**Yvor Winters (1900-1968)**

Robert Archambeau

The poet-critic Yvor Winters, was a unique figure in American poetry:an iconoclast who valued tradition; a poetic experimentalist who became increasingly committed to inherited poetic forms; a critic committed to rationality whose judgments struck many as wildly eccentric; a cultivator of disciples whose best students felt compelled to rebel. His early poetry is significant for incorporating elements of Native American poetics; his later poetry for its restraint and neo-classical refinement. Althoughnumbered by some among the New Critics, he wrote much criticism that was at odds with many of their central tenets, especially the "heresy of paraphrase." His critical writings became increasingly doctrinaire over time, and his sense of the acceptable canon of poetry narrowed.

Born in Chicago in 1900, Winters , whose full name was Arthur Yvor Winters, grew up in Eagle Rock, California, near Los Angeles. He attended the University of Chicago, where he met his future wife, poet and novelist Janet Lewis. Tuberculosis cut short his studies, and he was sent to a sanatorium in Santa Fe, New Mexico. There, and while teaching in small towns in the southwest, Winters wrote poems influenced by Navajo imagery and by the imagist movement. His essay from this period, "The Testament of a Stone," is among the most detailed statements of imagist poetics, linking imagism and mysticism. He would later repudiate both.

In 1925 he enrolled in the University of Colorado, from which he received his B.A. and M.A. degrees. He taught briefly at the University of Idaho before going on to earn a doctorate at Stanford, where he taught for almost four decades. During these years he became increasingly committed to an anti-Romantic and anti-modernist position. His correspondence with Hart Crane in the late 1920s pushed Winters toward this stance: he became increasingly disenchanted with Crane's work, and linked the irrationalism of the poetry with Crane's self-destructive behavior.

Winters articulated his theory of poetry in the studies *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), *Maule's Curse* (1938) and *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), which were collected and published in 1947 as *In Defense of Reason*, the definitive statement of his poetics. The study *Forms of Discovery* (1967) reaffirms his position as a poet-critic committed to rationality, clear statement, and traditional form. Together these books constitute what is arguably the most sustained critique of modernism by any American poet or critic.

After 1930, Winters' poetry eschewed modernist techniques. Winters sought models for his poetry in the past, and in so doing,helped revive the reputation of a number of neglected Elizabethan poets, notably Fulke Greville. His anthology *Quest for Reality*, co-edited with Kenneth Fields, appeared in 1969, and offered an idiosyncratic vision of literary history, including poets both canonical and obscure, as well as work by several of Winters' Stanford students.

In addition to his well-defined critical positions and his body of poetry, Winters' legacy includes his influence on many important poets, including Donald Hall, Thom Gunn, Philip Levine, N. Scott Momaday, John Matthias, Robert Hass, and Robert Pinsky.

**Further Reading**

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# Isaacs, Elizabeth. An Introduction to the Poetry of Yvor Winters. Chicago: Swallow, 1981.

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