

# SHOULD EZRA POUND BE SHOT?

## Five Writers Indict Him as a Traitor. A Reply to His Apologists in "PM."

Isidor Schneider, in NM, December 11, pointed out that the defense in the treason trial of Ezra Pound was trading on the bourgeois concept of poet as "holy idiot." Mr. Schneider discussed the viewpoints of five American poets and an American critic who, he said, "pre-endorsed Pound's holy idiot defense" in the November 25 issue of PM. The poets were E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Conrad Aiken and Karl Shapiro. The critic was F. O. Matthiessen, of Harvard. Mr. Schneider, arguing that Pound deserved a traitor's fate, asked the six who wrote the PM statements: "After reading the excerpts from Pound's broadcasts do you want to let those statements stand?" (According to PM, they had not seen the excerpts from Pound's broadcasts.)

Below we publish Prof. Matthiessen's reply. In addition PM prints the viewpoints on this case sent us by Albert Maltz, author of *The Cross and the Arrow*, Eda Lou Walton, poet and co-editor of *This Generation*; Arthur Miller, author of the novel *Focus*, Norman Rosten, poet, author of *The Fourth Decade*, and Lion Feuchtwanger, the eminent anti-fascist German novelist.

### Lion Feuchtwanger

THERE can be no objection whatever when a poet sets himself above the ramparts of party and withdraws into the clouds or an ivory tower. But when, during war, he uses his cloud or his ivory tower as a sniper's post, he must be prepared to be dragged down and placed in the dock. He who regards the aim of justice to be not to avenge but to deter cannot draw a distinction between the talented or untalented wrecker. On the contrary, through respect for his art he can with the clearest conscience imprison or hang the wrecker-poet.

### Albert Maltz

OVER the Italian radio a voice shouted anti-Semitism, offered glorification of fascism, urged treason upon Americans. The voice spoke in wartime, and it belonged to an American citizen. For this an American court indicted the voice and the person. It could have done no less.

For the same crime, the British sentenced Lord Haw Haw and John Amery. For the same crime, the United States will try Tokyo Rose. For an equivalent crime, the people of the United States made Benedict Arnold's name one to spit upon.

And yet some say that the voice and person of Ezra Pound should be inviolate. I submit that he is not less guilty than the others, but more guilty. He is not less guilty because he is a poet—he is more guilty *because* he is a poet.

When a poet becomes the enemy of Man—when a poet stoops to the vile wolfishness of racial hatred—when a poet, who inherits the humanitarian culture of the ages, betrays his heritage and his talent to fascist thieves, sadists and murderers—then what is he? He is unspeakable—he is carrion.

If Ezra Pound were a lawyer, doctor, businessman or factory worker, no voice would be raised in his defense. Yet it is *because* he is a poet that he should be hanged, not once but twice—for treason, as a citizen, and for his poet's betrayal of all that is decent in human civilization.

Let him not be buried in Potter's Field. For him there should be a plot of ground close by Arlington Cemetery for all to see. And there, flat upon his grave, a black tombstone, fittingly inscribed: "Here lies Ezra Pound, poet, who sought to betray Man to fascism. He was executed by the will of the people of the United States."

Do I sound savage? Yes—I remember the corpses of Buchenwald, Dachau, Maidanek. Who dares forget them?

### Eda Lou Walton

IT is difficult perhaps to be sure that Ezra Pound is sane. Having had letters from him on the occasion of every review I ever wrote of his work, I know the violence which he manifests toward any who judge him as not quite the greatest of the great. But Pound's disease, whatever form of egomania it may be, is not exclusive. Many of our artists have suffered from it. Undernourished, or feeling undernourished, by American "culture," they have become a "class" to themselves. They write for each other, talk to each other, huddle together in fearful inaction. Lately they have all become curiously obsessed with a sense of personal guilt about everything—particularly about, it would seem, the fact of having been born. Earlier they had the past to look to and the old world to retire to and other cultures than American to admire. Exiled even from these now, they must live in America, but not be of it. To be of it would be to be bourgeois, commercial, political—all the things that are impure. Not since the days of Edward Arlington Robinson have they recognized clearly what they fled from or to.

*Your dollar is your only word  
The wrath of it you only fear*

The culture of the dollar is disguised in other countries better than it is here. The American poet in England or in France had, he said, a "tradition." Actually he did have a larger audience, for the few were better read. We have not had built into us here the reverence, intelligent or ignorant, for the poet. I doubt if our gentlemen of wealth read as much poetry as do the English or the French. This may explain why we have cultivated beyond and above French symbolism the picture of the poet as the holy idiot. Here the poet has come to think even more exclusively of the word, as the businessman has come to think more exclusively of digits. And the word became God. Satan, on the other hand, was, and is still, largely unrecognized. That he takes the shape of the bourgeoisie most would grant. That he is big business a few have thought too.

Each of us might become some pattern of idiocy if his only reality were himself and his pen. The older artists suffer from what Burke calls a conditioned incapacity. Robinson saw all dreamers in our society as the saintly failures. And since in truth (or dollars and cents) the poets are failures here, they have built themselves up a particular kind of almost religious fanaticism. Beauty, they feel, is not to be found in our citadels to Mammon, but within the word. Each writes to be eaten, to be drunk. As for fertility, they have so impregnated each other, many of these poets, that each important father-poet has a host of children. An incest may bring a divine madness. What I am saying, half seriously and half humorously is that Pound is not alone.



