

CHAPTER 8

Publishing

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Frank Morley once claimed that T. S. Eliot was appointed to the board of directors at the publishers Faber & Gwyer as a sound businessman; he was a banker who had worked for eight years in the City of London. Morley was exaggerating, but he correctly suggests that Eliot's literary reputation was not in itself sufficient to persuade the board to employ him in the autumn of 1925. Eliot himself recounted that his name had been passed to Geoffrey Faber as a literary adviser during a dinner at All Souls College, Oxford, by his friend, the journalist and man of letters Charles Whibley. Faber had recently joined Lady Gwyer's Scientific Press, a publishing house specialising in medical textbooks and periodicals (most notably, *The Nursing Mirror*) and he was planning to reorganise the firm as a general publisher. Eliot recalled a nervous interview in the spring of 1925, when he successfully convinced Faber of his usefulness to the new venture. It meant release from his work in a basement office at Lloyds Bank and Eliot described it as the best piece of salesmanship he had ever undertaken. Faber in turn persuaded any sceptical colleagues that Eliot's editorship of the highbrow quarterly review the *Criterion* would bring the firm prestige as well as extensive connections among British, American and European writers and intellectuals. Initially employed as a non-managing director at £400 per annum, Eliot told Faber that he 'did not have in mind an exact correspondence between the publishing and the review', but that he wished to avoid 'publishing a book by some writer who had been consistently and steadily damned in the review' (*L2*, 610).

A lifelong friendship between Faber and Eliot ensued. It is worth remembering that Faber, a published poet (Eliot praised Faber's 'fine heroic note' in a review in the *Egoist* in 1918),¹ a formidable scholar with a first in Oxford 'Greats' and estates bursar of All Souls, did not automatically defer to Eliot's literary judgement. Eliot described Faber as a good chairman of the weekly Wednesday book committee meetings, which took place around a large octagonal table strewn with readers' reports



Figure 3 24 Russell Square, London.

and bottles of beer, lasting (according to Morley) from ‘lunch till exhaustion’.² It was here that book proposals were discussed and decisions regarding publication were taken. Faber was attentive to the advice offered by his fellow directors, tolerant of their humour and even their practical jokes, but he was very much chairman of the board, not averse to putting his colleagues in their place if the occasion demanded it. Yet this was the exception rather than the rule: the atmosphere at 24 Russell Square, the large Bloomsbury town house transformed into the offices of Faber & Gwyer, was gentlemanly in the manner of a Victorian family business.

From his top-floor room, a snug garret with sloping ceilings and a view across Woburn Square, Eliot set about establishing the finest English poetry list of the twentieth century. Aside from the onerous duties of editing the *Criterion* as the firm’s flagship literary journal and – until its

demise in 1939 – a recruiting ground for potential Faber authors, Eliot carefully cultivated and advised several generations of writers, as his voluminous publishing correspondence from four decades (occupying 120 box files) attests. Given his remarkable success in the field of English poetry, it is perhaps surprising that his beginnings as a publisher were less than auspicious. His first recommendations in the field of French literature, translations of Jean Cocteau's *A Call to Order* and Henri Massis's *Defence of the West*, were commercial failures. The money lost on them made him cautious about pressing recommendations, for he fully understood the importance of financial imperatives. Moreover, his earliest, rather unremitting initiatives in building up the literary side of Faber & Gwyer upset several of his London acquaintances. Richard Aldington was annoyed that Eliot's proposed series of critical biographies on European men of letters curtailed his own involvement with Routledge's Republic of Letters series, while Leonard and Virginia Woolf were surprised and distressed to discover that Eliot had persuaded Herbert Read to defect to Faber & Gwyer from their Hogarth Press.³ They did not welcome this new rival in the niche publishing field of advanced modern poetry, and they were entitled to feel aggrieved, as the London publishers of both *Poems* (1919) and *The Waste Land*, when they saw, without warning, Eliot's *Poems 1909–1925* announced in Faber & Gwyer's first catalogue.

