

(This craft essay originally appeared in *Poetry Kit Magazine*)



FEATURE – DAN MASTERON

5-book poet, founder/director of *Enskymnt.org*

WHAT DO THOSE POETRY EDITORS EXPECT, ANYWAY!

Here they come, two of them: Him and Her. Each has an office, with a closed door; Do Not Disturb signs dangle from the doorknobs. They're ready to consider your submitted poems and a zillion others, but first they'll make some coffee and get comfortable. That will give me a chance to tell you an editor story.

John Ciardi, the late poet and translator, was for years, the poetry editor for *The Saturday Review*. I asked him once, over dinner, how he chose poems for the magazine. He set his chocolate mousse aside and described the process. He read submissions only on Wednesdays in his Manhattan office. His secretary would have the poems (with their self-addressed-stamped envelopes attached) piled flat on his desk, usually 600-700 of them. She would place a large box to the left of his chair, ready to receive the rejected pieces. He'd read only the first line of each poem. If he found any he admired, he'd set the poem aside. Next, he'd read the first and second lines of the surviving poems. By now, he'd have three or four poems left. At this point, I asked him how many poems would he accept on a usual Wednesday. None. The overwhelming number of poems published in the magazine during those years came through solicitation by John Ciardi.

The editors are back, alone in their offices, coffee piping hot, the poems piled high. With any luck, they'll read more than the opening line or two. They start with the title. They like titles. They can tell a lot from them. If the title is an abstract word such as *Friendship*, or *Mother*, or *Sincerity*, they won't even get to the opening line. Into the box or drawer or basket it goes. Why? Because they're

quite sure that the poem is going to contain something like, "Everyone needs a friend to be with you until the end. Search the world so big and round until you know you've finally found, blah, blah, blah." No thank you. Next!

A few quotes to consider: Ezra Pound: "Go in fear of abstraction. The poet presents details, he doesn't comment." Aristotle: "Character is revealed only through action." William Carlos Williams: "Ideas only through things." Goethe: "I no sooner have an idea than it turns into an image."

Back to our editors, closeted away with our masterpieces, taking a break after rejecting the Friendship piece. What would have saved the poem from doom? Specific details. They want details, pictures. They want to hear about two friends who went to the hospital together because one was donating her kidney to the other. They want to see them in separate beds in the same room, being wheeled to the operating room, holding hands while they are put under anesthesia. Now that is friendship!

What else do they want, these coffee-sipping gods deciding your destiny? They want each line to show them something. They see an invisible box next to each line. If they can sketch in a little picture of what's going on in each line, they'll be happy. They can sketch in a hospital bed, but they can't sketch in a little sermon or a piece of advice. They want to be able to ignore the words, at poem's end, and just glance at the boxes from top to bottom, as though it were a filmstrip. If more than a couple of boxes are empty, bye bye poem.

They don't want to see many adjectives or adverbs, believing as Ciardi did that adjectives are the enemies of their nouns just as adverbs are enemies of their verbs. Adjectives are okay if they change the concept of their nouns. For instance, if the barn they visualize as big and red and wooden turns out to be small and tin and purple, you'd better tell them so. Otherwise, barn is all they need. Adverbs usually signal the reader that we've made a poor word choice. Instead of saying that someone ran quickly, try for a better verb: scampered or dashed might do. Check your thesaurus, but avoid the fancy choices.

Ritual will get their attention. Editors and readers love

ritual. It's very cinematic, and poetry is far closer to film than it is to philosophy or any other genre you can name. Take the editors through the process. For instance, allow them to tag along with the two girls on the way to the operating room: the squeak of the wheels on the gurney, the transparent tubing running from the elevated bottle into the patient's arm, the glint of light glancing off the donor's eyeglasses, the plastic identification bracelets on the girls' wrists, the gum-chewing orderly humming a tune as he nonchalantly wheels the gurney down the hall. Chances are, the editor will feel like sending you a thank you note. Every detail is an unwrapped gift. And don't explain. They'll get it. They don't need to be told that the orderly is less involved than the girls are. The poet Donald Hall calls those comments elbow nudgers: did you get it, did you get it? Yes, we got it. Now stop talking and give me more of the scene.

