

Introduction

Yvor Winters as Critic and Poet

Biographical Introduction

Our finely grained identities
Are but this golden sediment.

(“On the Portrait of a Scholar of the Italian Renaissance”)

The American poet and critic Arthur Yvor Winters was born in Chicago on October 17, 1900, son of Harry Lewis Winters and Faith Evangeline Ahnefeldt Winters. His father, after working in real estate, became a grain and stock trader on the Chicago Stock Exchange. Although Winters lived briefly in Seattle and visited grandparents in the Pasadena area as a child, Chicago was his home until 1919. After education at Evanston and Nicholas Senn High Schools, he attended the University of Chicago for four quarters, 1917–18. There he studied science but also became a member of the Poetry Club, to which belonged the young writers Monroe Wheeler, later director of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; Glenway Wescott, poet and novelist; Elizabeth Madox Roberts, poet and novelist; Pearl Andelson Sherry; and Maurice Lesemann, later a businessman. He had already begun his lifelong reading and writing of poetry in high school, but expanded his activity through a friendship with Harriet Monroe, founder and editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

Winters's life abruptly changed when, in the winter of 1918–19, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He was sent first to Riverside, California, then to St. Vincent's Sanatorium and later Sunmount Sanatorium in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for treatment. For the next five years his career was shaped by the need to recuperate from his illness. While at Sunmount, he met Marsden Hartley, the Modernist painter. Of one of Hartley's New Mexico landscapes Winters wrote that it possessed an “ominous physical mysticism,” which Winters himself felt was “the principal characteristic of this country.” His poetry from this early period in *The Immobile Wind* (1921) and *The*

Magpie's Shadow (1922) clearly reflects not only the hallucinatory quality he sensed in the landscape but the isolation and enforced physical repose that treatment of tuberculosis at the time required. In later years he wrote of the enervation the disease induced: "The disease filled the body with a fatigue so heavy that it was an acute pain, pervasive and poisonous" (Brigitte Hoy Carnochan, *The Strength of Art: Poets and Poetry in the Lives of Yvor Winters and Janet Lewis* [Stanford Univ. Libraries, 1984], 11–17).

Released from Sunmount in October 1921, he taught for two years in high schools in the coal mining camps of Cerillos and Madrid, New Mexico, experience which forms the background for many of his early poems included here. At this time Janet Lewis, who had joined the Poetry Club in Chicago, was diagnosed with the same illness, and came to Sunmount in 1922, where they met and formed a friendship that resulted in their engagement and marriage on June 22, 1926.

Meanwhile, Winters had resumed his college education by enrolling at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where in nine successive quarters, 1923–25, he achieved his B.A. and M.A. in Romance Languages and Phi Beta Kappa membership. With degrees in hand, he accepted a teaching job at the University of Idaho, Moscow, which he held for two winters, 1925–27. Some of his experiences on a four-day train journey from Boulder to Moscow are reflected in his poem "The Journey." The period spent teaching in Moscow, living with his two Airedales as a boarder with a local family, forms the background of his only work of fiction, *The Brink of Darkness*, first published in Lincoln Kirstein's distinguished literary journal *Hound & Horn* in 1932. After returning to Santa Fe, he moved with his wife to Palo Alto, California, where he enrolled as a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford University in the fall of 1927.

During the years prior to his move to northern California, while living in Santa Fe, Boulder, and Moscow, Winters had published, besides *The Immobile Wind* and *The Magpie's Shadow*, nearly a dozen reviews in periodicals such as *Poetry*, *Dial*, and *This Quarter*. Of the poems included in the first two books, Brigitte Carnochan writes in *The Strength of Art* that many grew out of experiments in Imagist technique while Winters was at St. Vincent's and Sunmount (17). He

also engaged in extensive correspondence not only with his Chicago friends but with other poets and critics in the East, the South, and abroad, including Hart Crane, Allen Tate, and Ezra Pound. He was well known as a modern poet and critic before arriving at Stanford, a fact that affected his career at that institution.

From 1927 to 1935 he was a graduate student and taught as an instructor in the English department. His dissertation concerned modern American literature, which at the time was considered an anomalous subject for scholarly study but was welcomed by the department chairman, William Dinsmore Briggs, a scholar of Renaissance humanism and Ben Jonson. During this period Winters published *The Bare Hills* (1927), *The Proof* (1930), *The Journey and Other Poems* (1931), and *Before Disaster* (1934). In addition, he founded, with Janet Lewis and Howard Baker, a little magazine of poetry and fiction, the *Gyroscope* (May 1929–February 1930), and served as Western editor for *Hound & Horn*, from 1931 to 1934. He continued to publish extensively as a critic. A daughter, Joanna, was born in 1931.

After taking his Ph.D. degree in 1934, Winters remained in the English department, partly for reasons of his and his wife's health, until his retirement in 1966. A son, Daniel, was born in 1938. During World War II Winters applied for military service, was rejected because of his medical history, and served in the Citizens' Defense Corps as Zone Warden for Los Altos. When Richard Foster Jones became department chairman in 1946, he urged Winters's promotion and his supervision of the Creative Writing Fellowships for poetry. During these years he was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and in 1960 received the Bollingen prize for poetry. He further established his reputation as a poet, through editing *Twelve Poets of the Pacific* (1937), publishing his *Poems* (1940) on his own press and *The Giant Weapon* (1943), editing *Poets of the Pacific: Second Series* (1949), and publishing with Alan Swallow his *Collected Poems* (1952) and *The Early Poems* (1966).

His first three critical books, *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry* (1937), *Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* (1938), and *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), were collected with an additional essay in *In Defense of Reason* and published by Alan Swallow in 1947. These essays were the work

of fifteen years, many growing directly out of his teaching of American literature at Stanford. Winters felt, as he wrote in his preface, that the collection developed a single theory of literature and a single theory of the history of literature since the Renaissance. These were followed by his book *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (1946) and another collection of essays, *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (1957). These books, in conjunction with his final critical study, *Forms of Discovery* (1967), and an anthology edited with Kenneth Fields, *Quest for Reality: An Anthology of Short Poems in English* (1969), form a coherent and lucid defense of the kind of poetry that Winters most admired and sought to establish in the English language in the twentieth century.

In 1961 a special issue of *Sequoia* (winter 1961) was dedicated to Winters by friends and former students, and in 1966 the English department published in honor of his retirement a collection of twenty-six poems by friends and students, *Laurel, Archaic, Rude*, edited by myself. After two operations for cancer of the throat, Winters died on January 25, 1968, at Stanford Hospital. In 1973 Francis Murphy edited *Yvor Winters: Uncollected Essays and Reviews* (1973)—an incomplete collection—and Janet Lewis edited *The Collected Poems of Yvor Winters* (1978)—also not entirely complete. In 1981 *Southern Review* published a special issue in his honor edited by Donald E. Stanford. R. L. Barth has since edited and published two books of Winters's uncollected poems, for the periods 1919–1928 and 1929–1957.

