22 CRITICS DISCUSS

Yvor Winters

(1900-1968)

"His poetry is gaunt, gray and harsh. It is also cold, with that burning cold that belongs to ice....There is an integrity about it which derives from the poet's metaphysical passion--a passion colored by his sharp apprehension of physical things, and having its issue in a profound disenchantment with the world. He conveys it by means of a few spare, precise images. In some thirty words he will give you the essence of a moment. But these moments are an effectual screen for eternity. Time, Space, and the mind that spins them are Mr. Winters's ultimate concern."

Babette Deutsch
Bookman
(June 1928) 441

"Mr. Winters remains one of the best of the Imagist school, but limited by that school. He is afraid to trust himself in any extension of language beyond absolute clarity and precision, and he therefore loses much in power. He remains one of the most interesting and contemporary of our poets, despite the fact that his critical mind does his poetic mind some injury. He states more clearly than any other poet the modern dilemma: the gradual loss of feeling through too much of 'print'."

Eda Lou Walton
Nation
(17 December 1930) 680

"Mr. Winters started with a basis of ideas which he has never found reason to abandon, either creatively or critically. His is a centrifugal progress. He has had the courage to work outward from hard absolutes of meaning and intuition toward the surfaces of sense, and thus toward the periphery of a complete and comprehending sensibility. To express this sensibility perfectly is to achieve style. Mr. Winters's difficulties have been chiefly of two kinds: in communication because the initial meaning or intuition has not always found a genuine sensible embodiment; and in persuasion, because, even when it has, the requisite passion and conviction of style have too often been lacking."

Morton Dauwen Zabel
Poetry
(January 1931) 226

"Yvor Winters, writing like a combination of a medieval scholastic and a New England divine, is a critic of a type that one has become accustomed to regard as practically extinct....Evidently Mr. Winters began with a temperamental distaste for the general atmosphere of distress, the hectic experimentation with forms and with style, that has characterized so much contemporary verse. But to this situation hw responded with that mechanism of the mind which consists in reacting to any phenomenon by celebrating its opposite....Mr. Winters is narrow, dogmatic, parochial; and these are all the defects of his method. But it would be unjust not to mention the virtues of these defects: the sharpening of focus on important problems, the formulation of useful distinctions, and the construction of definitions that at least provide a springboard for discussion."

William Troy
Nation
(20 February 1937) 216

"When Mr. Winters is actually talking about the work of the American experimental poets, how it failed and even how it could have been improved, when he talks about meter and convention or any technical matter, he makes only normal mistakes and produces a great many pertinent and stimulating facts....Mr. Winters's system of absolutes, his coinage of intellectual counters, is not much better than other systems or much worse; but it is more bare-faced, candid and uncompromising than most; hence more irritating andI should say easier, in a good cause, to ignore. When he translates his absolutes back into the genuine but ultimately provisional elements of his feeling for poetry, he will always be at the level of his best."

Richard P. Blackmur
New Republic
(14 July 1937) 285

"To watch him taking a critical misjudgment apart gives the same kind of pleasure that we get from seeing a first-rate woodman split a log--the great secrets being merely to start the opening wedge in the right place and then to hit it hard enough. Mr. Winters has no lack of sharp, smooth wedges to start where they will do the most good, and his style can be on occasion a two-handed sledge to sink then home...Those who perceive how much Mr. Winters has as a critic cannot well help wishing that he had everything. What he does not at present seem to have in normal measure is the rounded man's appreciation of writing that is consummate in a small way. His canons are serious in severity and he is little tolerant of the playful, the trifling, the frankly artificial, the droll, the merely mellifluous."

Wilson Follett
New York Times
(4 December 1938) 36

"What is most valuable about Yvor Winters as a critic is just what is most valuable about him as a poet: his power of controlled discernment of matters usually only observed fragmentarily, by the way, willy-nilly, with the merely roving eye. His observations carry the impact of a sensibility which not only observed but modified the fact at hand, and we feel the impact as weight, as momentum, as authority. The weight is of focused knowledge, the momentum that of a mind which has chosen--by an ethic of the imagination--its direction, and the authority is the authority of tone: the tone of conviction that cannot be gainsaid without being undone. The weight and momentum, as we feel them, give our sense of value--of the reality and exigence of what is said. The tone of authority, however, variously emphasizes, impedes, or irritates--for it appears in the guise of explicit assertions of fact and affords the reader sensations--our sense of the validity of the judgments it is meant to buttress.

This is another way of saying that Mr. Winters does not apparently find enough authority within his sensibility--in the very tone of experience itself--and is compelled to resort to constructions of the mind outside the data of experience either because they are consonant with the emotion of what has been given. When it happens that these constructions are not disparate from those of his audience, they are successful, though not thereby valid in themselves; and emphasize the point of what he actually brings to view. When, on the other hand, the constructions are seen conspicuously to be imported, the audience tends to feel, for them most part with injustice, that their invalidity vitiates the whole operative force of the sensibility. Men everywhere are unwilling to trust, to confide, either in the work their own minds do or in that which they see actually performed by the minds of others, though that is all they have in either case finally to depend on. They are driven rather to accept or dismiss, to foster or destroy, the little work actually done in terms of work, not done at al, but merely imputed. At least, this is so of every imaginative field; of religion, of politics, of philosophy, and of literary criticism.

Mr. Winters is one of these men, but only conspicuously so because his set of intellectual constructions are not superficially in keeping with those abroad in our time, and only dangerously so because his constructions occasionally permit him to issue in judgments which would be untenable without them. His elevation of Jones Very above Emerson, Bridges and Sturge Moore above Yeats, Williams above Pound and Eliot, and Edith Wharton above Henry James, taken together with the applications of his construction of the fallacy of expressive form, furnish examples both of what is dangerous and what is conspicuous. They make an artificial barrier--himself he might call it the framework--which obscures but does not touch the work he has actually performed. It is the purpose of this Note, if not to remove, then to show how transparent and artificial that barrier is.

If only Mr. Winters had been dead twenty odd centuries like Plato and Aristotle, or three generations like Arnold and Pater, the task would be easy and grateful; for it would amount to little more than remarking that most of the principles of thought turn out to be foibles of manner and crotchets of personality: touchstones that get in the way of the facts if taken seriously, but illuminating enough if taken, as they mostly are, as contributory facets of fact. But Mr. Winters is alive and uncommonly kicking; and to deprive him, by mere fiat, of his principles and his prejudices, would be so much to anticipate history as to seem amputation. Like everybody else he thinks he needs the assurance of his principles to reassure his prejudices; just as the reader, doubtless, would be terribly deprived on his part, for in a critic where principle and prejudice were minimized it would be necessary to read every word with attention, as in a poem or any table of values.