Do editors enjoy Personification? Not usually. "The flowers spoke to me." No they didn't. Theodore Roethke, the Father of the New Romantics (James Wright, Richard Hugo, and David Wagoner), was convincing while discussing Nature, but he never tried to sell us that miracle. When we give human qualities to objects of Nature, we are saying that we are superior to them. Well, think again. We are puny compared to the trees and streams and clouds. Allow them their dignity. Don't force them to bow and sing and embrace us.

Comparisons are somewhat akin to that sort of leap. Similes and metaphors often hurl the editor out of the poem. If we compare one of the gurney friends as having eyes as blue as the sea, we run the risk of the editor falling into the memory of last summer's vacation at the beach. Instead, compare the young woman's eye color to the pale blue walls of the hallway leading to the operating room. That way, the editors stay inside the ritual.

Avoid allusions. They too are capable of sending the editor away from the poem, and they often tend to suggest that the poet is showing off. If you're tempted to compare a scene to a moment in one of Shakespeare's plays or Dickens' novels, think better of it.

How long do editors want lines to be? Funny you should ask. That's next on my list. They don't care. If it works, it works. However, ten syllables is a fair measure. The sonnet

works well with that limit, and editors don't have to turn their heads back and forth as though they're watching a tennis match. Further, if a line over-extends itself, there is a chance that it may begin to sag or bend. Think of it as a length of wood. A foot-long 2" by 4" is not going to bend. A twenty-footer, if you were strong enough to hold it by one end, would begin to bend like a fishing pole. Trust your ear and eye. If it sounds or looks as though it's time for a line break, go for it. You might also plan on having each line contain three or four hard beats.

More on line endings: the last word of a line holds an important spot. It is that word that the editor will carry and think about on the long journey back to the start of the next line. Make it count. Avoid ending a line with "A" or "An" or "The." Line breaks can serve other purposes. Momentary confusion will sometimes keep an editor alert. James Wright's poem, "The Blessing," ends with an interesting line break: "If I stepped out of my body I would break -" The speaker is seen breaking, perhaps like a pottery vase. But, in the next moment, the poem's final two words ignite the image: "into blossom." That sort of line break is called an enjambment, and--in this case--the result is ambiguity.

There's a belief that contemporary editors don't like poems that rhyme. Don't believe it. Editors don't like poems that rhyme badly. Unless you are intimately connected to rhyme, be careful. Make sure rhyme isn't controlling you and the poem. Don't ever use a word just because it rhymes with an earlier word choice. Don't rupture a line by turning it upside down and inside out so that a rhyme word lands where you want it to be. Allow words to rhyme in other locations than at the ends of lines (interior rhymes). Slant rhyme (also known as near rhyme and off rhyme) is useful (it also keeps editors alert): fist/fast - lurk/look - fin/fan. Read some rhyming poetry by Richard Wilbur. He's one of the best.

Hand-in-hand with rhyme comes meter. Terrifying Meter! Students are often found covering their ears and falling asleep at the first mention of the word. No need. Meter is just another tool on the poet's workbench. The first sonnet that was written was not a known form; it was a nonce. Whenever you start a new non-metrical poem, you are creating a nonce (a momentary form). If your nonce catches on, it may find itself in the arsenal of forms, no longer a

nonce, but a grand form whose structure may be studied in graduate programs around the world. Big deal. Also, some of the metrical forms can save time.

There are a couple dozen meters, but modern and contemporary poets tend to use only four. Fluff up your pillow if you like, but don't fall asleep; I'll make this fast. Most poems are written in Iambic or its opposite, Trochaic. The iambic uses a soft (u) syllable followed by a hard (/) syllable. Here's an example from Theodore Roethke's poem, "The Waking" (a villanelle): "I wake to sleep and take my waking slow." Ten syllables, starting with a soft followed by a hard. Easy as that. Trochaic is the opposite. The iambic supplies a marching sound. Poets finding that a love poem isn't gentle enough often discover that it's in iambic: "Now let me talk with you again." (sounds a bit scolding. If they switch it to trochaic, they find the poem becoming lighter: "Let me talk with you again." (going from a hard beat to a soft beat lightens the tone.)