"New Masses" exposes Pound in 1936.

in his suffering from a supreme and neurotic contempt for everything he does not love or know. And today most of the older and more polished and cleverly self-publicized artists love only themselves and know only themselves. Many of them have quite obviously become intellectual fascists—not dangerous, perhaps, for they feel alone, even the signing of a petition, to be impure and unworthy of their position—but declaring that if they must choose between the common man and the present chaos, they prefer chaos. Cummings certainly has always preferred it; a lost romantic, he likes contradictions and confusions and he hates any levelling out. Aiken is brother mourner in Eliot's *Wasteland*. Shapiro is a peculiar case. He has been savagely defending himself from Army anonymity and is now, I've heard, inclined toward saving his personal soul. Matthiessen tried, I think, to say what I have tried to say and perhaps failed to point out.

Certainly Pound should be tried. Certainly he is a traitor. Only the best psychiatrist could test how far his disease, which is social and never so recognized, has driven him from sanity. And certainly, thank heaven, certainly, there are a whole group of poets who have torn at the walls of whatever it is that has imprisoned them. They were much in evidence in the depression years, but they were peculiarly depression poets. What cheers me more is that later some became political poets. And still later, and coming out from so many only half articulate throats of the very young today, there is a literature of resistance to exile and self-adulating loneliness, a literature of brotherly love, humane and very humble before all that is human and alive.

## Arthur Miller

IN THE belief that Ezra Pound's trial for treason is of high importance to the future direction of American letters, and poetry in particular, I should like to offer my commentary on the reaction of five poets and a critic to the Pound case in the newspaper *PM* of Sunday, November 25. The majority of the reactions are alarming.

All six agree that Pound's contribution to literature was of the highest order. With this no man can argue.

With the exception of Louis Untermeyer and possibly F. O. Matthiessen, the poets believe Pound's propaganda for fascism undangerous, either in the past, or if Pound is freed in the future. Says Mr. Cummings: "Every artist's illimitable country is himself." Which in its context, means that the poet has no responsibility for what he says so long as he means what he says.

William Carlos Williams believes that "He [Pound] isn't dangerous, they [the press] are." Karl Shapiro opines that "as a US citizen he committed the crime of not reversing his beliefs after Mussolini came to blows with Jefferson."

Conrad Aiken finds that Pound merely "betrayed a particular society of men for man in the abstract." And F. O. Matthiessen, although urging justice be done, feels that Pound's propaganda was "far too old and literary to have had an effect."

If I may be pardoned some non-poetical language, the boys are cutting the baloney pretty thick. Shapiro ought to know that Pound is not accused of not "reversing his beliefs," but of aiding and abetting the enemy by broadcasting propaganda calculated to undermine the American will to fight fascism. And Mr. Aiken ought to know by now that Pound did not betray himself to "man in the abstract" but to Mussolini whose victims are, to be sure, now buried and abstract, but who was a most real, most unpoetical type of a fellow.

And not being a poet, I used to listen, now and then, to Ezra Pound sending from Europe, and I can tell Mr. Matthiessen that in his wildest moments of human vilification Hitler never approached our Ezra. For sheer obscenity Ezra took the cake. But more, he knew all America's weaknesses and he played them as expertly as Goebbels ever did and with an effect equal to any short-wave propagandist. He was neither "odd" nor "literary." His stuff was straight fascism with all the anti-Semitism, anti-foreignism included.

But it is not the absence of political acumen or simple legal knowledge that is so alarming in the reactions of these poets, who are correctly characterized by *PM* as leaders in the field. It is rather that they have given notice in these replies that in their view they include themselves in this. They even go so far as to advance the astonishing thesis that the laws punishing treason cannot apply to poets.

I ask these gentlemen what they would say if four well-known bridge engineers asked such immunity for another bridge engineer who had gone abroad to work and propagandize for the enemy? Would they be willing to absolve such a traitor on the ground that he had given America many beautiful bridges? What do they say now when Hjalmar Schacht maintains that he cannot be guilty of "crimes against humanity" since he operated only as a businessman, and calls upon American businessmen to de-

By the way, Ezra, your movement is growing in America. The *New Republic* has just printed some sweet, pussyfooting, kindly articles by Stark Young in defense of Fascism. He writes like a maiden aunt defending her favorite tomcat from detractors. He mentions many things, but he does not mention the big industrialists and bankers who provided the funds for Mussolini's Black Shirts, hired him as one hires a gangster to protect their property. (Ernest Hemingway knows the facts about this, and could write them). And Mr. Young does not mention the five thousand corpses of trade unionists, co-operative members, peasants and workers upon which Fascism inaugurated its regime.

No, these facts are like doses of Fascist castor oil to you boys. Has that feeble fairy Jean Cocteau ever killed a trade union leader? Will Stark Young ever disembowel a peasant or shoot children for the glory of Fascism? Mussolini did; he saved the bankers and industrialists, rent, interest and profit in Italy.

There are other recruits to your movement here Ezra. You will be cheered to know that President Hoover has enlisted in the ranks and has empowered Secretary of Labor Doak to use Fascist methods for breaking strikes in this country. Many generals in the U. S. Army are going Fascist, it is very popular among army men. The American Legion is reading your articles, Ezra, and it is rumored you are to be an honorary colonel. H. L. Mencken is swinging over, and will soon be yours, perhaps. Lorimer and the *Saturday Evening Post* have been strongly for you these past three years of depression. Governor Fuller of Massachusetts is on your side, and the Ku Klux Klan is changing from nightshirts to blackshirts. You may yet return triumphantly, Ezra, to a Fascist America, and lead a squad that will mystically, rhetorically but effectively bump off your old friends, the artists and writers of the *New Masses*.

Always ready, but hoping to see you in hell first,

The New Masses

Open letter to Ezra Pound by Mike Gold, September 1931. "New Masses."