Allen Tate, with whom Winters had corresponded in the early years and argued about poetry—with “great zeal”—wrote that of his generation, “he is one of three major poets,” and that “an ignorant and superstitious generation has chosen to be unaware” of his “powerful verse” (*Sequoia* [winter 1961]: 2–3). More than twenty years later, on the occasion of an exhibition of the Winters-Lewis Papers at the Stanford Library, United States Foreign Service diplomat Henry Ramsey wrote of the “obsidian-like self-confidence in critical matters” of his friend and the teacher of his youth, and that “Joy to him was experience transformed to language, both mysteries to probe, both joys to encounter with the fullness of one’s powers” (*Sequoia* [autumn 1984]: 49).

On the same occasion, the poet Edgar Bowers recalled that

Winters displayed an “egalitarian spirit” in the classroom and out, and that he possessed “no ordinary sense of humor.” Bowers defined it as a kind of *hilaritas*, meaning (quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer) “not only serenity, in the classical sense of the word, such as we find in Raphael and Mozart,” but what Bonhoeffer describes “as confidence in their own work, a certain boldness and defiance of the world and of popular opinion, a steadfast certainty that what they are doing will benefit the world, even though it does not approve, a magnificent self-assurance” (*Sequoia* [autumn 1984]: 52–56). Of his classroom method, the poet Thom Gunn remembered that he proceeded “by means of persuasion and demonstration rather than dogmatic assertion, . . . always prepared to discuss the view of the opposition” (*Southern Review* 17 [1981]: 687).

Scott Momaday, poet, novelist, and painter, with whom Winters shared a love of New Mexico, speculated that had he not been a poet, “had he not ‘taken literature seriously,’ as he put it” to Momaday, he would have been a farmer. “And he would have been, like Jefferson, a farmer of strong philosophical persuasion, a man of original thoughts in any case” (*Strength of Art*, 7). Kenneth Fields, among others, notes that Winters showed “great kindness and generosity toward those who wanted to learn from him” and that “for him literature was a supremely important and exciting endeavor” (*Sequoia* [autumn 1984]: 60).

Of his character, Turner Cassity specified his “granitic integrity” and, of his teaching of the writing of poetry, wrote that “the response to the immediate . . . was his specific genius” (*Southern Review* 17 [1981]: 700, 694). Separate memoirs by poets Kenneth Fields, Philip Levine, Donald Hall, and Donald Davie, and by Winters’s colleague in American Literature, David Levin, record Winters’s teaching style, his personal generosity, his humor, his fondness for boxing, his love of Airedales, and the egalitarian spirit noted by Bowers. Of his integrity, Levine, in a poem entitled “30,” records an illustrative anecdote. While conversing in his garden in Los Altos with Levine (then a poetry fellow at Stanford), Winters, as Levine remembers, said: “Philip, we must never lie, / or we shall lose our souls” (*The Bread of Time: Toward an Autobiography* [New York: Knopf, 1994], 256). The quotation indeed illustrates the man.

The Search for Critical Understanding

Constant principles govern the poetic experience.

(In Defense of Reason)

Perhaps the most striking feature of this selection of the poems of Yvor Winters is the contrast in style and subject between the early poems, written before 1929, which are in experimental meters and forms, and the later poems, written in traditional English iambic meter and in a variety of traditional prosodic forms. Winters acknowledged this change in his poetic practice in the preface to *The Early Poems* (1966), explaining that it was not a “sudden intellectual or religious conversion.” Rather he found that he could not write poems of the quality he admired in Baudelaire, Valéry, Hardy, Bridges, and Stevens—“in a few poems each”—by the method he was using, so he changed his method, “explored the new method,” and later came to understand the “theoretical reasons for the change” he had made as a practical necessity (13).

His exploration of the reasons led him to write the critical essays and books enumerated above. His achievement made him the most innovative American literary critic of the period after 1930. Donald E. Stanford writes that Winters is “the only important poet of the century to go from experimental to traditional poetic technique” and “the only critic of the twentieth century who formulated a coherent theory of poetry at the same time he was practicing it” (*Revolution and Convention in Modern Poetry* [Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1983], 191).

Winters is often called a New Critic, because his work was developed in dialogue with R. P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, and others during the 1930s and 1940s, but he does not properly belong to that group. In effect, he retheorized the function of the poem and of criticism in a way that they did not. He belongs, rather, in the line of major literary critics in English that runs from Sidney and Ben Jonson through Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold. There is more to be learned from his deeply thought-out resistance to the seductions and limitations of Modernity than from any other critic,

because he attacked the relativistic principles that have led in recent years to the near destruction in the universities of both poetry and criticism itself.

For the most part Winters stood apart from the established norms and ideas of modern literature. Yet Kenneth Fields suggests in a memoir that “his approach is less marked by a distinct philosophy, method, or theory than we have sometimes supposed.” He is not a theorist in the modern sense of “a theory,” which Wesley Trimpi has described “as an idea to be tested, a body of doctrine to be believed, or a program to be instituted.” Rather, Winters is a theorist in the older Greek sense of “viewing” or “observing” (*theoria*), in Trimpi’s phrase: “inclusive observation or contemplation” (*Sequoia* [autumn 1984]: 60).

Because Winters’s discussions of T. S. Eliot challenged the critical establishment and because generally his views on literature and on the most highly regarded poets of the time were assertively evaluative and written in a forthright and deliberate manner, he gained the reputation of being a “dogmatist” and a “formalist”—neither of which he was. As a practical critic, he may more aptly be called a connoisseur—a connoisseur who gives his reasons. Despite some negative reaction provoked by his views, the evaluations he made, in critical essays beginning in the 1920s, of such writers as Melville, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Emily Dickinson, and the experimentalists Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Mina Loy, and others had a significant effect in winning a place in American studies for these authors.

Winters’s idea of what poetry is and should be, at its best, can be touched on only briefly here. On the one hand, he opposed the idea of the poem as an autonomous aesthetic object—the art-for-the-sake-of-art school of criticism. On the other hand, he was never sympathetic to the didacticism of the socially conscious Marxist and socialist critics of the 1930s and 1940s, although he was always concerned for social justice. (One of the last poems he published in the *New Republic* is a sharp satirical comment on race relations in the South in 1957: “A White Spiritual,” in *The Uncollected Poems of Yvor Winters 1929–1957*.) Although like the New Critics he is intensely interested in analysis of poetic technique, unlike them he places the

function of poetry in a far broader context, that of the human consciousness as a whole. While analyzing the finest points of meter, rhythm, and the connotative associations of a word, he never loses sight of the essential function of the poem as a “technique of contemplation” and as a “moral evaluation”—two of his central repeated phrases. In defining poetry he places it beside other genres of writing such as philosophical meditation, as in Descartes, or the essay, as in Montaigne, though different in methods.