Two more to go: Anapestic and Dactyllic. I learned the contents of anapest by allowing the word to be a girl's name: Anna Pest. Two soft beats (An-Na) followed by a hard beat (Pest): uu/. Someone once told James Dickey that anapest was a very difficult form in which to write. So, he wrote his next collection (Helmets) in anapest from beginning to end. Actually, it's quite a comfortable form, once you get going. Try it: I will wait for the sun to arise over there by the brook. uu/ uu/ uu/ uu/ uu/. If you happen to like the sound and enjoy playing the game it suggests, live it up.

Last one: Dactyllic (/uu) - the opposite of anapest. Believe it or not, a number of years ago there was a movie which frightened people even more than Meter. It was "Jaws," and it did so well, the producers decided to scare the bejabbers out of another generation. "Jaws II" came out with great fanfare. The ads centered around one line: "Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water." Perfect dactyllic: (/uu /uu /uu /uu /u) - except the last foot is trochaic (/u) instead of dactyllic (/uu), but we'll forgive them for that. After all, a marquee is only so wide. Did the writers working on the advertisement in some fancy ad agency know about all that meter stuff and actually choose dactyllic for effect? You bet they did.

What turns editors away from our poems? Many things. Two of them are the same things which annoy us, as readers: Self Congratulation and Self Pity. We don't want to sense that the reason the writer wrote the poem was to garner praise or pity. We want the characters in our fantasy world of poetry and fiction to be brave and humble. One way to avoid the possibility of falling into either one of those traps is to use 3rd person instead of 1st person: He or She, rather than I and Me. Third person also helps us avoid talking our way through a poem. While wearing the mantle of the 3rd person narrator, we are so busy describing the scene (filling up those filmstrip boxes along the margin) that we don't have time to brag or whimper or inflict elbow nudgers on the editors.

Our friends, the editors, also recoil from our work when they sense we are trying too hard. James Dickey used to call that tendency a "straining for poetic effect." I remember when he applied that phrase to one of my poems he was kind enough to read. I recoiled and quietly comforted myself with the knowledge that he was incorrect. However, after further consideration, I realized that he was on target. I had been way up on my tiptoes, trying desperately to be seen as a poet. We need to be flatfooted, using our own voice, the voice we use in conversation with a friend. That's a difficult lesson to learn.

Editors often, but not always, turn away from what I call Noun-of-Noun constructs. Writers enjoy splitting two nouns with an "of." Usually, the first word tends to be tactile and visual, while the second tends to be an abstract. Now and then, it works, as in "Grapes of Wrath." "Fingers of Terror" is less interesting than "Fingers of Rust"; "Eyes of Anger," less engaging than "Eyes of Stone." Your Aunt Lucy and Uncle George may prefer the abstract words, but probably they don't happen to be editors.

Journal editors do not want to be our English teachers or professors. If they find errors, they figure that we are careless and not devoted to the task at hand. Out it goes. Next! Errors of choice will be recognized as such, and probably accepted. That is, if you choose not to use quotation marks, and you make the poem work without them, fine. William Carlos Williams didn't want his poems to appear formal and stuffy, and he broke many rules successfully. James Dickey, in some of his longer poems

(see "Falling," for instance), used spaces instead of punctuation, creating what he called "windows in walls of words." Richard Hugo wrote, in his fine craft book, *The Triggering Town*, that semicolons are ugly and that we should never use them. You're the boss (;) you decide, but do take a look at that book (;) it's fine. Another helpful book is John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*. Don't let the title fool you; it helps poets as well. And, while I'm at it, familiarize yourself with the excellent website entitled *Drowning Man* (<http://www.drowningman.net>). You'll find an array of 300-some poetry journals just a click away.

Editors want poems which they believe present events that must have been important to their authors. They want to sense a residue of pain and/or experience. They also want to feel that the poet knows about the material at hand. Therefore, if an editor catches us in a factual error, we're done for. It all comes down to the writer/reader contract. When we submit work, what we are saying is that it is the best we can do. The editor, from his or her desk, is saying that he or she will read it, but that we are to realize that if we waste the editor's precious time with poorly written, error-bedecked lines and stanzas, chances are we will never be read by that person again.

