

xiv lines

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A LETTER TO JAMES SMITH

from T. S. Eliot

This essay, or at least these comments, contains extracts from a very short letter from Eliot to James Smith. The letter is dated 21 June 1926 and sent from London.

The introductory paragraph¹ clearly indicates that Smith has sent Eliot the manuscript of his poem for possible publication in the **Criterion**. In addition, the poem has obviously been written in heroic or riming couplets indicated by the reference to Pope and his verses.

I found this letter to be somewhat amusing and, in some ways, a little harsh. However, Eliot is not critical of Smith's work, but more against the use of this style of verse. In the following extract, emphases and superscripts are mine.

The desire to imitate or emulate Pope is itself rare and commendable.^(a) To imitate Pope is in itself highly useful for anyone who wishes to write poetry.^(b) I have done it myself, not so very long ago either, and with the exception of one or two lines I do not think that my verses were any better than yours, and perhaps not so evenly good. **I destroyed mine and recommend you to do the same.**^(c) Nothing in this style of verse is of any value except as an exercise: and this **for the reason that it has already been done literally to perfection.**^(d) **You cannot improve on Pope,** nor can you get anywhere by burlesquing him or ragging him because there is just sufficient element of burlesque in Pope himself to render him immune.^(e) **So there you are.**^(f)

Comments pertaining to the sentences highlighted by superscripts:

- (a) Likely more so today! It is extremely rare to see anyone try to imitate or emulate Pope. Seriously, I doubt that few would have heard of Pope let alone be capable of imitating him. Those who *have* tried, yes commendable.
- (b) Nothing better could be written or spoken. Pope's work was inspired (*he* was inspired is probably better) by Dryden. It is interesting to note that Eliot was fond of Dryden as a critic, poet and playwright himself. The consensus is the Pope perfected the riming couplet, and even *better than Dryden*.
- (c) Here is a little praise for Smith's effort. Perhaps some modesty on behalf of Eliot. He is referring to **The Fire Sermon** from his **The Waste Land**. The point of being destroyed is not correct, but more the case is that many lines were canceled from the typescripts. Eliot was fond of traditional

¹ Not included in this note. (Adhering to the fair-usage policy of Faber and Faber.)

meter and iambic pentameter, but Pound was after something different, something new. At times you would find an iambic pentameter verse in which one word was canceled resulting in something quite new and effective. But cancel the right word in the right line. As for the suggestion that Smith should destroy his verses, I believe that would be difficult and the outcome depends on the relationship between Eliot and Smith as to how the comment was made. Smith was himself a critic and educator and an occasional contributor to the **Criterion**. Eliot would later support Smith's application for Professor of English at Fribourg.

- (d) While I agree that Pope had perfected the riming couplet, I do not agree with considering it merely as an exercise. We might even say that Eliot has contradicted himself comparing this with the second sentence where he says it is *highly useful*. We must give Eliot the benefit of the doubt since he does state that these are *hurried statements in lieu of criticism*. Eliot had taken a long time to reply to Smith and may have preferred to brush it off as quickly as possible for that present time. Nevertheless, the lack of skill demonstrated by today's poets shows an ignorance of technique and construction. A study of Pope's work and some attempt to imitate his rhythm (meter) and rime would serve them well. What is touted as *vers libre* can only be improved with a study of classical forms which we may say are *tried and proven*.
- (e) Very true, one cannot improve on Pope and yes, Pope was indeed immune to most burlesque and ragging (insults, mocking and the like) and he could deliver much better than what he received.
- (f) *So, there you are*. Ha! I would say, a little Eliot humor rather than a *know-all* statement, especially after reading correspondence between Eliot and Pound. Although, one is almost expecting an exclamation.

It would be interesting to know if Smith destroyed his verses. As we know, this was one of Eliot's habit or eccentricities. He would destroy initial drafts or manuscripts once the matter had gone to typescript or publication. He also believed that unfinished work should also be erased. Basically, it is useless in its current state, so forget it or create something better with it. It would be difficult for people to follow this example, but Eliot's mind was very different.

As for the imitation of Pope: I believe that this is an honorable pursuit for those writing or starting out to write poetry. You cannot go wrong. However, there comes a stage when imitation must cease, and each poet finds their own voice. This may of course be styled on another but will naturally contain some unique traits according to the individual. Take what is useful or rather, what you can use, and forget the rest.

This letter (extract) was taken from:

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Faber and Faber, 2012

Did you know there was never a second **Faber** figure? The change of name was due to **Faber and Gwyer** agreeing to go separate ways. Geoffrey Faber bought out Lady Gwyer and renamed the company. The second *Faber* was added to give the name some symmetry. Who would have thought?