Which is precisely the burden which Mr. Winters' real work unremittingly imposes. His intimacy with the matter-and-form of poetry and imaginative prose, when it exists at all, is genuine and complete and stirring; it is also infectious. The reader who ignores the obstacle race of irrelevant formulation and incompatible comparison and returns straight to the mater-and-form considered will find Mr. Winters has given him, in just payment for attention, an access of intimacy both accurate and viable in detail: an advantage of position from which the whole labor of principle seems wilful, if expedient, waste.

The expedience we aill come to, and end on, here let us represent the intimacy, and let us do so in the form of a tribute. No reader willing to see what Mr. Winters plainly demonstrates in his studies of the experimental school of American poetry (in *Primitivism and Decadence* chiefly, but also in uncollected reviews, particularly of Crane and Williams) will be able to avoid the conviction that the incompleteness, confusion, and ultimate emptiness of that poetry *as a school* are radical, and due to a wrong objective, namely: poetry without subject-matter. No critic has done more to deflate, in detail, specifically, under your nose and in your mouth, the final value of poetry, however otherwise valuable, which fails to declare its subject. No critic has done more both to restore both a sense for the need of objective substance and to indicate the modes by which it may be secured if it is there to secure. (No one, obviously, can set springes for woodcock that can't fly.) Again, (in the same book and the same reviews), Mr. Winters has done a great deal towards developing a usable set of notions about metre; whether they are the right notions or the only notions, and whether Mr. Winters' applications of them are always correct, matters relatively little; they are usable in a field wide enough to include Pound, Williams, Tate, Eliot, Yeats, Marianne Moore, Crane--anybody you will.

Metre, like substance, had tended to disappear from consideration, which is to say had passed beyond control, and therefore did its work badly; rather running away with than sustaining, or on the other hand rather imprisoning than supplying motive-power to the efforts of developing sensibility, whether compositional or appreciative. Metre still tends to disappear, just as subject-matter still tends to fail to eventuate; the fallacy which Mr. Winters calls expressive form is still with us; but the congeries of critical opinion and the habits of poetic practice have been enough modified in the last ten years to make the following summary statement of the metrical virtues generally acceptable.

Neither deliberate privation of medium nor willful defect of sensibility is esteemed for cultivation. Mr. Winters' metrical virtues therefore involve the virtues of sensibility. For metre: "coherence of movement, variety of movement, and fine perceptivity...in a system in which every detail is accounted for. Every syllable must be recognizably in or out of place;...in brief, the full sound-value of every syllable must be willed for a particular end, and must be precise in the attainment of that end...Traditional metre...tends to exploit the full possibilities of language; experimental metre...is incomplete...Experimental conventions in general tend to abandon comprehensible motive, to resort to unguided feeling; similarly experimental metre loses that rational frame which alone gives its variations the precision of true perception." Anyone who grew up, as I did, between 1920 and 1930, will appreciate the change in poetic weather which these fragmentary quotations indicate, and will regret, as I do, that the change was not sooner felt. I believe that Mr. Winters is as responsible as anybody that the change has been felt at all.

Mr. Winters' background point of view, and the same faculty of controlled discernment of illuminating fact, which produced the valuable aspects of his essays on modern poetry, are also responsible for the seven studies in American obscurantism which he calls *Maule's Curse*: the curse that required of Hawthorne, Cooper, Melville, Dickinson, Poe, Emerson and Very, Henry James, and the culture which they express, that they drink or shed their own blood: the curse of inadequacy, on the expressive level, of life lived. It seems to me that every fact and almost all the interpretive or explanatory observations brought forward in these studies are both pertinent and useful. No one who reads the section on Poe will be content to accept him indifferently thereafter, and no one who reads the quotations from Cooper will risk dismissing him indifferently, though I doubt that in either case many readers will share Mr. Winters' extremes of opinion. Similarly, the remarks on James will well limit appreciation, as those on Melville will deepen it of those writers. The essays on Hawthorne and on Dickinson seem to me to achieve more, though they intended no more, than the others, possibly because of a greater active sympathy for the critic; they may be taken as tolerably complete versions of their subjects, but without any effect of substitution--the reader is driven back, guided and controlled with the sympathy of right preparation, to experience what is offered and to miss only what is not there.

The essay on Jones Very and Emerson, by contrast, at least to me, is at its critical point an act of substitution: the substitution of a superficial attack upon Emerson (an attack, I mean, which strikes nowhere near the centre of Emerson, his extraordinary and fertile sensibility, but only upon the incoherence of its periphery) in order to elevate the absolutism, the rigid mysticism, of Jones Very: a substitution performed in lieu of critical observation in the interests of Mr. Winters's own intellectual predilections. It is good to have Jones Very, and there is not harm in Mr. Winters employing his prejudice in the discovery; but it is a very dangerous kind of criticism which judges one writer advantageously by applying *merely* prejudice, as appears here, to another writer. The danger is the vitiation of the very standards the prejudice is meant to support.

A closer illustration may be seen in the comparison of James and Mrs. Wharton to the disadvantage of James, closer, because no sooner does Mr. Winters make his comparison than he comes, with justice, to deny that after all, Mrs. Wharton's orderly competence--my summary of what Mr. Winters attributes to her --is anywhere equal to 'the vast crowd of unforgettable human beings whom' James created. Here Mr. Winters was compelled by his experience of it to return--despite its diffuseness, its made concentration upon detail, its confusion at crucial points of morals with manners, it lapses from the advantage of plot--to what James actually everywhere exposed, an inviolable and inexhaustible sensibility. That return is the obligation of the critic as it is the necessity, for survival, of the writer. The point about Mr. Winters is that he returns often enough so that we can afford to dismiss him where he does not: we lose little to gain much.

What we lose, if I may reverse the language of religion, we tend to find in a different, less annoying, more appropriate place. For example, in this nexus, if we apply the weight of Mrs. Wharton to the mass of Henry James and see just where it bears--see just how Mr. Winters did actually apply it--it modifies without diminishing our sense of the mass of James. We know better what James is; which is the object of criticism. Something similar is true of the relation between Very and Emerson, Moore and Yeats, Bridges or Mrs. Daryush and Eliot or Pound. It is only by a kind of mechanical inadvertence almost universal in intellectual operations that Mr. Winters himself would have us see more; or, to use a more familiar (though hiddenly more complex) term, it is only a difference in the *operation* of taste that comes between us. Which explains the justice of Mr. Winters' charge that Poe had no taste to operate, and that Emily Dickinson could not control the operation of hers.