In the broad realm to which Winters assigns poetry, he gives it a high place, repeating at several times in his essays that the poetic discipline “is the richest and most perfect technique of contemplation.” It is not a technique which would “eliminate the need of philosophy or of religion, but [one] which, rather, completes and enriches them” (*In Defense of Reason*, 21–22, 29). Moreover, Winters argues many times in his essays that the poem, more particularly, expresses and communicates a unique moral judgment of the experience contemplated.

Winters’s assertions that poetry is a technique of contemplation and that poetry is a “moral evaluation”—or “moral judgment”—of experience have frequently been misunderstood. The word “moral” has unfortunately triggered visceral reactions in careless readers anxious to declare their freedom from any and all moral considerations in the realm of any art. What he means by “moral” as used in those two central phrases and in his essay title, “The Morality of Poetry,” in *Primitivism and Decadence (In Defense of Reason*, 17), is not to say that the poet measures experience against some societal norm, or that poetry is essentially didactic, as was the belief and practice of most of the Marxist and socialist poets, nor that poetry should “teach a lesson” in the Victorian sense. For Winters “moral” means the properly or uniquely human function of the consciousness in establishing a balance within itself of conceptual thought and various emotive and other pressures. The *balance* of the consciousness is a key concept by which to grasp his self-understanding and his poetry and criticism. He thinks of Classical reason (the Platonic and Aristotelian *nous*) as the principle of order within the paradoxical human consciousness.

When Winters, Janet Lewis, and Howard Baker named the little

literary magazine they started in 1929 the *Gyroscope*, they were thinking of the familiar scientific instrument, capable of maintaining its orientation and direction-keeping properties even in changing circumstances. It is used in spinning-tops and compasses and, today, in automatic pilots and ballistic missiles. The founders of the magazine intended the gyroscope as a symbol for the balance of the human consciousness as ordered by reason—Classical *nous*, not Enlightenment rationalism.

Such a Classical conception of reason, though not fully articulated in his critical writings, became central to Winters's understanding of the complex and paradoxical nature of the human consciousness. It is both Platonic and Aristotelian to think of the consciousness as structured by what Plato calls the "metaxy," or in-between condition, as the political philosopher Eric Voegelin has described the nature of the soul for both philosophers. Whether Winters derived this understanding of the consciousness from reading the Greek philosophers or from some later transmission, or simply from his own experience, it distinguishes him from most other modern critics.

For Winters, in art as in life, "moral judgment," as he uses the term, is a matter of comprehensive balance of the powers of the soul and the pressures on it in its in-between state, not of disregard for any aspect of the consciousness, much less of suppression, were such suppression possible. It was a chronic imbalance in the expression of the claims of emotion in the work of most nineteenth-century poets that led Winters to devalue their work. The most fully human, most fully conscious poet, in a quest for understanding, would appeal not only to similar experience of balance in his reader but to a similar capacity for rational thought and judgment about the experience that is the subject of the poem. Grosvenor Powell writes that most of Winters's negative critics "make the mistake of assuming that moral judgment is a wholly un-lived and objective act," rather than, as it was for Winters, "always a lived experience": "It is only moral because it is human; there is always an element of feeling, and . . . the moral judgment is expressed through the human feeling motivated by the poem" (Introduction, *Yvor Winters: An Annotated Bibliography, 1919–1982* [Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1983], 11).

Throughout his critical work Winters remained close to the fun-

damental questions that must be asked about poetry and about literature generally, if literature is to survive. His work shows no inclination to spin fine webs of “theory” in the spider-like manner that presently dominates the critical world of the academy and literary scholarship. Nor was he inclined to go extensively into biographical or historical influences and origins, though he always made use of the most authoritative historical scholarship that he could find in seeking understanding of a text or tracing the influence of ideas. His last published poem, included here, was dedicated to his friend in the English department at Stanford, the esteemed Old English philologist, Herbert Dean Meritt, of whom he wrote: “With cool persistent tact, / You form what men would say.” Another esteemed Old English philologist, Fred Robinson, observes in a review of *Forms of Discovery* Winters’s “imaginative understanding of the exact point where philological scholarship, literary criticism and the writing of poetry . . . share a common concern and exact an equal measure of seriousness from their practitioners” (*Comparative Literature Studies* 5 [1968]: 489).

His criticism nearly always focuses on a particular work, on what it was meant to say, as far as that can be understood, and on how the writer put it together technically. The critic’s final and most important task, after understanding the work on its own terms and in its context, is, for Winters, to evaluate it generally and in relationship to others of its kind, giving reasons for his evaluation, whether positive or negative. In *The Function of Criticism* he writes that “the primary function of criticism is evaluation, and that unless criticism succeeds in providing a usable system of evaluation it is worth very little” (16–17).

Useful in reading Winters’s poems in this selection is an awareness of his view of how language is used in poems and how it can attain a maximum effect. He qualifies his central definition of poetry as “a statement in words about a human experience” by writing that it is a statement “in which special pains are taken with the expression of feeling” (“Preliminary Problems,” *In Defense of Reason*, 363). Words are “audible sounds,” or their “visual symbols.” Simple enough. But next he makes a distinction between the conceptual meaning of a word and its connotations, a thick penumbra of historical and per-

sonal associations that meaning carries with it. Both conceptual and perceptual content are extremely important in Winters's criticism, but understanding of the conceptual meaning should precede response to the emotion elicited.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, most of the emotional impact of a poem is, or should be, derivative from the conceptual content itself—from what the poem actually says. Second, what he calls "the vague associations of feeling" that cling around nearly all words can and should relate coherently, justly, and precisely to what is said conceptually. The feelings and emotional associations evoked by the words should stand in a rational, comprehensible, and just relationship to the statement (the motive).

Winters composed his critical books, essays, and reviews the way he composed most of his poems: so that every word counts. There is little filler. He says what he has to say as clearly and compactly as he can, not troubling to refute objections he feels he has answered elsewhere. Such plainness brings the reader into touch with the essential and perennial questions.

