

## EZRA POUND: "PSYCHOTIC", OR JUST A LIFE-LONG ANTI-SEMITE

By Merle Molofsky

I found myself both fascinated and disturbed by a quotation attributed to Ezra Pound, which Arnold Richards sent, "The worst mistake I made was that stupid suburban prejudice of anti-Semitism", and by an article on the IP.net website, "Pound's Anti-Semitism at St. Elizabeths: 1945-1958, by Ellen Cardona. Her article is wonderfully rich, meticulously researched, and yet, I found myself disagreeing with a major premise in the article.

The argument in the article that his literary writings were lucid, while his bigoted writings were psychotic, doesn't make sense to me. The author cites work by Wendy Flory, and agrees with Flory. She offers this quote by Flory: "Throughout Pound's years in St. Elizabeths, political or economic topics invariably precipitated a psychotic response. Yet on any other topics, such as literary matters, Pound was able to be logical and reasonable and often to show an energetic enthusiasm. A change of topic would cause an instantaneous switch into or out of a psychotic mood in a way that has been noted by many people, from his daughter, describing how her father was at the time of the broadcasts, to his visitors during the St. Elizabeths years" (Flory "Pound and anti-Semitism" 291). She then goes on to quote Flory again, stating that Flory makes the same type of argument in her work, *The American Ezra Pound*". She offers this quote: "And yet he was able to an unusual degree to confine his psychotic thinking to the one topic around which it had grown up in the first place" (162). She then states, "This one topic involves a banker's conspiracy, and Flory notes that on any other topic, Pound's writing was 'entirely lucid and reasonable' (*The American Ezra Pound* 162). From my examination of the correspondence from Harry Ransom Center, I believe that Flory is correct."

I don't agree that Pound's writings discussing literature are "clearer", "more lucid", than are his writings discussing Jews. For instance, the article quotes him as saying, "Remember you are much better educated than Shakespeare's audience and they understood him without college profs". I find Pound's statement ludicrous, not at all clear nor lucid.

Shakespeare's audience spoke the same Elizabethan English that Shakespeare spoke. Twentieth century college students indeed may struggle with Elizabethan English vocabulary and style. Shakespeare's audience may have been very aware of elements of English history, so that the situations in plays about Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, may have been quite familiar to Shakespeare's audience, but not to 20th century American students. Also, the sociocultural content of plays like "Cymbeline" may have been easily recognizable to Shakespeare's audience, but not to 20th century college students.

Perhaps what is being overlooked when comparing what Pound said about literature with what he said about Jews is that hatred is not "psychotic", just aberrant, and loathsome. If he was foaming at the mouth about Jews, he was vituperative, and didn't bother to polish his prose.

Maybe Pound's "madness" wasn't madness at all, just a political choice to keep him out of jail. St. Elizabeth's may have been much more comfortable and safe than jail would have been, especially for someone charged with treason during wartime, in the aftermath of that war.

During his hospitalization, he continued to spout anti-Semitic ideas. He would not talk to psychiatrists who had what he considered "Jewish names". He recommended "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" to visitors. He maintained friendships with other avowed anti-Semites and bigots. When he was released, he made some effort to restore his reputation by ostensibly renouncing anti-Semitism, but privately he continued to espouse anti-Semitism.

Madness shmadness. Maybe just plain old evil ideology.

Why whitewash Pound? Or T.S. Eliot? Or Jung? Or any other eminent thinker? Or popular writer? Or celebrity?

Was Agatha Christie psychotic when her writings were blatantly anti-Semitic and racist? Or was she just a garden variety bigot? The Anti-Defamation League wrote a letter protesting her bigotry. Christopher Hitchens reported that when he had dinner with Agatha Christie in the 1960's she was openly anti-Semitic.

Also, "intellectuals" were not necessarily awakened to the horrors of the Holocaust by the publication of the work of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi in 1960, as Ellen Cardona suggests. Some were already awakened. Of course, the world benefited from Elie Wiesel's and Primo Levi's poignant, brilliant work.

My working class parents had a thick volume of writings emerging from the Holocaust, with onion-skin thin pages, which I read when I was a kid, some time in the early 1950's. I was traumatized reading those articles and short stories. Surely intellectuals who were educated, middle or upper class, perhaps academics, had access to such a book, since my poor, working class, self-educated parents did. The writings of Elie Wisel and Primo Levi certainly are remarkable, quite wonderful, and did a great deal to reveal the evils of the Holocaust, and rightfully should be revered, and read, and re-read.

Ezra Pound never gave up his anti-Semitism, not his pro-Fascist ideas. After being released from St. Elizabeth's, he traveled to Italy, in order to remain as close as possible to the once dominant Fascist ideal that prevailed prior to the end of WW II. The first thing he did on arriving in Naples was to give the fascist salute He remained a life-long anti-Semite.

"The central fact which dominates the relations of Jew and non-Jew is that the Jew is 'different.' He looks different. He thinks differently. He has a different tradition and background. He refuses to be absorbed." — Winston Churchill

"The Jewish domination of the media ... There's a major lobby in the United States. They are hard workers. They stay on top of every comment, the most powerful lobby in Washington. Israel has fucked up United States foreign policy for years." — Oliver Stone

"There is a trait in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity, maybe it's a kind of lack of generosity towards non-Jews. I mean there is always a reason why anti-anything crops up anywhere; even a stinker like Hitler didn't just pick on them for no reason." "I am certainly anti-Israel, and I have become anti-Semitic."— Roald Dahl

"The strongest impelling motive of the Jewish race is love of profit as distinct from any other form of money earning." — Beatrix Potter

"They are, all of them, born with raging fanaticism in their hearts, just as the Bretons and the Germans are born with blond hair. I would not be in the least bit surprised if these people would not some day become deadly to the human race." — Voltaire

Don't forget other famous anti-Semites: Charles Lindbergh, Coco Chanel, , John Galliano, Henry Ford, G. K. Chesterton, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Evelyn Waugh, Denis Diderot, Mel Gibson.... And, alas, Fyodor Dostoevsky....

Of course there are the good guys, those who decried anti-Semitism: Emile Zola, Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy. Bless them!

Merle Molofsky, MFA, NCPsyA, LP