To make these observations is not I think, to injure the frame of Mr. Winters' thought; certainly it does not vitiate the moral insight upon which the frame rests; it merely reduces thought taken as principle back to the condition of thought taken as value, as discrimination, as an order, among other orders, of discernment, which is the condition or level where it is most useful in the reading or composition of literature, or for that matter, of religion or philosophy or politics. Here we come to the point of expedience where we began. Without the expedience of his principles--the logic of his taste--and without the exaggerations and irrelevances to which they led him, Mr. Winters could probably have gotten nowhere with the aspects of American poetry and fiction which absorbed his instinctive attention. It may even have been his principles which let him see what he sees. For his subject was confusion, confusion of mode, subject, source, and flux; and the best, or at any rate the quickest way to clarify a confusion is by imposing, as you think, an order upon it which you have derived elsewhere, whether from the general orthodoxy or from your special heresy of the orthodox--your version of the superrational. Actually, of course, you do no such thing, except so far as you fall into error; actually you find, discern, the order which already exists in the confusion before you and of which you form, by sheer egocentricity, the integrating part.

Order is the objective form of what you know, and reaches its highest value as familiarity, its lowest as boredom, conscious or not. In between lie the operative reaches of error, heresy, shock, and irritation; the confusion that fills or the speculative leap that crosses the gaps in discernment. Orthodoxy, which is the order of orders and absorbs them, is not for the individual. It is honest, as well as prudent, in setting up an order to leave room for disorder, which is merely the order you have not yet discerned. The difficulty is great and usually insuperable, such is the pride, and the fear beneath the pride, of intellect. But if you fail, others who come after you will do it for you, seeing, as they will with enough effort, that your order is but the condition of the disorder they, and you, both find.

It is my contention that Mr. Winters knows all this is practice, and that if you will permit yourself to know what he knows you will be able both to ignore and to profit by the more provisional form of his argument. It is the sensibility, in the end, that absorbs, and manifests like light, the notion of order. For what it is worth, as a sort of postscription to this whole context, is not the following couplet the sensibility declaring order rather than the intellect inviting anarchy?

Allez! Steriles ritournelles!
La vie est vraie et criminelle!

R. P. Blackmur
The Expense of Greatness
(Arrow Editions 1940) 167-75

"To his earlier perversities...Winters adds an intemperate denigration of the poetry and criticism of T. S. Eliot....This seems to me not only mistaken but ungenerous, since I cannot help but feel that Winters shares both Eliot's literary and religious traditionalism and his method of employing arresting obiter dicta which contain valuable insights even when the essays in which they blossom are elaborately wrong-headed. What I find of value in Winters's criticism is precisely what I have found (but in a larger measure) in Eliot's: a love of good writing and an occasional articulation of that passion, despite theories and posturing."

George Mayberry
New Republic
(12 July 1943) 51-52

"Mr. Winters's work is precise, scrupulous and taut; no syllable is wasted: the intellectual element does not exclude emotion, though it controls it. The metrics are formal, the rhymes strict; seldom does a word seem rhyme-fetched, rather than intended. The poet's ear is good. If his poems seem cold--or, anyway, cool--it is worth remembering that it can be with poems as with women: some like them so, at least sometimes."

Rolfe Humphries
New York Times
(23 April 1944) 24

"To the extent that the evaluation of works of art has not become an extinct critical function in our time, credit must be largely due to the redoubtable labors of Yvor Winters, poet, professor of English at Leland Stanford University, and the author of four remarkable volumes of literary criticism: *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), *Maule's Curse* (1938), *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), and *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (1946). Winters is a serious man, and in some respects quite a useful one, and it is regrettable that to a generation of writers younger than himself he has become largely a comic figure, the man who thinks that Elizabeth Daryush is our foremost living poet and that Edith Wharton is a better writer than Henry Jamjes. Winters had made these statements, and other more extreme, but he is our foremost and perhaps sole representative of a vanishing art, Johnsonian criticism, and he is well worth careful study.

Winters is very much in earnest about the art of evaluation, which he sees as the crowning glory, the ultimate reason for being, of critical analysis. He has listed in detail the processes, culminating in evaluation, that constitute literary criticism as he sees it. He writes:

"It will consist (1) of the statement of such historical or biographical knowledge as may be

> necessary in order to understand the mind and method of the writer; (2) of such analysis of his literary theories as we may need to understand and evaluate what he is doing; (3) of a rational critique of the paraphrasable content (roughly, the motive) of the poem; (4) of a rational critique of the feeling motivated--that is, of the details of style, as seen in language and technique; and (5) of the final act of judgment, a unique act, the general nature of which can be indicated, but which cannot be communicated precisely, since it consists in receiving from the poet his own final and unique judgment of his matter and in judging that judgment. It should be noted that the purpose of the first four processes is to limit as narrowly as possible the region in which the final unique act is to occur."

For 'poem,' of course, we read 'any work of art,' and we observe that inasmuch as art itself is the act of evaluating experience for Winters, he sees criticism as a remarkably complicated double judgment secondary in evaluating the poet's evaluation of his experience (the 'subject' of the poem) and primary in evaluating the critic's own experience (the poem itself).

To this difficult and subtle task Winters brings a set of persuasive principles. The critic should display 'reasonable humility and caution' in evaluating, and even at that, 'it is only fair to add that few men possess either the talent or the education to justify their being taken very seriously, even of those who are nominally professional students of these matters.' However, 'every literary critic has a right to a good many errors of judgment.' Whether or not Winters actually displays 'reasonable humility and caution' in evaluating, and whether he has not, as he charges against Poe, far exceeded his generous quota of errors, are other questions.

Winters's dogmatic evaluations are most striking in the case of the half-dozen writers he admires almost to the point of worship. One of those is Edith Wharton. He has written that Mrs. Wharton, at her best, is nearly the perfect example of an effectiveness in the novel that Jane Austen, Melville, Hawthorne, Henry James, Fielding, and Defoe can only exemplify after making allowances for 'limitations of scope and defects of procedure.' In terms of the celebrated comparison with James, he believes that Mrs. Wharton gives a greater precision to her moral issues than James was ever able to achieve, and that the prose of at least *The Age of Innocence* and *The Valley of Decision,* however, it also 'might be defended as superior to any single work by James.'