Yet his style brought him some misunderstanding. John Fraser writes in a review of *Forms of Discovery* that in his earlier books "too much of the essential evidence [for his evaluations] was produced only dispersedly." However, in his last book, as in the "final stages of a painting . . . the whole canvas is retouched and the relations of all the parts to each other are fully clarified at last" (*Southern Review* 5 [1969]: 185). Winters completes the argument made throughout his essays by a full chronological discussion and by listing over four hundred poems for commendation: "Almost every kind of short poem is among them, almost every kind of subject, and almost every kind of form and technique." Further, after noting some of the faults of the book which are for him "venial," Fraser writes that what "distinguishes Winters among poetic historians is not only his unwavering concern with the particularity of the poems and poets he discusses and with their relative merits," but also "his concern with the dynamics of poetic history in terms of first-rate states of consciousness." By this he draws attention to Winters's discrimination of a canon of poems in the English language that includes the work of poets so various as Raleigh, Jonson, Vaughan,

Churchill, Dickinson, Hardy, Stevens, and Bogan. Whether the effect of Winters's criticism is permanent remains to be seen. I would hazard the view that unless it is, the role of poetry in the intellectual and cultural life of the mind in the twenty-first century will have lost its most serious and passionate defender.

Discoveries: The Experimental Poems of the 1920s

In this the sound of wind is like a flame.

(*"The Rows of Cold Trees"*)

Some slight commentary—by no means full explications—may be helpful to the reader who is encountering Winters's poetry for the first time here. The first three poems in R. L. Barth's selection are the first poems that the poet chose to reprint in *The Early Poems of Yvor Winters 1919–1928* (1966). "Two Songs of Advent" and "One Ran Before" appeared in *The Immobile Wind*, published when he was twenty-one. The next five one-line poems appeared in *The Magpie's Shadow*, a book of twenty-eight poems composed entirely in this unusual six-syllable trimeter form, not really free verse. Appearing in the first "Song" and throughout many of the early poems is the theme of the human consciousness alone in the physical universe, expressed in terms of austere western American landscapes. The landscapes are those of New Mexico, Colorado, and Idaho, all places he lived while recovering from tuberculosis. The solitary consciousness is represented as a voice in relationship to a landscape.

In the first "Song," the landscape is an "ancient shell," hostile, enormous (voices are only "far whispers"), alien, and isolating to the human being's unique but fragile trait of articulate thought. In the second "Song," the "coyote" has a voice, "running wild in the wind's valleys," but he is regarded as hostile, for he proposes to take over the consciousness: "I enter now your thought." In this and in other early poems Winters uses the Native American poetic form of speaking in the persona of an animal or some other less-than-human condition, as a technique to explore the imagined experience of the non-human—a dissolution of the consciousness. For examples: "Alone" (a dissolution), "Winter Echo," and "The Aspen's Song."

Nearly all writers on the early poems have noticed the importance of contemporary Imagist experimental poetry, of Japanese poetry, and of Native American poetry to Winters's sensibility and technique. Terry Comito, in discussing the unique quality of Native American poetry, comments in *In Defense of Winters: The Poetry and Prose of Yvor Winters* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986), "It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the use of language in *The Magpie's Shadow* is a magical one: the book is a series of charms to summon up beneficent powers and to banish malignant ones" (55). Again, after carefully analyzing these influences and Winters's success with them, the British poet Dick Davis notes in *Wisdom and Wilderness: The Achievement of Yvor Winters* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1983), that Winters is "attempting to convey sensation through language, and language, his means of communication, seems to get in the way":

His later insistence on words as *concepts*, mental signs separate from the world, is a direct result of his early attempt to "give" sensation unmediated to the reader. He came to believe that language was irreducibly a matter of the intellect and could not convey pure sensation—the attempt was the pursuit of an *ignis fatuus* (14).

One may add that in his pursuit, especially in the one-liners of *The Magpie's Shadow*, he produced some of the most beautiful poems of the Imagist movement. Again, noticing the limitations of the sensibility and technique in these poems, Kenneth Fields comments in "Forms of the Mind: The Experimental Poems of Yvor Winters" (*Southern Review* 17 [1981]) that "in Winters's early poems reality seems to be a solipsistic function of the poet's mind, an invention, not a discovery" (941). Yet "discovery of reality" was what Winters later came to believe poetry was all about.

Grosvenor Powell provides a fascinating analysis of Winters's handling of the subject-object problem, as a prime concern of his early intellectual dilemma, inherited from Romanticism:

The relationship between subject and object in experience is often discussed as if it were a polarity: perceiver and perceived, self and nonself, internal and external. It is only a polarity, however, when considered schematically and statically. In experience, the two poles

fuse inextricably—the intensity of the experience determining the degree of fusion. In the most intense moments of vision, the polarity disappears.

The fusion entails loss of consciousness—that is, oblivion. And Winters saw oblivion as death, and rejected it (*Language as Being in the Poetry of Yvor Winters* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980], 126–27). The poet himself, of course, saw all these limitations, though not always in these terms, criticized them in his essays, and turned to write another kind of poetry in about 1929.

Winters appears in retrospect not to have lost much through his early experimental poetry, though he personally regretted the years he lingered under the spell of the ignis fatuus of poetic “immediacy.” Rather, one positive result clearly was a carryover of a lifelong solicitude for exact sensory detail in any phrase or descriptive line within a poem written in traditional meter and form. Fields notes that despite changing his “methods and ideas in later years, he preserves much of his early imagist subtlety” (952), as, for example, in the line describing the ocean in “The Slow Pacific Swell” (1931): “Heaving and wrinkled in the moon and blind.” With its fusion of two perceptions, of the sea surface seen sharply as itself and suggesting simultaneously its powerful inhabitant the gray whale, Winters’s apprenticeship to imagist technique shows its value. “Summer Commentary,” one of Winters’s finest later poems, likewise achieves stunning effects of sensory sharpness, perceptual exactness, and juxtaposition of perceptions.

Transitional Investigations

No man can hold existence in the head.

(“*The Moralists*”)

Howard Baker, Winters’s early friend and fellow poet, writes in his retrospective essay, ““The Gyroscope”” (*Southern Review* 17 [1981]), that 1929 “was the year of the foundation of his later work” (735). Winters believed that the *Gyroscope* stood for “an approximation of

a classical state of mind”—an approximation which could only be developed, as Winters wrote in his statement of editorial purpose, by the “study of the masters of art and thought, as well as of self and living human relations” (735, 738). In this compact statement, Winters identified a program for his own intellectual and poetic development. His poems written over the next thirty years show to which “masters of art and thought” he turned and from whom he learned, as well as the fruits of his study of himself and his “living human relations.”

For example, his study of one master of thought led to his treatment of the life and intentions of Socrates, in the moving internal monologue “Socrates,” and, together with another historical figure, to a significant stanza in a poem not included here, “A Testament (to One Now a Child)”: “These gave us life through death: / Jesus of Nazareth, archaic Socrates.” The double heritage of American civilization in the Judaeo-Christian and the Graeco-Roman body of art and thought is compactly alluded to in two central historical figures, as part of a deeply personal reflection upon a parent-child relationship: “O small and fair of face, / In this appalling place / The conscious soul must give / Its life to live”—the tragic concept exemplified in the lives of both historical figures mentioned. Other masters of art and thought appear in many different poems.

