Winters, Yvor (1900-1968)

Arthur Yvor Winters was a formalist poet whose *Collected Poems* won the prestigious Bollingen Prize in 1960. Although his poems were well regarded in his lifetime, Winters’ reputation and continuing influence rests on his contentious literary criticism. There, he relentlessly attacks the radical premises of American Modernism while advocating that poets educate themselves, instead, in the tradition of formal poetic conventions. Winters’ poetry and criticism has had a profound impact on the New Formalism in American poetry.

Born in Chicago, Yvor Winters earned a B.A. and M.A. in Romance Languages from the University of Colorado-Boulder, and he spent his career as a professor at Stanford University. There he taught and influenced many students and colleagues, including Thom Gunn, Robert Pinsky, Philip Levine, Donald Hall, Robert Hass, Turner Cassity, Helen Pinkerton, Wesley Trimpi, J.V. Cunningham, and Edgar Bowers. Winters was married to poet and novelist Janet Lewis. He was also a breeder of champion Airedale Terriers.

As a young poet in the early 1920s, Winters wrote in the Imagist mode, seeking to create short, spiritually intense poems representing states of mind bound by neither reason nor logic. However, by 1927, as a graduate student at Stanford, Winters decided Imagism and Modernism were bankrupt, decadent, and obscurantist. Winters 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).

Winters took a hardline stance against Modernism and its precursors. He opposed literary hedonism and aestheticism—the idea that poetry is judged according to the pleasure derived by the reader or poet, or that poetry is a means to heighten pleasure. Winters also rejected the Romantic theory that poetry is a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” as William Wordsworth had claimed, 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 as 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 moral technique of contemplation and 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, Shakespeare, and Robert Herrick as models of logical, rigorous, and precise writing.

For Winters, a well-composed metrical poem is a precision device to comprehend or control the seeming incoherence of human experience. It offers the poet the best means to discover important truths about the self and the world. In a formal poem, every detail and every syllable is accounted for, and the verse form itself is perfectible. 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 can 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, but because of the poet’s obedience to them.

**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

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

Isaacs, Elizabeth. *An Introduction to the Poetry of Yvor Winters*. Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1981.

Powell, Grosvenor. Language and 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

http://www.ohioswallow.com/extras/0804010129\_cover.jpg

http://www.nndb.com/people/605/000099308/yvor-winters-1.jpg

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

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