Perhaps the highest praise in Winters's vocabulary has been reserved for the work of Robert Bridges. Bridges's poetry is superior to that of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and practically every other modern poet, 'incomparably' superior to that of Ezra Pound, and superior to and more original than that of Gerard Manley Hopkins in every respect. Moreover, Bridges is a 'more civilized' and a 'saner' man than any of his contemporaries. To bring him into comparison with his equals, he has written a number of poems that 'will stand the most scrutinizing comparison with any of Shakespeare's sonnets,' he is 'probably the most finished and original master of blank verse since Milton,' and he has written at least two fine occasional sonnets that 'would cast no discredit on Milton' and a formal ode 'no whit inferior' to Dryden's 'ode on the Death of Mistress Anne Killigrew.'

'It seems to me beyond all question' Winters writes, 'that Bridges' two plays on Nero are the greatest tragedy since *The Cenci* and (if we except that furious and appalling composition, *Samson Agonisters,* which, though a tragedy, is no play) are quite possibly superior to any English tragedy outside of Shakespeare.' Furthermore, Winters has classified Bridges's poetry, for the convenience of lazy readers, into 'short lyrics,' first level' (ten poems), 'short lyrics, second level: (twelve poems), 'longer lyrics at a slow tempo, first level' (three poems), 'second level' (one poem), plus two fine epigrams, two admirable didactic poems of some length, 'of which the second is nearly on the first level,' and the above-mentioned two fine occasional sonnets and formal ode....

The novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts ranked above those of Henry James, a chapter of Dr. Williams's *In the American Grain* was superior 'to any other prose of our time and most of the verse'...The trio of living Americans who excited Winters most were Williams, [Hart] Crane, and Tate....and Lawrence was the only major poet in England since Hardy. By 1943 Tate was 'surely' one of the major talents of our time....Wallace Stevens may be afflicted with a 'hedonist' degeneracy,' for example, but his 'Sunday

Morning' is 'probably the greatest American poem of the twentieth century and is certainly one of the greatest contemplative poems in English'; 'Tate's 'Shadow and Shade' and 'The Cross' are 'two of the great lyrics of our time'...

Winters's pose is that of a mind flashing across the whole corpus of poetry in English in the search for a comparison, and he is perfectly capable, in one passage, of placing Byron by comparisons with aspects of Jonson, Campion, Googe, Tuberville, Lawrence, and Poe, or, in another, of discussing the difference between Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams in terms of the Petrarchan rhetoric of the sixteenth century, the metaphysical verse of the seventeenth century, the sonnets of Shakespeare and Donne, and the poetry of Fulke Greville, Vaux, Googe, Gascoigne, Tuberville, Daniel, and Drayton....Implicit in this view of the moral nature of art and criticism is the obligation on the critic to 'correct' traditional opinion in so far as he believes it to be wrong....

One of his contributions to modern criticism (inherited from Babbitt, but chiefly developed and propagated by Winters) is the concept of 'the heresy of expressive [or "imitative"] form. He sees it as the outstanding characteristic of modern literature, particularly evident in Eliot, Pound, and Joyce, and traces it to Coleridge's doctrine of 'organic form.'...By 'obscurantism' Winters means 'the development of feeling in excess of the motive,' which is more or less what the Greeks thought of as 'hysteria' and regarded as a specifically female complaint, seated in the womb. On the basis of this definition, Winters sees all his seven writers as afflicted with obscurantism in some form, and in fact sees it as the chief phenomenon of what he calls 'the romantic period,' from 1750 to the present....

Maule's Curse [is] a study of the moral significance of individual writers; *The Anatomy of Nonsense* is a study of what Winters believes to be the four 'most influential tendencies in the literary practice of our time....Winters is nothing if not a patient and far-sighted worker, as is demonstrated (according to his account) by the seventeen years he spent working on the five long essays that make up *Primitivism and Decadence*: revising them constantly, working most of his periodical writing into them, conferring on them with everyone available, and even changing his attitude toward modern poetry completely...

For detailed study of the evaluative method at work, Winters's second book, *Maule's Curse*, is probably the best, since it is his only book concerned primarily with writers, the first having dealt with forms, the third with ideas, and the fourth with a single poet [Robinson]....The 'curse' of the title is the prophesy in Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*: 'God will give him blood to drink!' predicted for Colonel Pyncheon by a man he had wronged. Winters believes that our great writers of the last century, from Cooper to James, suffered from this figurative curse; specifically, that having been cut off from their true literary heritage, they were 'abnormally sensitive to the influence of European romanticism,' and thus drank blood--their own....

Winters deserves particular praise for his treatment of Herman Melville, to whom (almost alone of contemporary critics, with the honorable exception of F. O. Matthiessen) he has at last given his rightful due as America's greatest writer and one of the world's supreme novelists. Winters is...too limited in interpreting the deeper meanings of *Moby-Dick*, but in detailed symbolic interpretation of passages he is invaluable....Whenever he is able to take time off from the responsibilities of moral evaluation, Winters is impressive as a close and imaginative reader, and several critical readings in the book, particularly a detailed analysis of the allegorical symbolism in...*The Scarlet Letter* where Hester and Pearl wait in Governor Bellingham's mansion and see themselves distorted in a mirror, are quite penetrating. Despite Winters' dubious theories of metrics, particularly his theory of the metrical basis of free verse...he sometimes produces remarkably stimulating metrical analysis, of which one in *Maule's Curse*, of three of Emily Dickinson's poems, is a fine example. The book is also useful for sharp analyses of various aspects of American cultural history, the best example being Winters's discussion of the 'Puritan Paradox,' the belief in predestination combined with action on the basis of belief in free will....His specific application of it to the strain of allegorizing in New England writers from Cotton Mather to Henry Adams is a genuine achievement....

Winters is, in fact, a wicked man to tangle with in print, and at one time or another he has quarreled with a good percentage of contemporary critics and reviewers....He...replies to reviews with counter-reviews of the reviewer, articles with counter-articles, and chapters in books with counter-chapters to *his* books. He never forgets an attack, although he may wait years to reply...

Winters has contributed a number of things of value to contemporary criticism: some good metrical analyses; some brilliant close reading and studies of poetic structure (particularly in *The Anatomy of Nonsense*: of Stevens's 'Anecdote of the Jar,' Tate's 'Death of Little Boys,' and two lines from Browning's 'Serenade at the Villa'); a salutary insistence on 'the intellectual and moral significance of literary forms,' and the relationship between beliefs and forms...Most important, he has, almost single-handedly, kept an important critical function, evaluation, alive for us...He does evaluate, does compare, contrast, grade, rate, and rank, at a time when most serious criticism only analyzes and interprets, and when the reader of a critical article has to go to the newspaper reviewer to find out whether the work is any good or not (and then is misinformed more often than not).