Yet, obviously, so major a turn-around in style and life could not be instantly accomplished. In a sense, Winters remained “experimental” through a transitional period from 1928 to 1931 during which he was editing the *Gyroscope* and contributing as Western editor of *Hound & Horn*. After first applying his acute intelligence and talent to experiments in modern verse, he turned, in effect, to experiments in traditional meters and forms, for even in the latter he created something entirely new. He found that more could be done—could be said about contemporary experience—in poems that engaged *all* of the consciousness than in those that engaged only the sensibility. The “extension and reintegration of the spirit,” as he termed his endeavor, could be best achieved by using all the resources of the mind and senses that language afforded. But first some problems had to be cleared up, even if they stretched the resources of at least one traditional form to the breaking point.

His first exercises in traditional form were sonnets that appeared in the *Gyroscope* and in *American Caravan* (collected in *The Proof*), of which six are included here. They are, as Douglas Peterson suggests, a sequential exploration by the poet of the role of the mind “in working out of solipsism,” out of “the prison of his own subjectivity” (*Southern Review* 17 [1981]: 919). They show Winters experimenting with direct expression about an epistemological question: How does the mind deal with immediacy, in particular with the brutal fact of death, whether that of others or its own mortality? Such a question had to be dealt with satisfactorily before he could emerge from the solipsistic concerns of the early poems to a balanced consciousness founded on rationality as the ordering principle. As Richard Hoffpauir writes in a recent essay, “Strategies of Knowing: The *Proof* Sonnets of Yvor Winters,”

It is entirely appropriate that he chose this form to investigate the conventional ways of placing and moving the significance-seeking mind between unstable and finally unknowable mutability of the physical on the one hand and the unstable and finally unknowable immutability of the absolute on the other hand. (*English Studies in Canada* 23 [1997]: 75)

Two of the poles of the consciousness in its in-between condition, time and the timeless, were obsessive concerns of Winters in his earlier poems. Hoffpauir writes that in “To William Dinsmore Briggs Conducting His Seminar” Winters found that “The definable is never completely free of the indefinable; we can never break free into pure truth; the absolute can never be viewed separate from the impure.” Nor, it may be added, can the timeless ever be viewed, by us, separate from time. The poet, as student, “detects the effort, the successes, and the limitations in the very face of his teacher Briggs (lines 11–13).”

*Discoveries: The Later Poems in
Traditional Meters and Forms*

All this to pass, not to return again.

(“*The Marriage*”)

Study of the “self,” announced in the *Gyroscope* manifesto, from this point on always led Winters *outward* from the closed consciousness that had been the preoccupation of his early poems—and of modernity generally—into “living human relations”: family, friends, fellow poets and critics, academic colleagues, and contemporary American public life, whether local or national. Thus, the later poems directly concern, first, such subjects as love and marriage, children, parents, and friends. Second, they concern public figures, historical and contemporary, and public events. Third, many concern the life of the mind as evident in both art and scholarship. And last, he wrote several poems on the human relationship to the Divine, or as he variously termed it, the “Eternal Spirit,” the “Holy Spirit,” or the “Absolute.”

Having explored a major epistemological concern in the sonnet form in a style aptly characterized by Hoffpauir as marked by a “too urgent bluntness,” Winters turned to the possibilities of the traditional heroic couplet, with its two iambic pentameter rhymed lines. Almost immediately, he found it a more congenial form than the sonnet. He wrote a magnificent group of six poems, “The Slow Pacific Swell,” “The Marriage,” “On a View of Pasadena from the Hills,” “The Journey,” “A Vision,” and “The Grave” (not included here), all collected in 1931 in *The Proof*. Each one deals with personal experience, and yet through the “innovation” in style, the return to expository statement and traditional meter, each relates the personal to common experience in lucid but deeply felt language.

When he writes in “A View of Pasadena” that “This is my father’s house,” the conceptual language draws the reader into reflection upon his own child-parent relationship. The relationship of American urban civilization to the land, a major theme in American thought, is also richly explored in Winters’s meditation on the Los Angeles

suburbs (discussed further below). More than any other poem of this period of his writing, "A View of Pasadena" illustrates what Winters meant when he wrote in his introduction to *Early Poems* (1966) that he found he could not achieve in experimental verse what he could in traditional meters.

Although in his *Gyroscope* manifesto Winters set out a program for study of the masters of art and thought and of living human relationships, he failed to mention that the relationship between man and the physical universe of which he is a part would be an abiding theme for him. A preoccupation with the human consciousness existing in a hostile universe is present in his poetry from beginning to end in many experiential differentiations. Even in one of the last poems he wrote, "To the Holy Spirit (from a Deserted Graveyard in the Salinas Valley)", the natural world is still felt, as it was in most of the early poems, in subtly hostile terms. He describes the landscape setting in the Salinas Valley (California) as "desert," "pure line" (like the "pale mountains" of "Advent I"), "dry grass and sand," that offers "no vision to distract"—that is, nothing beyond its blunt inarticulate presence. Yet the hills' appearance is deceptive, for "Calm in deceit, they stay."

Despite a lingering preoccupation with an intuited malignity in nature, throughout the poems in traditional meters and forms from 1930 on (especially in the series written in heroic couplets) Winters explores some of the more benign or at least more secure relationships that man can establish with different kinds of landscapes through growth in emotional and intellectual maturity and through civilized efforts. For Winters these are achieved through reason, exercise of will, and deliberated action. Still, it must be kept in mind, as the Canadian critic John Baxter cautions in "Can Winters Mean What He Says?" that the kind of "definitive certainty that Winters frequently manages to convey in his tone should not be allowed to obscure the profoundly exploratory quality of many of his poems, almost all of which have an unmistakably American timbre" (*Southern Review* 17 [1981]: 842–43).

A few examples will suffice. In "The Slow Pacific Swell," although the Pacific Ocean is felt to be at least as threatening to human life and consciousness as the arid stony Western deserts and mountains

of the early poems, yet the poet is able to stand apart (“A landsman I, the sea is but a sound”) in a balanced poise appropriate to his humanity. Moreover, he is acutely aware of the sensory beauties of the land: “The rain has washed the dust from April day.” In “The Marriage,” nature is seen in his garden in its most lovely and delicate sensory details: “The lacy fronds of carrots in the spring, / Their flesh sweet on the tongue,” and “The young kids bleating softly in the rain.”

