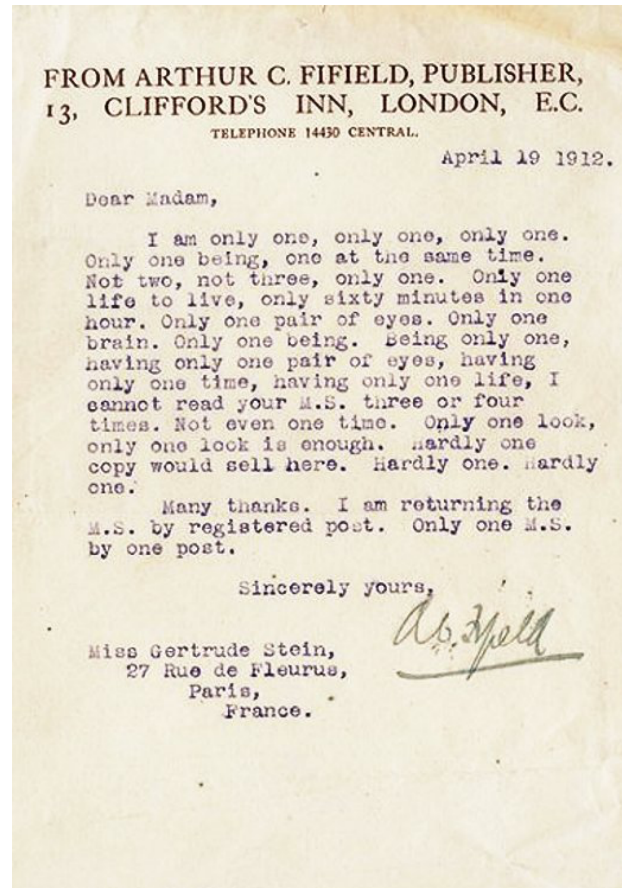
Another thing I can say: take no pleasure in practicing the art of rejection. Take no satisfaction in disappointing someone. Do not mock, do not assume an authority, do not enjoy writing such a letter. You embarrass the art of rejection, let alone the role of the editor by doing so.

Let Arthur C. Fifield's 1912 rejection letter to Gertrude Stein stand as warning:

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Once, because I was asked to, I performed some terrible math. All told, at a publishing house such as Graywolf Press, we accept under one-third of one percent of submissions that come in. Given those numbers, rejection letters are necessary, and they are, unfortunately, unexceptional. In fifteen years in publishing, I have probably written more than two thousand rejection letters. I wish I were better at writing them. Someone should offer a rejection-letter writing workshop. This would be my application essay.

Writers seem concerned about how to read an editor's rejection letter, an art unto itself. But go back a step: how should editors write a rejection letter?



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Sure, the “form rejection” language is always there, and it’s easy and often necessary to employ it:

Dear Author, Whoever You May Be, Whatever You May Have Written,

—a little testament to human blindness. The sheer volume of submissions requires the use of the form rejection—the lowest form of the art of rejection, yet the most prevalent. The general and anonymous language of the form rejection says a great deal to the author, even more than the actual words of the form rejection.

Does an author even read past “Dear Author,” as a salutation? What follows those words perhaps matters little, but you have given that author a powerful statement of disappointment. No writer deserves this, no matter how bad you think a submission may be. Writers have offered you something they deem precious, and you have sent them a clear message by not even calling them by name nor allowing your own to be associated with their work. You have to forgive yourself for it, if you can, knowing that the author might not.

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“Submission,” “rejection,” “acceptance”—our very language for this is utterly problematic, steeped in false authority and religiosity. The publisher is not a priest, the writer not a penitent.

If you can reject this language, do so.

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It is the anonymous language of form rejections that Francesca Bell’s poem turns into an eroticized proposition, a sexual “submission”:

I Long to Hold the Poetry Editor’s Penis in My Hand

and tell him personally,
I’m sorry, but I’m going
to have to pass on this.
Though your piece
held my attention through
the first few screenings,
I don’t feel it is a good fit
for me at this time.
Please know it received
my careful consideration.
I thank you for allowing

me to have a look,
and I wish you
the very best of luck
placing it elsewhere.