What criticism can adopt from Winters is his vigor and boldness of evaluation, while making...them on a basis of more significance to literature than his concepts of 'rationality' and 'morality,' and with them giving the reader the whole structure of analysis, to serve as a basis for the reader's checking the evaluation or making his own on the evidence. Winters's own five-stage process culminating in evaluation...is a fairly good basis for such a process."

Stanley Edgar Hyman
The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism
(Random House 1947-55) 23-53

"Winters is what Kierkegaard said he was--a corrective; and Winters's case for the rational, extensive, prosaic virtues that the age disliked, his case against the modernist, intensive, romantic vices that it swallowed whole, have in his late criticism become a case against any complicated dramatic virtues. Winters's tone has long ago become that of the leader of a small religious cult, that of the one sane man in a universe of lunatics; his habitual driven-to-distraction rages against the reprobates who have evidenced their lunacy by disagreeing with him go side by side with a startled, giant admiration for the elect who in a rational moment have become his followers."

Randall Jarrell
New York Times
(24 August 1947) 14

"In his own generation he has the eminence of isolation; among American poets who appeared soon after the first world war he is, Crane being dead, the master. If he has been neglected--when he has not been ignored--the reasons are not hard to find. He has conducted a poetic revolution all his own that owes little or nothing to the earlier revolution of Pound and Eliot, or that does back to certain great, likewise neglected Tudor poets for metrical and stylistic models....He is a Renaissance humanist of the pre-Spenserian school of metaphysical rhetoricians, the school of Greville and Raleigh: a poet whose moral imagination takes, without didacticism, the didactic mode, striving for precision in language and, in verse, for formal elegance."

Allen Tate
Nation
(2 March 1953) 17-18

"His best poetry is 'occasional.' It takes off from something observed or remembered, or from contemporary occasion, and by a combination of perception and meditation wrings some human meaning out of it. This meaning is often oblique, often delicate, quite different from the great commonplaces of the Victorian or eighteenth-century poets. Nor does it reach out through deliberate symbolic echoes and ironic parallels to include all of civilization, as the early Eliot so often did. Winters works by limitation; the meaning which each of his poems achieves is precise and restricted; and perhaps his most remarkable technical accomplishment is his control, his ability to stop (not only in terms of length but also in terms of depth) when he has said enough."

David Daiches
Yale Review
(Summer 1953) 629

"The defects of *Maule's Curse* are worth noting because the book has the virtue of its defects. Winters keeps very close to 'the relationship of the history of ideas to the history of literary forms' and to 'the intellectual and moral significance of literary forms,' which, as he says, must constitute 'the very core of literary criticism and of the understanding of literature.' He braves the difficult region where theoretical premises dissolve and reshape themselves into literary attitudes and structures. But in so doing he oversimplifies both terms of his equation. American thought and letters are both reduced to 'American obscurantism.' To be fair to Emerson, to Hawthorne and Whitman, to Melville and Poe, one must take Winters' basic question in a more disinterested way than he himself intends....Their movement was not obscurantist but honest, an ingenuous attempt to explore a common intellectual situation."

Charles Feidelson, Jr.
Symbolism and American Literature
(U Chicago 1953) 4-5

"These poems [by Emily Dickinson] have been brilliantly studied in this light ["natural images exist only that they may contribute to the definition of a moral experience"] by Yvor Winters, in his 'Emily Dickinson: or the Limits of Judgment,' *Maule's Curse* (Norfolk, Connecticut 1938) 179 n.21."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 179 n.21

"Winters attended the University of Chicago and received his M.A. degree from the University of Colorado. He has taught English at Stanford University since 1928, and is well known both as a poet and a critic. Although his work is often considered to be a part of the New Criticism, his critical theory is distinctly individual and often at variance with more prevalent opinions. He maintains that the critic should be concerned with the moral evaluation of a work of art, and that a poem should be a rational statement about human experience in which the poet is 'seeking to state a true moral judgment.' His books of criticism include *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), *Maule's Curse* (1938), and *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), all of which are collected in *In Defense of Reason* (1947); *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (1946), *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (1957); *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1960); and *The Poetry of J. V. Cunningham* (1961).

In his poetry, which is of a traditional nature, Winters adheres to his critical theories on the necessity of balance between reason and emotion; his verse was awarded the Bollingen Prize in 1960. His books of poetry include *The Immobile Wind* (1921); *The Magpie's Shadow* (1922); *The Bare Hills* (1927); *The Proof* (1930); *The Journey* (1931); *Before Disaster* (1934); *Poems* (1940); *The Giant Weapon* (1943); *Collected Poems* (1952). He edited and contributed to *Twelve Poets of the Pacific* (1937)."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1243

"His first two books, *The Immobile Wind* (1921) and *The Magpie's Shadow* (1922), show a poet unsure of his utterance, experimenting with the borrowed inflections of William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and the Imagists. In *The Giant Weapon* (1943) and, most of all, in the revised *Collected Poems* (1960), the poet speaks in his own voice. It is a well-modulated voice, traditional, formal in the best sense, quiet but firm.

It was not Winters' poetry but his criticism which occasioned many attacks. As an essayist, he was nonchalantly controversial, stubbornly dogmatic, dispensing provocative obiter dicta, and challenging established reputations with dissenting opinions. 'I laid,' he said, 'the foundations for more literary enmities...than I should judge have been enjoyed by any other writer of my generation.' Nevertheless, *In Defense of Reason* (1947), a collection of three volumes of his criticism, overcomes opposition; an analysis of ideas governing styles, itis a cumulative and historical study. 'To the extent that the evaluation of art has not become an extinct critical function in our time,' wrote Stanley Edgar Hyman, one of Winters' most consistent critics, 'credit must be largely due to the redoubtable labors of Yvor Winters.' The six essays in

On Modern Poets, reissued in 1959, are a set of drastic reappraisals by one who has been labeled 'a maverick of literary criticism.' In 1961 the Bollingen Prize was awarded to Winters' *Collected Poems* as 'the culmination of a poetic discipline'."

Louis Untermeyer, ed.
Modern American Poetry
(Harcourt, Brace 1962) 549

"The disciplining of the aesthetic experience, its substancing in moral values, which Eliot and Pound promoted, was to resort to other methods during the thirties. One of these appeared in the mature work of Yvor Winters, whose efforts to analyze the form of modern poetry, to define its processes, to find a critical methodology for them, and to rescue poetry from the disorder and confusion of aimless experimentation, led him toward more and more severely classical principles, these being partly influenced by the arguments of Irving Babbitt, partly by a personal contempt for the abuses and anti-intellectual tendencies of artistic experiments based on psychological and amoral motives--his dissension from the Humanist position being indicated, however, by his judgment on Babbitt: 'His analysis of literary principles appears to me to be gravely vitiated by an almost complete ignorance of the manner in which the moral and intelligence actually gets into poetry'."