In the uniquely powerful poem, “On a View of Pasadena from the Hills,” Winters develops in a very different way his theme of hostile nature. Nature, as “cold and monstrous stone,” underlies and yet is challenged by the developing civilization of Los Angeles and its suburbs in the late 1920s. Detail by detail, as he watches the day begin from his father’s house in Eagle Rock (Flintridge), overlooking “the city, on the tremendous valley floor,” the poet elucidates what the scene means to him and the costs of such a civilization. For example: “The driver, melting down the distance here, / May cast in flight the faint hoof of a deer / Or pass the faint head set perplexedly.” The poem is comprehensive in its description and not limited to ephemeral appearances of Los Angeles at the time. It offers historical detail (in his childhood “The palms were coarse; their leaves hung thick with dust”); personal detail (of his father: “Too firmly gentle to displace the great”); and immediate visual detail (“The long leaves of the eucalypti screen / The closer hills from view—lithe, tall, and fine, / And nobly clad with youth, they bend and shine”). The reader may easily track the variations on the theme of nature partially subdued by human effort and the kind of precarious balance achieved in this poem, as in “The Slow Pacific Swell.”

Nature is again perceived as dangerous in a later poem, “Elegy on a Young Airedale Bitch Lost Some Years Since in the Salt-Marsh” (*Before Disaster*, 1934), but here the setting is the relatively benign salt marshes of the southern edge of San Francisco Bay. The canine victim is “betrayed by what is wild” in her. Another small poem that shows a similar preoccupation with the constant material (and sometimes spiritual) presence of “the brutal earth we feared” is “Much in Little” (1938), where he writes about a corner of his garden: “And if no water touch the dust / In some far corner, and one dare / To

breathe upon it, one may trust / The spectre on the summer air: / The risen dust alive with fire, / The fire made visible." This particular preoccupation and Winters's insistence upon achieving a balance of consciousness and maintaining it through deliberate effort of the will and intelligence is, perhaps, best summed up in the line in "To a Portrait of Herman Melville in My Library" (not included here) praising Melville's literary and personal achievement: "Wisdom and wilderness are here at poise."

Other less directly personal poems that develop the theme of nature and civilization include the dramatic monologue "John Sutter" (1935), in which Winters splendidly evokes the pre-Gold Rush Central Valley landscape in all its pastoral beauty. He suggests that a civilized man, when he cultivates the land and does not exploit it for greed, can make the natural seem benign. John Sutter, the Swiss immigrant, describes his ranch and farm lands: "The earth grew dense with grain at my desire; / The shade was deepened at the spring and streams," and he aids the settlers, who "in my houses feasted through the nights, / Rebuilt their sinews and assumed a name." Yet when gold is discovered, the settlers, "grained by alchemic change," become themselves mindless, like the rock and minerals: "Metal, intrinsic value, deep and dense, / Preanimate, inimitable, still, / Real, but an evil with no human sense, / Dispersed the mind to concentrate the will."

Yet another differentiation of the theme of nature in relationship to man emerges when the roles become reversed and man's civilizing activity reveals an intention to overcome nature rather than to live in harmony with it. In "The California Oaks" (1936), Winters reviews the history of the majestic native oaks, first through the Native American generations: "What feet have come to roam, / what eyes to stay?" A conjectural Chinese period follows: "Hwui-Shan, the ancient, for a moment glides [and] The brook-like shadows lie / where sun had shone." Next, the English, "Drake and his seamen pause to view the hills," and the Spaniard, because he learned "caution from the trees," allows his "ambitious mind" to bend "to an archaic way." None of these harmed the oaks. However, with "the invasion" of the American settlers, "the soil was turned, / The hidden waters drained, the valley dried" and the oaks begin to die out.

In an anticipation of our turn-of-millennium concern with the increasing pace of destruction of plant and other kinds of life, the poet eulogizes “the archaic race— / Black oak, live oak, and valley oak,” who have “Died or are dying!”

Winters carries this reversal in the roles of nature and man to an extreme variation and defines the dangers of man to nature and consequently, of course, to himself because he is part of nature, in his poem, “An Elegy: For the U.S.N. Dirigible, Macon” (1938). The poem is about the construction, launching, and loss in a storm in February, 1935, of the lighter-than-air craft, which was 785 feet long. The airship was launched from Moffett Field in Sunnyvale, not far from the home of the poet and his wife on the outskirts of Palo Alto. As Steven Shankman has pointed out, the dirigible becomes a symbol of mankind’s hubristic desire to achieve perfection in building a “flawless technological machine,” one that will rival nature in power: “The perfect wheel / Now glides on perfect surface with a sound / Earth has not heard before” (*In Search of the Classic: Reconsidering the Greco-Roman Tradition* [University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1994], 36–48).

As Shankman reads it, the poem is a strong critique of “rationalism,” in distinction from “rationality,” the term by which he distinguishes the balance of consciousness based on Classical reason. He compares Winters’s judgment of the *Macon’s* builders to that of Sophocles in his indictment of Athenian pride of intellect in *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Oedipus is a “symbol of the . . . desire to master reality, to know it from the outside rather than patiently to participate in it; he is a symbol, that is, of rationalism rather than of rationality.” Winters is saying that “in place of a profound awareness of the need for spiritual salvation, modern man has substituted the rationalist dream of mastering the material world, an enterprise which can only lead to suicide both spiritual and material” (46–47). Man trying to overcome nature will destroy his hard-won civilization: the present age has “seized upon a planet’s heritage / Of steel and oil, the mind’s viaticum: / Crowded the world with strong ingenious things, / Used the provision it could not replace; / To leave but Cretan myths.” In this poem and in others, whether they deal with excesses of “rationalism,” on the one hand, or excesses of feeling, on the other,

Winters always views the problem from the balanced center of the consciousness—the centered poise of Classical reason as he understood it from 1929 on.

Such a balance is reflected, again in terms of civilized and social culture, in “Time and the Garden” (*Poems*, 1940), where the poet’s pleasure in his own garden of “Persimmon, walnut, loquat, fig, and grape” symbolizes the integration of the sensory and intellectual aspects of the consciousness that he has, momentarily at least, achieved. The change of seasons is experienced in a way quite unlike the stark obsessive impressions of the early sequences in *The Bare Hills*. They are spaced by the cultivated plants “in their due series” and make his garden “a tranquil dwelling place.” Yet even here, as a man, Winters knows himself to be capable of imbalance, and he recognizes his own peculiar temptation to impatience, “restlessness,” in his quest for “Unbroken wisdom” and for the achievement of the poets whom he admires, “Gascoigne, Ben Jonson, Greville, Raleigh, Donne” (all of whom he discusses in detail in his critical essays).