There is no doubt that Eliot himself was the firm's most important and, in the long term, most lucrative acquisition as a poet. His slender output of new poetry appeared at strategic intervals, starting with 'The Hollow Men' in *Poems 1909–1925*. The Ariel Poems pamphlet series was the vehicle for 'Journey of the Magi' (1927), 'A Song for Simeon' (1928), 'Animula' (1929), 'Marina' (1930) and 'Triumphal March' (1931), attractively illustrated with the artwork of E. McKnight Kauffer and Gertrude Hermes. 'Burnt Norton' made its first appearance in *Collected Poems 1909–1935* and consolidated his reputation as the pre-eminent poet of his generation. Although Eliot exercised a great measure of control over the appearance, arrangement and distribution of his work, he was often an inattentive proofreader (hard pressed by other responsibilities), contributing to the instability and unreliability of successive editions, including his *Selected Essays* (where 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is misdated to 1917) and the *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, in which there are several errors and unauthorised final emendations. Over these decades his writing was so much in demand, and was issued so many times and in so many forms, that he could scarcely keep up. Unlike many poets, his work was never in danger of going out of print. Even under exigent wartime

publishing conditions, including paper rationing, 'Little Gidding' was published in 1942 in a print run of 16,775 copies. The 1959 paperback edition of *Four Quartets* had a staggering print run of 58,640 copies.

The halcyon days of Eliot's work as a publisher followed the withdrawal of Lady Gwyer's interest and the reorganisation of the firm on 1 April 1929 as Faber & Faber (a name selected for euphony, since no second Faber was active on the board). Joined by his American friend and occasionally sparring partner Frank Morley, Eliot was (ir)reverently dubbed the 'Pope of Russell Square': many luminaries of modern literature were drawn to Faber by the gravitational pull of his presence. Championing controversial figures was to be an important part of his achievement and of his legacy as a publisher. They included writers of his own generation such as James Joyce, Ezra Pound and D. H. Lawrence, and younger writers such as Samuel Beckett, Djuna Barnes, Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell. Eliot was determined that the firm should publish Joyce's 'Work in Progress', and sections from it, *Anna Livia Plurabelle* (1930), *Haveth Childers Everywhere* (1931) and *Two Tales of Shem and Shaun* (1932), appeared as pamphlets. In July 1931, Joyce signed a contract with Faber for the rights to the completed work, although it would be eight further years before *Finnegans Wake* was finally ready for publication, following innumerable editorial tribulations which put a strain on the friendship between Eliot and Joyce (who lamented the failure of 'Feebler and Fumbler' to publish a UK edition of *Ulysses*).⁴

Pound found a sympathetic new London publisher. Eliot introduced a 1928 Faber edition of his friend's *Selected Poems* and commissioned, copy-edited and wrote 'blurbs' for subsequent works. In 1937, Eliot reported to the book committee regarding Pound's idiosyncratic *Guide to Kulchur*: 'We asked for this and we have got it. It is only a damned kulchered [*sic*] person who will be able to find his way about in this book, but for the perceptive there are a good many plums, and for the judicious who know how to trim the boat with their own intelligence there is a good deal of wisdom.'⁵ At times, Pound could be exasperating; obstinate and arrogant on matters that left his publisher vulnerable to the laws of libel. Eliot's secretaries recalled the time and effort that went into managing this difficult author. Still, Eliot's loyalty as a friend and as a publisher was crucial in keeping Pound's presence before a wary poetry public. His blurb for the *Pisan Cantos* spoke with quiet authority of these cantos as 'both more lucid and more moving than some of their predecessors, with the same technical mastery but a new poignancy of human speech'. The catalogue continued: 'Such an achievement is all the more extraordinary, because

of their having been written under conditions which, for most men, would have stifled inspiration and prevented composition' – a reference, that is, to Pound's incarceration in an American prisoner-of-war camp outside Pisa, as a consequence of his broadcasts for Fascist Italy.