Morton D. Zabel
Literary History of the United States, third edition
(Macmillan 1963) 1370-71

"I think we shall decide, when more is known about our literary history, that Yvor Winters was not wrong when he went behind Whitman to Emerson to locate the source of what he considered Hart Crane's romantic errors....The company of those who in our time have been not just unaware of Emerson but positively repelled by him includes many moralistic humanists like Yvor Winters, who saw fit to blame Hart Crane's suicide on Emerson, and humanists of a more 'scientific' cast, who suspect Transcendentalism of being just a watered-down version of Christianity, an unacceptable 'myth,' in short....In an essay that traduces Emerson and ends by overrating Very as a poet, Yvor Winters long ago wrote most of what needs to be said on this matter: Very's most important affinities are not with Emerson but with the Puritans and the early Quakers....Yvor Winters's dismissal of Poe's poetry as bad verse springing from bad theory and reflecting all the bad taste of contemporary popular culture is too extreme an indictment, but as so often, Winters is merely grossly overstating a partial truth....

Yvor Winters...told the readers of the *avant garde Hudson Review* that [Tuckerman's "The Cricket"] was 'one of the greatest meditations on death to be written since the 17th century' and also--even more surprisingly, since not very many 'meditations on death' have been written in any century--'probably the greatest single American poem of the 19th century'....Early in 1965 Tuckerman's *Complete Poems* were published, edited with an Introduction by N. Scott Momaday, with a Critical Forward by Yvor Winters. It would appear that at last Tuckerman had been *really* 'discovered,' past all possibility of being 'forgotten' again. But Tuckerman's merits are said, by both Winters and Momaday, to depend on our rejecting, indeed on our despising, Emerson, and Romanticism generally; and I suspect that there are many besides myself who will think that if this is really true, it is too high a price to pay merely to find another American poet worth reading. As Winters puts it in his new piece, Tuckerman was 'oner of the three most remarkable American poets of the nineteenth century. The others were Jones Very (1813-80) and Emily Dickinson (1830-86).'

So far, one might *possibly* follow him: Very was 'remarkable,' in the most literal sense of the word, and so, in a different way, was Dickinson. After all, 'remarkable' need not involve any value judgment. But immediately after this it becomes clear that for Winters 'remarkable' is indeed a normative word, and very positively so: 'Emerson had talent, which was badly damaged by foolish thinking....Of Poe and Whitman the less said the better.' Winters' catalogue of nineteenth-century poets is complete at this point. (He mentions, and dismisses, Bryant in the clause I have omitted.) What all this clearly implies is that Tuckerman appeals strongly to critics who have a long history of eccentric opinions."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets from the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton Mifflin 1968) 91, 113, 124, 135, 256-58

"He did, it is true, receive one or two national awards, mostly for his poetry, when he was in his sixties, and a few well-known critics such as Randall Jarrell, R. P. Blackmur, Arthur Mizener, Morton D. Zabel, and Allen Tate had occasionally spoken highly of him earlier. But in bulk even the favorable reviews of his books seemed to add up to the proposition that he was admirably independent and dedicated and that sometimes, when he set aside his theories and gave himself up to a text, he could be brilliant, but that his theories were mistaken, his taste narrow, and his judgments often absurd.

As for the hostile commentaries, one could put together an anthology of remarks from them for parallels with which one would look in vain except in discussions of F. R. Leavis's work. And unlike Leavis, Winters could not have had the satisfaction of knowing at the end that if his detractors had often been brutal, his admirers were now legion. Nevertheless, with the exception of again of Leavis, it is hard to think of any other eminent man of letters in English during the past few decades to whom the remarks quoted above could more fittingly be applied, or who is more deserving of being seen as, in a fairly precise sense of the term, a culture hero. The term has been cheapened a good deal, and a sizable region of the culture of the last decade or two could be charted by examining the processes by which a term formerly applied to figures like Henry James can now be applied with no sense of incongruity to someone like Warhol.

What has been lost, of course, is the notion of *heroism*--the notion that someone is admirable not because he has Made It, but because of qualities such as endurance, self-discipline, integrity, and courage that have traditionally invited the epithet 'heroic,' whether displayed by a great soldier or by a great man of letters, such as Samuel Johnson. I shall try in this article to define some of the aspects of Winters' character--or, if that seems too old-fashioned a term, of his way of being a man of letters, more particularly an academic man of letters--that make his example especially heartening at present, when there is so observable a distrust, even inside the profession, of the academic life and the academic virtues.

That Winters, from the time when he was the Western editor of *Hound and Horn* in the early Thirties, evoked a good deal of hostility is a commonplace. But it is a commonplace whose force, in these professionally liberal times, is likely to diminish rapidly as his stock rises, just as there are no doubt now a lot of young readers who are under the impression that Leavis was always recognized as a major critic. These are economically comfortable times for academics and for the young who wish to enter the academic profession, and it is natural to want to think well of one's chosen profession and to believe that--dedicated as it professedly is to the pursuit of truth--it is one in which truth will always out and virtue always be recognized. After all, are we not all, those of us in literary studies, engaged almost daily in the classroom in celebrating the virtues of the illustrious dead and testifying obliquely to our own collective percipience about them in contrast with the impercipience, often, of their less enlightened contemporaries? And even where controversial contemporaries or near-contemporaries of our own are concerned, it is insidiously easy to feel that when 'unnumber'd suppliants croud Preferment's gate,' almost any kind of reputation is better than none at all and that the very fact of being controversial entails an implicit recognition of one's importance. It is increasingly easy, then, to miss the force of a remark like that which Winters made in a letter to a colleague of mine in the late Fifties apropos of a favorable review of *The Function of Criticism*: 'You don't know how nice it is to be called a great critic instead of a son-of-a-bitch until you have been called the second a few hundred times.'

When Winters was an embattled reviewer in *Hound and Horn*, he was not simply a critic with an unfashionable line and unwelcome tone. He was also an academic and, worse, a graduate student, in what appears to have been a very traditional department. And for a number of years thereafter (he did not in fact achieve a full professorship until he was forty-seven) he was a relatively junior member of that department and of his profession. To re-enter imaginatively those Depression and immediately post-Depression years is becoming increasingly difficult where the academy is concerned....Admittedly Winters was not in fact shut out from an academic post at a decent university, as Leavis was for eight or nine years. But the following cool passage of reminiscence in *The Function of Criticism* makes telling reading none the less:

> 'Of the four gentlemen who have been head of the department of English at Stanford in my time, the second, the late Professor A. G. Kennedy, told me that criticism and scholarship do not mix, that if I wanted to become a serious scholar I should give up criticism. He told me

> likewise that poetry and scholarship do not mix, and that he had given up writing poetry at the age of twenty-five. And he added that my publications were a disgrace to the department. Fortunately for myself, he was the only one of the four department heads to hold these views, but one was almost enough. And he was far from an exception so far as the profession as a whole was concerned. There were other men like him at Stanford, some in positions of greater power; and there were others like him elsewhere.'

