Lettvin, Feld discuss Ezra Pound's facsimil

By Barb Moore

As Biology Professor Jerome Lettvin stated it, a debate over the Ezra Pound Affair is something of an "autopsy on a dead issue," but Wednesday night in the Student Center lounge the controversy was once again discussed.

The debate, sponsored by the MIT Hillel and moderated by Associate Dean for Student Affairs Robert Holmes, compared the views of Lettvin and Professor of Physics Bernard Feld on the issue of presenting the Emerson-Thoreau award to Ezra Pound, one of the great American poets.

The controversy centered around the fact that Pound made several broadcasts during World War II for Mussolini, where he recently died.

Several years prior to his death, a committee of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences proposed to award the Emerson-Thoreau prize to Pound on the basis of his "contribution to the broad field of literature." The council then considered the possibility that his anti-Semitic views might offset some of his contributions to literature. The Academy decided to reverse the decision to present the award.

Another point made by Lettvin was that the committee that reviewed the award had no cooperation in judging the value of poetry. The group reportedly included no poets or other literary figures, but was, in the words of Lettvin, "a bunch of biochemists and other grocers" as assistants. Also, during the reviewing process, the point was brought out that Pound was a "madman" and that his actions were the "actions of a madman."

Lettvin felt as though the Academy were playing "word games," and that Pound's sanity, or lack of it, should not be a factor in judging his poetry. He said that "at this time, nausea overtakes me and I resign" from the Academy.

Lettvin went on to say that on the basis of the decision of the Academy in the case of Ezra Pound, no American living at this time is entitled to receive any such award, without going up his citizenship, in view of the atrocities being committed by the US government in Indochina. In being a citizen under such a government, Lettvin argued, one is as guilty of having immoral beliefs as was Pound.

He concluded that it was the art that you were mandated to award."

The two hour debate prompted no clear-cut explanation of the incident, but did show that the question is based upon a misinterpretation of the exact purpose of the award. The general impression of the audience was that it agreed with Lettvin when he stated, "I would rather have Pound with extreme anti-Semitism than a world without Pound."

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