The 'Pope of Russell Square' gave countless business lunches and tea-and-cake audiences to aspiring writers. He was instrumental in launching the 'Auden Generation' of Oxford poets, who were nurtured in the *Criterion*. Auden himself was launched in *Poems* (1930), and although Eliot occasionally found him to be supercilious, Faber were to be the chief purveyors of 'Vin Audenaire' (as a 1937 advertisement put it) for more than three decades. With the young Stephen Spender, Eliot took an avuncular interest, offering him practical advice on how to build up a reputation. Principally, Eliot emphasised the need for an emerging poet to foster a select readership and to avoid publishing too much (Spender's literary and political criticism appeared elsewhere). In 1933, Spender's first Faber collection was introduced by a blurb which claimed: 'If Auden is the satirist of this poetical renaissance, Spender is its lyric poet.' This sentence incited the Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis to complain, 'Whoever was allowed to write it knew nothing about poetry'⁶ – but the ignorance was his, for the blurb was written by Eliot. Louis MacNeice was also corralled into Faber's stable of Oxford poets. His debut was accompanied by another magisterial blurb: 'His work is intelligible but unpopular, and has the pride and modesty of things that endure.' Years later, in an obituary note on MacNeice, Eliot drew attention to the differences between the gifts of 'several brilliant poets who were up at Oxford at the same time'.⁷ Distaste for Cecil Day Lewis led Eliot to differentiate between the respective merits of that Oxford collective poet satirised as 'MacSpaunday' in Roy Campbell's Faber volume *Talking Bronco* (1946).⁸ Day Lewis remained with the Hogarth Press.

Cambridge poets did not fare as well as Oxford poets at Faber in the 1930s. Leavis's protégé, Ronald Bottrall, was dropped following the publication of *Festivals of Fire* in 1934, which led to several awkward letters of rejection, particularly given Eliot's principle (later stated publicly) of sticking with poets 'through thick and thin however disappointing the response of reviewers and readers'.⁹ This explains why Eliot sometimes took years in coming to a firm decision on the long-term promise of a young poet, preferring to test them out in the *Criterion* before recommending book publication. Charles Madge, a young Cambridge poet, turned out to be one of Eliot's less inspired choices, and although Faber published William Empson's second collection, *The Gathering Storm*

(1940) – deliciously epitomised by Eliot’s blurb as a development from ‘the most brilliantly obscure of modern poets’ – Empson would later send Eliot the ‘most insulting letter which I have ever received’.¹⁰ Empson wrongly alleged that his publisher had failed to promote his work. Eliot was so annoyed that he directed future correspondence to his younger colleague Peter du Sautoy. (Thankfully, cordial relations between Eliot and Empson were restored.) James Reeves, who had collaborated with Empson on a Cambridge student periodical, was invited to tea at Russell Square and given reviewing work for the *Criterion*, but as a poet he remained outside Eliot’s fold. He recalled that Faber published the most ‘fashionable poets’, adding that this imprimatur ‘had an enormous cachet attached to it’.¹¹

Eliot’s attention, of course, was not focused solely on poets fresh from Oxford and Cambridge. The case of George Barker is illustrative in this regard. In 1934, Eliot was so excited by his first reading of Barker’s poetry that he touted his talent – sometimes using the word ‘genius’, although circumspectly¹² – to potential benefactors, including Lady Ottoline Morrell and Virginia Woolf. His efforts to raise funds and find employment for Barker were not uncharacteristic of his generous dealings with a number of impecunious waifs and strays: he usually gave them terse, often severe, criticism on matters of poetic technique, but tempered this with encouragement. He offered Barker practical advice on the selection and arrangement of his poems in a volume and on the need to continue to develop as a writer, suggesting that he seek to clarify his ‘difficult’ poetry in order to communicate better with his audience (although he was told to ignore the popular market). Barker was included – together with Auden, Spender, MacNeice, Yeats, Pound and Eliot himself – in Michael Roberts’s *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936). This was a canon-forming attempt to delineate the ‘new bearings’ in English poetry, and in American poetry too, since it also featured Marianne Moore, whose *Selected Poems* had been published by Faber the previous year, introduced by Eliot’s subtle analysis of Moore’s metric. (In 1945, Eliot acquired Wallace Stevens for Faber, another key American poet.) By establishing a canon of modern/ist poetry, Roberts’s anthology eclipsed its rival, W. B. Yeats’s eccentric selection in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (also 1936). In 1939, Eliot’s patronage of an anthology drawn from the pages of Geoffrey Grigson’s feisty little magazine *New Verse* helped secure Faber’s dominance in the market for serious modern poetry.