The most telling moment in this poem is in the first line, the word “personally.” Everything after that word is impersonal, the received language of a form rejection letter sent by the poetry editor, who we know nothing else about, other than the poetry editor is male and uses impersonal forms of rejection. But the humor of the poem comes entirely from the placement of that impersonal language into one of the most personal of situations. Sex between a writer sending in work and the editor reviewing that work is comical only because the perceived distance between the writer and the editor is vast, is palpable, and the language of a form rejection makes that distance seem unbridgeable. But then, in this poem, suddenly that distance is obliterated into an uncomfortable intimacy.

Of course, the poem is also a form of revenge, as the rejection of the writer’s work becomes a rejection of the editor’s penis—and in the editor’s own words, no less. It’s a powerful reversal for being a reversal of power, and, sure, with the surprise and hilarity on a first reading. Upon further consideration, this poem does perhaps boil down to another stock “form”—a “that’s what she said” joke, which contorts language not intended to be sexual into a sexual situation always at the expense of women. But in the case of this poem, it’s the male poetry editor who is the joke, whose rejection has rejected him. Rejection is the only “happy ending” available to him.

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About rejection letter writing, some advice I once heard:
“It’s like the Marines—go in fast; get out even faster.”

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Many editors keep a “template rejection” at hand as a means of more quickly composing a “personal” letter. The template might include spaces to fill in for the author’s name, the title of the manuscript, and other details. This template letter often has various permutations so the editor might easily cut and paste reasons for the rejection to custom fit for any kind of submission:

[DATE]

[ADDRESS]

Dear [NAME OF POET]:

Thank you for sending [TITLE], which we have read and seriously considered for publication at [PUBLISHER]. We appreciate your patience during the last [NUMBER] [MONTHS or YEAR[S]] while we read and considered your work.

In this time, [TITLE] moved from our slush pile of unsolicited submissions to our [EDITORIAL ASSISTANT’S or GRADUATE ASSISTANT’S] desk, before it then found

its way from the [NO SNOWBALL'S CHANCE or UNLIKELY or "B"] pile to the heralded [HALLS OF MOUNT PARNASSUS or LIKELY or "A"] pile. From there, [TITLE] moved into the [FOURTH, FIFTH or SIXTH] dimension, where admittedly it was lost for a short time as it turned from [A SOLID, LIQUID, or GAS or DARK MATTER or A TOXIC THREAT] into a [A SOLID, LIQUID, or GAS or SONNET CROWN]. Upon reintegration, [TITLE] materialized long enough for our [EDITOR] to read and seriously consider it. What an amazing journey your submission has made, and only in [NUMBER] short [MONTHS or YEAR[S]!

I have the [UNPLEASANT or SELF-GRATIFYING] job of informing you that [PUBLISHER] decided it will not publish [TITLE], not [EVER or IN THE NEXT TWO YEARS or IN ITS CURRENT STATE]. I have no doubt there is a great deal of merit in your poetry, but finally it came down to [ENTER ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING]:

[1] THE FACT THAT YOUR WORK READS LIKE

[1a] A HALLMARK CARD.

[1b] A JOHN ASHBERRY KNOCK OFF.

[1c] A TAX RETURN.

[1d] WISHFUL THINKING.

[1e] LYRICS BY GORDON LIGHTFOOT.

[1f] YOUR RESUME.

[1g] DIRECTIONS FOR HOW TO ADMINISTER THE HEIMLICH.

[2] THE FACT THAT WE DON'T PUBLISH

[2a] SONNET CROWNS.

[2b] LIVING AUTHORS.

[2c] POETS RESIDING ABOVE 42nd STREET.

[2d] POETRY IN TRANSLATION.

[2e] YOU.

[3] THE REALIZATION THAT

[3a] WE HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU'RE ATTEMPTING, EVEN IN YOUR COVER LETTER.

[3b] THIS IS POETRY AND WE DON'T PUBLISH POETRY.

We hate to be [DISAPPOINTING or WISHY WASHY or SOUL-CRUSHING], but I hope you understand our position and can accept this personal response as some kind of [CONSOLATION or CONVERSATION STARTER or BATHROOM WALLPAPER]. Sincerely, and with [REGRETS or BEST WISHES FOR NATIONAL POETRY MONTH],

[NAME OF EDITOR]

[TITLE OF EDITOR]

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This is advice stolen from a writing workshop about how to offer constructive criticism to other writers, but it's advice I've heard about writing rejection letters:

“Use the ‘Poison Sandwich’—offer some positive comments first; then slip in the rejection; end with final words of praise and good wishes.”