We must also remember that editors want to enjoy our work. They're not out to get us, reject us, ruin our lives, but they're busy and will take any excuse to get on to the next poem balanced atop the tower of pages facing them. They enjoy reading well-structured lines and phrases. Therefore, we should think twice before streamlining a piece by deleting articles. The result of that habit used to be called *Tonto Talk*, referring to the way *The Lone Ranger's* faithful Native American sidekick, *Tonto*, spoke, in broken English. Now it's referred to as *Telegram Talk*, since it makes it seem as though the author is being charged for each word used, and is trying to save money by being brief. So, use the articles and verbs, allowing the lines to be fully crafted.

Are stanzas important to editors? Everything is important to editors. The real question is, are stanzas important to the poem. They often are. The word stanza means "room." And each room in a house or a poem is somehow unique. A stanza is similar to a scene in a movie. In screenwriting, we teach that the writer needs to decide to

whom the scene belongs, what it should accomplish, from what scene it will flow and what scene it will be followed by. It is also good to remember the "clothesline rule." That is, think of the whole piece as a length of rope representing the day of the event. We should enter the scene as late as we can, and we should leave the scene as quickly as we can after the scene's purpose has been accomplished. We speak of the process as "trimming the rope," the decisions serving as the rope's scissors or knife.

The editors have read many poems by this point, filled their coffee mugs to the brim a number of times, and have perhaps already come to our poems and have called downstairs to stop the presses so that our poems can share the front cover - the first time anyone's work has ever been placed on the cover of this elegant journal. Congratulations to both of us. Thank you. Thank you. But, just in case they haven't arrived at our work yet, let me mention the importance of breaking the editors' hearts. There are many well-intentioned poems about events which should touch us deeply, but for some reason, they fall flat and we just don't care about the characters and their lives. Editors are capable of feeling the same way. Perhaps we all feel as though we've been toyed with. That is, the writer set out to make us weep. That doesn't work. That's what most of the greeting cards try to do; "So you've had a baby boy! O, my goodness, joy joy joy." That's why you and I purchase blank baby cards so that we can write something of our own. We don't want editors or readers to respond by saying, "O, what a sweet person he or she must be." We want them to say, "Wow, this poet is really involved in the moment." The poet Galway Kinnell gives us a "wow" moment when in a poem about his infant daughter, he writes that as he sat one evening, singing quietly to her, wrapped in his arms, she reached inside his mouth to take hold of his song. What a moment! Poet Peter Verrick once said that he knows when he's read a good poem because when the poem stops, he goes through the windshield.

How do we get back to a moment like that, perhaps after the child has grown into womanhood? Memory helps, and often, objects help. I suggest you invest yourself in each of your poems in some personal way. Purchase a book on the topic. Purchase or find a relic or any tangible item tied to the event. Make it small enough to carry with you. How about that baby's hairbrush tucked away in a drawer all these

years? A sock? A scrap of paper she colored on? A sliver of wood from the birdhouse he made in first grade. You get the idea. Such a relic, kept in your pocket, can become a constant companion, a reminder of the poem in progress. Each time you touch it, you'll be thrown back into the poem. Try it. It might enable you to get the proper response from the editors.

Did you include a cover letter with your poem? If so, one of those editors may be reading it right now. There are different opinions concerning such letters, of course. I have strong feelings about the appropriate contents. I suggest you begin the letter by addressing the editor by first and last name. Then, make the text of the letter brief and uninformative. Something like this: Dear Monica Bookjacket, Enclosed are three new poems from my growing manuscript entitled Waiting for the Crosstown Local. I look forward to hearing from you after you've had a chance to read "One Book too Many," "I Know It's Around Here Somewhere," and "Cleaning the Attic Without You." - Sincerely, Anna Pest.

Nothing more. Allow the editors to think that they probably should know you, imagine that the ms you mention represents your 5th book, and that you're probably a famous poet they've missed somehow. Allow the poems to wow them all by themselves. Good luck with it all, and write on!