Poets who were rejected by Eliot, Laura Riding and Basil Bunting for instance, had their acceptance in London literary circles delayed by decades. By the 1940s, however, he had become less sure of his ability to

discover new talent, often seeking a second opinion from his former secretary Anne Ridler. Shortly before becoming a Faber poet herself, she chose the poems in Faber's *A Little Book of Modern Verse* (1941), unassumingly prefaced by Eliot, and in 1951, following Roberts's premature death from leukaemia, she updated the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*. By this time, Eliot's initial enthusiasm for several Faber poets had cooled. In 1950 he reacted with extreme distaste to the exhibitionism of *The True Confession of George Barker*. It appeared instead from the Parton Press and was omitted from Barker's Faber *Collected Poems* of 1957. Another of his protégés, Henry Treece, was so wounded by the detachment evident in Eliot's blurb for *The Exiles* (1951) that the repentant publisher offered him an apology. Nevertheless, Faber continued to attract outstanding poets throughout the 1950s, including Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes. Charles Monteith wrote a somewhat non-committal report on Hughes's *The Hawk in the Rain*, but a handwritten addition by Eliot urged that he be snapped up immediately. Hughes's diary records that he was in awe of his studiously correct, impeccably dressed publisher; yet beneath the carapace of old-fashioned courtesy, he saw Eliot as 'a rather over-watchful, over-powerful father'.¹³

In addition to poetry, Eliot was responsible, as Peter du Sautoy recalled, for a 'very distinguished' list of books on theology, to which he sometimes contributed prefaces and essays.¹⁴ He also frequently consulted Philip Mairet, a collaborator on the *New English Weekly*, on proposals relating to sociology, economics and philosophy. Mairet recalled:

Of the costly attention [Eliot] has devoted to new or obscure authors I could a tale unfold; I mean, of his care that work in which he discerned value should not perish, though it might be quite unpublishable without onerous revision. Many people must have thought that the trouble he took in this direction was a work of supererogation, or even regrettable in a creative writer already heavily occupied in other ways; but I am sure he did not think so. The altogether rare kind of personality that he brought to publishing meant more than nursing the offspring of writers who are better thinkers than writers – though this can involve one in labours and in decisions that are harassing enough. A higher spiritual expense is liable to be incurred in deciding whether to sponsor the work of authors who may have undeniable competence of some kind, and are venturing into yet uncharted oceans of thought.

According to Mairet, 'a good part of Eliot's best influence on the younger intelligentsia was communicated personally through his ministrations as editor and publisher'.¹⁵ Eliot took so much trouble over the submissions of young writers that Mairet was not alone in wondering if all these aspirants were worthy recipients of his rare critical intelligence. It should

also be said that there were days when his routine of publishing duties – dealing with authors and agents, answering business correspondence, reading manuscripts, writing book reports, composing book-jacket blurbs – could feel like wasted labour.

After joining Faber, Eliot read the lion's share of unsolicited manuscripts in French and German. He also read a significant quantity of fiction and detective fiction, but he made it clear that his judgements on a genre he did not practice were fallible. Inevitably he made mistakes. He wrote on behalf of Faber to decline George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: it certainly wasn't prudent for his firm to be seen criticising the Soviet Union, then Britain's wartime ally.¹⁶ Still, Eliot's rejection letters were always carefully worded and contained a personal touch. His habitual refrain was that since his areas of publishing expertise did not make the firm money, he was obliged to ensure that he didn't lose too much. (Not that his young poets were likely to grow rich on 10 per cent royalties on sales over 500 copies – which is probably why he declared that 'poetry is not a career, but a mug's game' [*UPUC*, 154].) Eliot's stated aim 'to lose as little [money] as possible' could sound a little disingenuous once his name had become synonymous with Faber's success as a publisher of modern literature.¹⁷ He tended to overplay the occasions when his poetry recommendations were shot down in the boardroom. On the other hand, his infrequent recommendations designed to increase the effectiveness of the sales and marketing side of the business were far from compelling to his colleagues (in the late 1940s one suggestion regarding publicity sparked an apoplectic response from Geoffrey Faber).¹⁸ From the 1950s onwards, Eliot scaled back his publishing duties. He was permitted the luxury of tackling *The Times* crossword during the longueurs of the weekly afternoon book committee, until a special 'Mr Eliot's list' was drawn up to concentrate the aged eagle's publishing eye. Excessive demands were no longer placed on this elder statesman of letters, Nobel laureate and OM, whose health, which had never been robust, was beginning to fail.