Last, in both style and subject, “A Summer Commentary” (1938) is the finest example of Winters’s continuity with his early poems, even while the result of his commitment to the classical balance of the consciousness is evident. In plain language he recalls in the first stanza his early state of mind, when “with sharper sense,” hearing “the farthest insect cry,” he was “stayed” by it, while, “intense,” he “watched the hunter and the bird.” Then, in precise conceptual language, he questions that earlier experience. What meaning did he find then, or was it “but a state of mind, / Some old penumbra of the ground, / In which to be but not to find?” The word “penumbra” alone, with its connotations of overarching, heavy shadow, evokes the entire ambiance and feeling of the closed solipsistic consciousness of the early poems. The wordless immediacy of purely sensory “being” is contrasted with the truly human activity of seeking (questioning) and finding more and more of reality. Then through the last three stanzas Winters describes his present feelings about the excessively dry, dusty, late summer California landscape in terms of the “sweet,” the “fair,” the “soft,” and the “rich,” in vivid visual, aural, tactile, and olfactory imagery, almost as if astonished by the pleasure and beauty revealed to him in this landscape.

The perceptions are conveyed with the sharp impact of the imagist technique, while the intimate directness and firm conceptual statement of the opening two stanzas control and give meaning to the sensory passages. Now, "summer grasses, brown with heat, / Have crowded sweetness through the air; / The very roadside dust is sweet; / Even the unshadowed earth is fair." And "silence," which had in the early poems been the "silence" of mindless absorption in "stone," "lichen," "leaves," or "bees," is now "caressed" by the "soft voice of the nesting dove, / And the dove in soft erratic flight." Even the "rubble, the fallen fruit," though doomed to "decay," as is everything in nature, produces by its fermenting the sweetness of "brandy."

Winters's poems that take man in nature as their subject represent only one of the many kinds of poetry he wrote. As part of his announced intention to move out into living human relations, he published throughout his career a number of poems on public and historical figures, and on public events, as well as poems on the purpose and hazards of art and the artist in society. On public figures or on the role of the political man, in this collection, are the Machiavelian "The Prince," the worldly American "On the Death of Senator Thomas J. Walsh," and his allegorical narrative of a man of action, "Theseus: A Trilog." On historical figures are "Socrates," "John Day, Frontiersman," "John Sutter," and "On Rereading a Passage from John Muir." On his participation in public experience are two of the Depression era: "Before Disaster" (when "Fool and scoundrel guide the state") and "By the Road to the Air-Base." The following concern World War II: "Summer Noon 1941," "To a Military Rifle" (probably the finest, with its indictment of the lust for power), "Moonlight Alert," "Defense of Empire," "Night of Battle" (for the last two see *The Collected Poems of Yvor Winters*, ed. Donald Davie, 1978), and "Epitaph for the American Dead" (for this see *The Uncollected Poems of Yvor Winters 1929-1957*, ed. R. L. Barth, 1997). He wrote several poems on the trial and defense of David Lamson in San Jose (1933-37), a series of events in which Winters engaged both his sympathy and his efforts for Lamson's acquittal (for these also see *Collected Poems*, 1978).

As a result of his study of the "masters of art," as well as the

“masters of thought,” Winters frequently writes of both the artist and the scholar in terms of the life of the mind. Some of these poems are general in theme, some personal, and some achieve both the general and personal by using a Greek mythical figure or a medieval legend. Among the more general are “To a Young Writer,” “Sonnet to the Moon,” and “On Teaching the Young.” More personal is a long and gently funny satire in heroic couplets on many of the celebrated poets and critics of the 1920s: “The Critiad: A Poetical Survey of Recent Criticism” (1931). It is imitative of Pope, but without Pope’s acid tone (see *The Uncollected Poems 1929–1957*). More personal in subject are “For Howard Baker” and poems addressed to Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne (not included here).

Under the Greek figure of “Orpheus,” Winters writes of his early friend and fellow poet Hart Crane. In “Heracles,” he writes, as he noted, “of the artist in hand-to-hand or semi-intuitive combat with experience.” In this poem, which has been misinterpreted, the artist, in the figure of the Greek hero Heracles, loses his humanity because he loses the balance of the consciousness. In his attempt to achieve the “Absolute,” he enters the “Timeless,” as a demigod, but because he becomes “perfection,” he sacrifices the imperfect woman Deianira: “This was my grief, that out of grief I grew.” Tragically, he grows beyond the human. In “Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight,” based on a medieval legend, Winters writes of his own early experience of the attempt to achieve an immediacy with nature. In “Chiron,” through the Greek mythical figure of the centaur who was Achilles’ tutor, he writes of his attempts to educate young poets. In “Time and the Garden,” he writes of his restlessness in striving to reach the achievements of the poets whom he admired. In one of the last poems he wrote, “To the Moon” (1953), the general and personal come together effortlessly, as he invokes the Moon, as the “Goddess of poetry,” and writes that “Your service I have found / To be no sinecure; / For I must still inure / My words to what I find, / Though it should leave me blind / Ere I discover how” (*Collected Poems*, 1952, 1978).

As part of his commitment to the life of the mind, including the studies appropriate to a university scholar, Winters wrote sev-

eral poems praising men engaged in scholarship. There are three on his graduate teacher at Stanford, the distinguished scholar of Renaissance humanism, William Dinsmore Briggs. Of these, included here are "To William Dinsmore Briggs Conducting His Seminar," "Dedication for a Book of Criticism," and "For the Opening of the William Dinsmore Briggs Room." Connected in theme is his one poem on a work of art, "On a Portrait of a Scholar of the Italian Renaissance." Of this type is "To Herbert Dean Meritt," mentioned above. Four poems, none included here, satirize academics who failed to live up to the profession. As early as 1946 Winters had analyzed the roots of the decay of American academic life in his essay "The Significance of *The Bridge* by Hart Crane, Or What Are We to Think of Professor X?" (*In Defense of Reason*, 577–603). Relativism and indifference in the pursuit of truth in the humanities, far beyond that of his "genteel" Professor X, had by the time of his death corrupted the life of the mind in the university and consequently the life of the art of poetry there.