For it was not a profitable controversiality that Winters was achieving. He was not, at least for many years, able to operate professionally behind the kind of shield that comes from one's being known by one's duller colleagues to be highly esteemed in certain influential circles. He was in fact fair game up to the end in a way that none of the other well-known critics have been, again with the exception of Leavis. (The reviews of *Forms of Discovery* about his unsuccessful attempt, at the request of a Stanford librarian, to get significant first editions of modern poetry on the open shelves put into a special collection: 'On a few subsequent occasions I suggested to the more eminent members of my department the importance of such a collection; but I was given to understand that the materials were unimportant, that I, after all, was scarcely competent to deal with the problem, and that I seemed to be making an effort to magnify my importance in the department.' It is the anecdote of someone who for a sizable number of years was without pull--without clout.

Furthermore, Winters was not just a critic whose books appeared unprestigiously and got some devastating reviews. He was also--he was primarily--a poet, the author, by the end, of close to three hundred published poems; and, as Howard Kaye observed recently in an admirable brief article in the *New Republic* (1968), he was 'among the most passionate of modern poets.' His commitment to poetry was as total as, say, Hart Crane's or Robert Lowell's; and though his confidence in speaking of his own work was almost saintly (he never paraded himself in his criticism as Winters-the-Poet), his estimation of that work appears to have been high, if one can go by such clues as the introduction to his *Early Poems* in 1966. But he never enjoyed any of the dispensations and reassurances that have been increasingly available to poets who have lodged in the academy. He was not a guru at a liberal arts college; he was not a peripatetic Visiting Creator. He earned his Ph. D. at Stanford at a time when Ph.D.'s were not earned easily. (In the letter that I quoted above he commented that his involvement with *Hound and Horn* delayed his getting his degree by at least two and a half years, a cost that perhaps only those who have likewise involved themselves in professionally unprofitable activities while in a Ph.D. program can fully appreciate.) And for the rest of his working life he was a thoroughly professional academic in a major department. In those circumstances, being the kind of poet that he was must have been especially arduous.

In the Twenties, Winters had been acquiring a valuable reputation as a poet; indeed, one reviewer announced in the *Nation* in 1930 that 'Mr. Winters' named is one of the best known in circles where modern poetry and modern criticism are discussed.' From the start of the Thirties on, he lost that reputation. Actually, in the words of Kaye, 'his subjects and his style were modern in the fullest sense.' (Kaye quotes Lowell as saying, 'He was the kind of conservative who was so original and radical that his poems were never reprinted in the anthologies for almost twenty years'). But, having drastically altered his style by an effort of will and intelligence that is probably without parallel in the history of verse in English, he had to live for the next two decades with attacks on his principles, his critical judgments, and his own performance as a poet that reached a pitch in the mid-Forties, with the near-simultaneous publication of *The Anatomy of Nonsense* and of the major selection of his poems entitled *The Giant Weapon*, that would have broken almost anyone else. True, when the *Collected Poems* appeared in 1952 a few reviewers, notably Frederick Morgan, Hayden Carruth, and Allen Tate, wrote with almost unreserved enthusiasm about them, and one can unearth the occasional rare complimentary remark earlier (for example, by Arthur Mizener and Morton Dauwen Zabel) about his post-'experimental' work.

But it was obviously a starvation diet during the years that mattered, the years of his most intense and arduous creative activity. And such a diet does not become enriched retroactively, whatever kudos a man may receive in his sixties. Even by the time he died, the only articles, as distinct from reviews, that had been devoted to his poetry were a brief if good one by Richard M. Elman (*sic*) in the *Commonweal* (1961) and a longer one by Alan Stephens in *Twentieth Century Literature* (1963), to which Winters himself took strong exception in print. There is also an excellent note by Alvin B. Kernan on the cover of a record of

Winters reading his own poetry. And even though a few of his poems had started creeping into anthologies, one would look for them in vain in the overwhelming majority of college anthologies. Furthermore, where such distinguished students or associates of his as Edgar Bowers, J. V. Cunningham, Alan Stephens, N. Scott Momaday, Helen Pinkerton, Catherine Davis and Janet Lewis were concerned (none of whom, representatively enough, is mentioned in M. L. Rosenthal's *The New Poets,* 1967), it was almost entirely Winters himself who had to dothe public insisting on their distinction and, implicitly, on the validation that their work helped to furnish for his own principles--not a very felicitous position to have been in.

II

....Winters himself, as I have said, was always marvelously continent in references to his own career, and amply earned the right to case a cool eye on Pope's 'exasperation [in the 'Epistle to Arbuthnot'] with people who [had] exasperated him' and to observe dryly, 'They were doubtless exasperating, but so are most people; so is life.' But in a passage like the following we are obviously glimpsing the top of an iceberg about which some biographer will no doubt sometime tell us a good deal:

> 'A first-rate poet differs from his contemporaries (and I include those who think of themselves as literary contemporaries) not in being eccentric or less human, but in being more central, more human, more intelligent. But the difference in this respect between, let us say, a great poet and most distinguished scholars is very great, and few scholars are distinguished; and the scholar cannot recognize the difference and is scarcely prepared to admit the possibility of the difference, for he regards himself as a professional man of letters. To the scholar in question, the poet is wrong-headed and eccentric, and the scholar will usually tell him so. This is bad manners on the part of the scholar, but the scholar considers it good manners. If the poet, after some years of such experiences, loses his temper occasionally, he is immediately convicted of bad manners. The scholar often hates him (I am not exaggerating),or comes close to hating him; but if the poet returns hatred with hatred (and surely this is understandable), he is labeled as a vicious character, for, after all, he is a member of a very small minority group. The poet may become neurotic under such pressure; there is no comparable pressure on the scholar, and he usually remains normal.'

Nevertheless, Winters never took either of the obvious escape routes. He never succumbed to the academy, and he never turned against it.

