Yvor Winters (1900-1968)

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Arthur Yvor Winters was 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; and a cultivator of faithful but sometimes rebellious disciples. His early poetry is significant for incorporating elements of Native American poetics; his later poetry for its formalist restraint and neo-classical refinement. In 1960, his *Collected Poems* won the prestigious Bollingen Prize.

Born in Chicago, 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 later while teaching in small mining towns in the southwest in the 1920s, Winters wrote short, spiritually intense 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.

In 1925, Winters enrolled in the University of Colorado-Boulder, from which he received his B.A. and M.A. degrees in Romance languages. He taught briefly at the University of Idaho before going on to earn a doctorate at Stanford, where he taught for almost four decades. By 1927, as a graduate student at Stanford, Winters decided Imagism and Modernism were bankrupt, decadent, and obscurantist. He repudiated both.

During the 1920s and 30s, Winters 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: Winters became increasingly disenchanted with Crane’s work, linking the irrationalism of the poetry with Crane’s self-destructive behavior. Winters also often singled out T. S. Eliot and his ‘pseudo-mysticism’ as a baleful influence on American poetry. In a letter from 1932, Winters wrote that the Modernists ‘cannot organize their material into precise statements within a precise form because they do not know what they are writing about. They are myopic marksmen shooting at an atmospheric blur with a shotgun’ (*Letters* 189).

Because Winters wrote criticism in the era of the New Critics, he is sometimes numbered with them, yet much of his criticism was written in opposition to their positions: Winters 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. Winters articulated his theory of poetry in *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), *Maule’s Curse* (1938), and *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), which were gathered 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 perhaps the most sustained critique of modernism, and argument for formalist poetry, by any American poet or critic.

Winters took a hardline stance against Modernism and its precursors. He opposed literary hedonism and aestheticism—rejecting the notion that poetry is judged according to the pleasure derived by the reader or poet. Winters also rejected the Romantic theory that poetry is (as Wordsworth claimed) a ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,’ and the notion that emotions are good and trustworthy while rationality is unreliable, dangerous, and perhaps evil. Winters argued that the true danger was the Romantic notion that the poet ought to surrender to emotional impulses and write poems that are simply forms of self-expression. Winters contended that aesthetic hedonism and Romanticism led inevitably to Modernism’s sense of relativism: the belief that there are no absolute truths and thus no reason to search for them.

Winters thought a few poems by Wallace Stevens and Williams Carlos Williams could be judged great, but he considered most Modernist free verse incoherent and sloppy. Winters claimed that by abandoning tradition, rationality, and literary conventions while championing free verse and irrationality, Modernism forfeited the intellectual and moral force that makes poetry a powerful technique for contemplation and for the comprehension of experience and emotion. Modernism’s revolutionary desire to liberate itself from so-called old-fashioned conventions led to a belief that the primary basis for literary production and judgement is subjective or emotional.

Winters called his theory of literature ‘absolutist.’ In opposition to the highly associative, subjectivist, and intuitive theories of poetry propounded by American modernists, Winters promoted a style of poetry that seeks eternal truths ‘worth discussing’ while balancing emotion and reason by means of the rules of verse. Not only did he believe that objective truths exist, even if we can never fully know them, he argued that poetry is one of the best techniques we have developed to discover, or at least approximate, those truths. Winters proposed the study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets such as Thomas Wyatt, George Gascoigne, Ben Jonson, Fulke Greville, William Shakespeare, and Robert Herrick as models of logical, rigorous, and precise writing. 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.

After his rejection of Modernism Winters maintained that a well-composed metrical poem was a precision device to comprehend or control the seeming incoherence of human experience. Such poems could offer the poet the best means to discover important truths about the self and the world. By submitting to the exigencies of diction, meter, rhythm, and rhyme, a lyric poem can be a philosophical means of reflecting on, evaluating, and shaping experience. Aligning oneself with the laws of verse could incite the poet to discover universal ideas, images, and values that might not have been discovered or contemplated without such formal constraints. Winters’ ideal poem (and few met his exacting criteria), therefore, makes a defensible rational statement about experience, and the poem’s success or failure can be judged according to intellectual standards and objective literary criteria. A poem does not become great by freeing itself from the formal problems of rhyme and cadence, Winters argued in his later years, but because of the poet’s obedience to them.

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, Turner Cassity, Helen Pinkerton, Wesley Trimpi, J.V. Cunningham, Edgar Bowers, Philip Levine, N. Scott Momaday, John Matthias, Robert Hass, and Robert Pinsky. He has been an important influence on the New Formalist movement in American poetry. He was also a breeder of champion Airedale Terriers.

List of Works

Poetry

*Collected Poems* (1952;1960)

*Selected Poems* (1999, ed. Barth; 2003, ed. Gunn)

Literary Criticism

*Edwin Arlington Robinson* (1946)

*In Defense of Reason* (1947) (collects *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry* [1937], *Maule’s Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* [1938], and *Anatomy and Nonsense* [1943])

*The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (1957)

*Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English* (1967)

Other

*Quest for Reality: An Anthology of Short Poems in English* (1969)

*The Selected Letters of Yvor Winters* (2000)

Further Reading

Archambeau, Robert. *Laureates and Heretics.* South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

Comito, Terry. *In Defense of Winters: The Poetry and Prose of Yvor Winters*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986.

Davis, Dick. Wisdom and Wilderness: The Achievement of Yvor Winters. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983.

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

Powell, Grosvenor. Language as Being in the Poetry of Yvor Winters. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.

Recording

Poetry Center

https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/poetrycenter/bundles/191208

Possible Images

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http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s\_z/winters/winters.jpg

http://www.poetryarchive.org/files/styles/220x170-live-recordings-block/public/poet\_photos/Winters\_large.jpg?itok=fQhPqjY6