In his affectionate 1961 memorial address for Geoffrey Faber, Eliot remarked that his chairman could not have foreseen how the risky recruitment of an obscure avant-garde poet back in 1925 had altered his life. (In fact, Faber told A. L. Rowse he had 'rescued Eliot for poetry'.)¹⁹ It is worth recalling the unhappiness of Eliot's private life in the years after he joined the firm; how the Fabers and the Morleys propped him up following his separation from Vivien Eliot in 1933, and how his loyal secretaries handled his distraught wife on her unscheduled appearances at Russell Square, keeping her in the waiting room until he could slip out of

the building. The abiding memory of Eliot, recalled by Geoffrey Faber's secretary in the mid 1930s, was of 'an unhappy man, smoking innumerable Gauloise cigarettes, crouched over his desk in an attic in Russell Square'.²⁰ Yet in many ways, Eliot's office, decorated with cherished personal mementos, became his home from home. A poem addressed to Morgan, the company cat, whimsically depicted him sharing Eliot's wartime fire-watching duties at Russell Square and is indicative of the way Faber became his family: little Tom Faber, among other godchildren (the children of colleagues), was the inspiration for *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), lyrics which appeared posthumously in the musical *Cats*, swelling the coffers of the firm where he had worked for forty years. Faber had been a rock to Eliot in the years following his separation from his first wife and it is fitting that he should propose to his second wife in his office. Eliot's marriage in January 1957 to his devoted secretary of seven years, Valerie Fletcher, might be viewed – in respect of his connection with the publishing house he did so much to lend world renown – to have set a crown upon a lifetime's achievement.

NOTES

1. 'Short Notices', *Egoist* (August 1918), 99.
2. F. V. Morley, 'T. S. Eliot as a Publisher', *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium*, ed. Richard March and Tambimuttu (London: Editions Poetry London, 1948), p. 67.
3. Virginia Woolf suggested that Eliot had 'poached' Read. See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 447.
4. The first UK edition of *Ulysses* was published by Bodley Head in 1936.
5. Quoted in Ronald Schuchard, 'T. S. Eliot at Fabers: Book Reports, Blurbs, Young Poets', *Areté* (summer/autumn 2007), 76.
6. F. R. Leavis, 'This Poetical Renaissance', *Scrutiny* (June 1933), 70.
7. 'Mr Louis MacNiece', *The Times* (5 September 1963), 14.
8. In a 1956 report for the Faber book committee, Eliot remarked: '[Roy Campbell] has the inconvenient habit . . . of satirising in his rough clownish way, Faber poets'. Quoted in Schuchard, 'T. S. Eliot at Fabers', 80.
9. 'The Publishing of Poetry', *Bookseller* (6 December 1952), 1568.
10. Quoted in *Selected Letters of William Empson*, ed. John Haffenden (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 159.
11. 'Conversation with James Reeves', *Review* (1964), 69.
12. T. S. Eliot to George Barker, 26 September 1937: 'I believe in your genius, so far as one is ever justified in believing in genius except in retrospect, and I believe that it is genius if anything and not talent.' Quoted in Robert Fraser, *The Chameleon Poet: A Life of George Barker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p. 101.

13. Ted Hughes journal entry, 5 January 1965, quoted in *Guardian* (2 September 2009).
14. Peter du Sautoy, 'T. S. Eliot: Personal Reminiscences', *Southern Review* (autumn 1985), 954.
15. Philip Mairet, *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Neville Braybrooke (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958), p. 43.
16. T. S. Eliot to George Orwell, 13 July 1944: 'I am very sorry because whoever publishes this [*Animal Farm*] will naturally have the opportunity of publishing your future work: and I have a regard for your work, because it is good writing of fundamental integrity.' Quoted in Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 458.
17. 'Publishing of Poetry', 1569.
18. Details from the Faber archive related by Matthew Evans in *Guardian Review* (6 June 2009), 20.
19. Quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p. 328.
20. Erica Schumacher (née Wright), letter to Jason Harding, 1 February 1999.