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Other problematic language: “turn down,” as if the editor might be putting the writer to sleep.

Other problematic language: “Poison Sandwich.”

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You will disappoint, can only disappoint, will always always disappoint. You will carry that disappointment with you. You will receive responses from writers you disappoint. Some of them will use your name. Some of them will be kind.

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Here’s a poem, a sonnet, by Craig Morgan Teicher:

To an Editor Who Said I Repeat Myself and Tell Too Much

The mouth works all its life to spit a vowel—
some long sound with feeling fenced in
by the sharp stops of a few consonants, a howl
and a pen to keep it tame, a calm din
that won’t drown out the life it tries
to say, but won’t deny, either, that hell
is the sound we’re born making, the cry
in the womb, which we tell
and tell—too much, of course—
in the hope of exhausting it. Stated plain,
there is no other subject—rejoice, remorse,
repress—all words stand for pain.
Over and over I say—what else can I do?
All words stand for pain. Fuck you.

The poem is, in effect, a reverse rejection letter. You can’t blame an author for writing one, even publishing one, like this poem or Francesca Bell’s poem above. Your rejection rejects you, and that rejection can take many forms.

For instance, there’s enough force in what an editor might write in a rejection letter to inspire a Shakespearean sonnet. Teicher’s poem is exhilarating in that it risks and admits a certain pettiness—on the part of both the editor and, I think, the writer.

While you can imagine the anger of the writer in response to the editor's rejection letter—for here are the anguished words of the writer's response—can you imagine the actual contents of the editor's rejection letter? In the writer's mind, that letter seems to look like this:

Dear Writer,
You repeat yourself and tell too much.
Signed,
The Editor Who Says You Repeat Yourself and Tell Too Much

In other words, what is brilliantly made palpable in this poem is the fact that all the writer hears is that the editor says he repeats himself and tells too much. The editor's actual words are reduced to some essence, just as the writer's words in the poem are finally reduced to "Fuck you."

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The editor in Bell's poem is rejected for saying, essentially, nothing. The editor in Teicher's poem is rejected for saying, essentially, something. This is exactly the space where the editor is schooled in the art of rejection.

It is so much easier to say yes. Yes is what the editor wants to say. No is what the editor must say.

I'm sorry to disappoint you, the editor says.

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Something else I must tell you, finally: we are all meant to side with the author. Even as you practice the art of rejection, always side with the author. You are the writer's advocate, even when they might not see that, even as you fail each other. They are sending their manuscript to you in hope you will see them in all their humanity, their anguish, their joy, their triumph, their vulnerability, their pain, and not turn away. You will turn away.

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Alternate titles:

"To an Editor Who Said I'd Love to See What You're Working On"
"I Long to Have the Work in Mind"
"To an Editor Who Watched over His Sedated Infant Son in the NICU"
"To an Editor Who Wanted to Be a Writer"
"I Long to Hold the Finished Book in My Hand"
"To an Editor Who Suggested I Change My Title"
"I Long to Have the Reader in Mind"

“To an Editor Who Wanted to Edit Books instead of Write Rejection Letters”
“I Long to Hold the Editor’s Hand in My Hand”

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Dear Author,

Thank you for being in touch with your essay on the topic of rejection. Perhaps some will want to turn the table and hear from a working editor about rejection letters—what goes into writing them, and what they mean for the editor as well as to the writer.

But, as an editor myself, I have to write such a letter to you now. When it comes down to it, this essay just doesn’t feel like a winning proposition. Who wants to dwell on what gets rejected, when we could be dwelling on what does, finally, get published? Maybe this is my failing, but it feels like you might be writing this to no one, or perhaps only to yourself as a sort of confessional. There’s just no audience for this kind of writing.

I’m sorry to disappoint you.

Best wishes,

Editor

With gratitude to Francesca Bell and to Craig Morgan Teicher. Bell’s poem “I Long to Hold the Poetry Editor’s Penis in My Hand” appears in *Rattle*, and is used by permission of the author. Teicher’s poem “To an Editor Who Said I Repeat Myself and Tell Too Much” appears in his book *To Keep Love Blurry*, and is used by permission of the author and BOA Editions.

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