In abandoning the self-engrossment typical of his (and other poets') work during the 1920s, Winters explored, perhaps more movingly than any other area of life, the relationships of love, marriage, children, and parents, frequently in the context of mortality. Of these the reader may turn to "The Dedication" (from *Before Disaster*), "Inscription for a Graveyard," "The Last Visit" (with its haunting line, "Ruin has touched familiar air"), and, as an especially illustrative example, "The Marriage." In an acute analysis of this poem as Winters's exploration of the "old question, what is love?" Gordon Harvey notes that the lovers "neither live wholly in each other (as would Tristan and Iseult in their vault, and sometimes Donne), nor try to fix their love in some perfect moment (like Jay Gatsby, and sometimes Donne)." Rather, "they look outward, and forward, in the same direction. After demonstrating Winters's use of metaphysical thought, Harvey concludes,

"The Marriage" in Winters's title is double, and in this his poem answers Donne. The marriage is first the indissoluble union of each of our spirits to its ever-changing phenomenal circumstances, including the body. This is the union [James] Smith shows to be such a pos-

itive wonder to Donne, and it is a ground theme in Winters's work as a whole, poetry *and* criticism. But the marriage is also what this first union seems to make unimaginable for Donne, and often enough for ourselves: a union of two spirits actually forged and deepened by separate selfhood, by change, and by the absoluteness of death. This is the metaphysical puzzle at the heart of civil marriage, to which enterprise Winters's poem attaches us. ("Winters's 'Marriage' and Donne," *The Gadfly: A Quarterly Review of English Letters* [May 1984]: 40–41)

Others of this type are "For My Father's Grave," "Phasellus Ille," "A Leave-Taking," "The Cremation," "Prayer for My Son," and one of his last poems, the exemplar of Winters's high art, "At the San Francisco Airport," addressed to his daughter. Others not included here on similar themes are "To My Infant Daughter" and "A Testament (to One Now a Child)," mentioned above (see *Collected Poems*, 1952, 1978).

Finally, in the widest casting of all in his quest for reality, Winters wrote several poems of a type his early manifesto did not apparently include in its program—those on the human relationship to God, or the Divine, or (the terms he uses) the Holy Spirit, the Eternal Spirit, or the Absolute. In "Prayer for My Son," he addresses the "Eternal Spirit" as "you / Whose will maintains the world, / Who thought and made it true;" and as "You who guided Socrates." In "To the Holy Spirit," he defines the Spirit as "mind alone" but also speaks of the Holy Spirit's "fallen sons." In "A Fragment" he rejects the Christian faith directly ("I cannot find my way to Nazareth"), and he goes on to say, "Thy will is death, / And this unholy quiet is thy peace. / Thy will be done; and let discussion cease." In "A Song in Passing," he concludes: "There is no other place. / The only thing I fear / Is the Almighty Face." God may be addressed, may be prayed to, has sons, may be feared, may to a certain extent be defined but cannot be understood, certainly not from within the paradox of the human consciousness.

In "To the Holy Spirit" Winters shows his maturest skills. These include mastery of the short trimeter line structured in irregularly

rhymed stanzas of irregular lengths. Although he was fond enough of trimeter to use it in many poems, he more often used it in quatrains than in an irregular stanza, as he does in this poem. Its stylistic predecessors include "Prayer for My Son," "Summer Noon," "To a Military Rifle," and a few others. "To the Holy Spirit" shows what he was aiming for all the time in its perfection of rhythm, as the sentences, clauses, and phrases run over from line to line, pacing his thought to the stanzaic limits, yet allowing variation in stanza lengths to reinforce the closures of the thought. All this gives an air of unstudied elegance of form.

The movement of the line also exploits an ever-varying position for the caesura, when there is one, within the line. Winters may have learned this from Ben Jonson, writing in the Classical plain style. But he had, probably before ever reading Jonson carefully, composed an entire book in the iambic trimeter line, standing on its own as an individual poem: *The Magpie's Shadow*. So, it is more likely that from an early period he was fond of exploring by ear the possibilities this line offers. Constant practice in writing a line with close attention to the effects of each syllable, when there are only six available, as well as of each pause, no doubt played its part in the mastery he exhibits in "To the Holy Spirit." Some of the lines could stand alone and, given appropriate titles, be successful imagist poems. For example: "The Bare Hills:" "Calm in deceit they stay."

In overall structure "To the Holy Spirit" demonstrates understanding of the tripartite meditative form typical of, and possibly learned from, the seventeenth-century devotional poetry of the Metaphysical poets. As practiced by Donne, Vaughan, and others, the first part (stanza 1) "sets the scene" or subject to be the focus of meditation, in this case the Salinas Valley landscape. The second part (stanza 2) constitutes the "meditation proper," in which the poet states his thoughts about the subject. In the third part (stanzas 3 and 4) the poet "turns" to address an individual in a "colloquy," in this case, with the Holy Spirit. The unique adaptability of this traditional form is evident in Winters's skilled handling of it. He had been concerned all his life with the Western, later California, landscape as a symbol of the material universe. Here he compactly represents it in

a few telling words and phrases, infused with connotations of beauty, deceptive stability, and the menace of death. Also, his lifelong concern with palpable fact, especially that of death, obvious in the many poems that take death as their subject, permits his thought to move both by association and by logic into the meditation in the second stanza. Last, the peculiar power of the third part of the meditative form, the “turn” or “colloquy,” demonstrates itself in Winters’s sudden, almost abrupt, almost accusatory address: “These are Thy fallen sons, / Thou whom I try to reach. / Thou whom the quick eye shuns, / Thou dost elude my speech.” Continuing the address to the Divine through the last two stanzas, Winters defines his understanding of the Holy Spirit as “mind alone,” and of himself as “bound / Pure mind to flesh and bone, / And flesh and bone to ground.” Desiring “certainty,” he is only certain of the difference between himself (and man in general) and the Holy Spirit. The final observation is a reluctant admission of the impossibility for him because of age and experience to pursue the question any further.

Yet, despite the putting aside at last of questions that he had been concerned with all his life, the tone of the poem, the power and resonance of the form and of the language, suffused with intelligence and personal engagement, is such that one feels Winters is leaving the question open for others to explore. He thought of poetic forms as various means to discovery, as the title of his last critical work indicates. This particular traditional meditative form enabled him to discover where he stood on the most important, to him, of all questions, but his personal stance is not offered as one for all readers. It is his considered understanding and judgment of the question at issue. By participating in his judgment, through reading and understanding it fully, the reader may be enabled to discover further areas within his or her consciousness that had not before been available.

David Yezzi, in a recent essay, “The Seriousness of Yvor Winters,” has said of Winters’s criticism of poetry that, “as both a description of its enduring ills and a prescription for regaining much that has been lost to the lyric tradition in English, Winters’s bitter pill is our long-overlooked and strongest medicine” (*New Criterion*, July 1997, 28). Of Winters’s poetry, Yezzi comments: “As with Rilke’s archaic torso . . . when each of today’s more fashionable, self-expressive and

wildly emotive poets looks on Winters's work, there is but one heartfelt message: you must change your life" (33). That Winters himself in an act of profound and admirable resistance to the closed consciousness and the relativisms of modernity did change not only his style but his entire artistic and intellectual life is evident in the poems collected here.

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