He remained intensely professional, intensely concerned to bring home to creative writers the importance of historical learning and to show that there is no necessary opposition between academic discipline (as distinct from the erudition-gathering of a Blackmur) and creative work. To quote one of his most trenchant formulations: 'The damnable fact about most novelists, I suppose, is their simple lack of intelligence: the fact that they seem to consider themselves professional writers and hence justified in being amateur intellectuals. They do not find it necessary, so far as one can judge, to study the other forms of literature, or even forms of the novel other than those they practice; they do not find it necessary to think like mature men and women or to study the history of thought; they do not find it necessary to master the art of prose.' Twenty-odd years ago, when conservative academics were a good deal more powerful and dangerous inside the academy than they are now, he objected to the quarrel 'picked with the philologists and the textual critics....' and suggested that 'There is far more need even yet for good textual criticism even of many standard writers than these critics seem to realize, and philology has always been and will always remain a subject of fundamental importance for the student of literature. If more poets had studied philology, the quality of our poetry would probably improve.'...

He stood up for certain strengths in the academic life as against the customary intimidating claims on behalf of a supposedly very different mode of being--the 'creative'--with its exhilarations, its daring, its shortcuts to truth and wisdom and profundity. But if he spoke as an academic, there was nothing academic about him, any more than there was about Samuel Johnson; and I have still not accounted for the sense of Johnsonian weight and strength that he can induce in one....There is no 'school of Winters' in criticism. It is tempting, of course, to take over his judgments and tone at times, especially when people whose activities one dislikes are under attack. If one is irritated by the current apotheosis of William Carlos Williams into a proto-beat father-figure, for example, it is very pleasant to read the flat statement that 'he was a thorough bore in print except on a few occasions,' just as, when exasperated by some particular instance of academic stupidity (for example, Thomas H. Johnson's ruinous punctuation of Emily Dickinson), one can only murmur to oneself with Winters, that 'scholar find it very difficult to stay in their place....Winters himself always maintained in print a sharp division between himself and younger writers who admired him or whom he admired....And when one comes across the judgment that 'few men possess either the talent or the education to justify their being taken very seriously' as critics of poetry, one can be pretty confident that one would not have been included among them. Winters' stance and voice are all his own.

III

In what may well have been the most intelligent review of *The Function of Criticism* (*Delta* [Cambridge], 1962), Richard Gooder complained a little oddly of a lack of 'naturalness' in Winters' prose style. The style, which seems to me a great one, was eminently natural to Winters himself, however. It was there from the start (which is not to say that his judgments and ideas did not change); and the voice is the voice of someone who is all of a piece and who is not role-playing. It is the voice of a mind that may be complex but in which there are not the customary over-neat dichotomies--'literature' and 'lie,' thought and creation, discovery and teaching, public and private, and so on--that most of us employ in the ordering of our own disorderly mental economies....

In his poetry of the Twenties he stood with Williams and the Stevens of *Harmonium* as one of the principal modifiers and extenders of Imagist techniques on this side of the Atlantic, and in the later poems, as in that magnificent short story 'Brink of Darkness,' there is likewise a great deal of vivid precision of a high order, especially in the handling of natural scenes. Howard Kaye is quite right when he reminds us that 'we should remember that for all his intellectuality, Winters was one of the preeminent nature poets of our time.' Indeed, one of the most touching passages in his poetry is the second stanza of the lovely 'On Rereading a Passage from John Muir,' in which he speaks wistfully of the imagined 'pristine peace' of being himself an uncomplicated naturalist, 'a gentle figure from a simpler age.' But of course he was much more than a nature poet, even in his numerous poems involving nature. I suggest that, paradoxically, it may well turn out that for all his so-called traditionalism he in fact saw modern America more precisely in his poetry than did any of the experimental and ostensibly more modern poets; saw it in a less literary fashion; gave us scenes and places and activities in such a way that they will remain solid indefinitely when all that remains of most other modern poets is the kind of literary blur that seems to exist only for the footnotes that it needs if it is to be intelligible.

Allen Tate seems to me marvelously right when he says that 'a careful reading of [*Collected Poems*] will dispel the generally held opinion that Winters is "withdrawn from life." I have not been able to find in another living American poet as much life actualized in language. There is no other modern American poetry more deeply rooted in a particular American background, more informed by American history, or more sensitive to its natural and human features.' Winters' California in particular--the 'slow Pacific swell,' the natural flora, the 'gardens bare and Greek,' the weather, the hills, the superhighways and airbases--is "there" in a way that Williams' Patterson or Crane's Manhattan or even Lowell's Massachusetts are not. It belongs to the world that almost all of us inhabit when we are not drunk or suicidal or engaged, *qua* literary men, in disrupting and fragmenting and transmogrifying our surroundings by means of language, especially figurative language, in the interests of notating intensely agitated states of consciousness.

'At the San Francisco Airport,' for example, grasps quintessential modern phenomena in a way that Lowell's 'For the Union Dead' does not. Nor is it merely a matter of relative talents, vastly the more distinguished though Winters seems to me to be of the two. The difference is of the kind that obtains between, say, Wyatt's 'They Flee from Me' and Donne's 'Twicknam Garden.' Donne's poem probably seems the richer of the two when one is young, but the complexity is that of an erudite, powerful, and idiosyncratic mind deploying a complex rhetoric, and not, as in Wyatt's poem, or in a number of comparable ones by Hardy, or in 'At the San Francisco Airport,' the complexity inherent in some of the major episodes of life itself....What Winters gives us in his best poems is something that answers more to the common experience of intelligent, sensitive, and educated people, whatever their occupation, than almost anything one finds in the other major twentieth-century American poets. That is not in itself a prerequisite of greatness, of course; it obviously does not hold true of Stevens, for example. But it is a very rare and remarkable achievement none the less....

'I wish to point out that all people die,' Winters wrote, 'that human life is filled with tragedy, and that commonly the tragedies accumulate all but overwhelmingly toward the end. To ignore the tragic subject is to leave oneself unprepared for the tragic experience; it is likely to lead to disaster and collapse.' No young man, Hazlitt observed, ever thinks that he is going to die; no academic, one sometimes feels, ever writes as if students of literature are mortal and have exhaustible stores of health and energy and time. This revealed knowledge of 'our' world constitutes an important part of Winters' authority as a critic--I mean, of the sense he produces in one that here is someone who brings to his reading a good deal of uncommonly precise knowledge of the world and of certain experiences in it. At its simplest it is a first-hand knowledge of physical activities that surfaces from time to time in a way that makes most other critics appear rather too exclusively men of letters, or, at least, men who have adopted a genteel convention whereby when one is discussing letters there are certain areas of one's own experience (one's graduate students among them) that one does not bring into such discussions.

The surfacing does not happen often--it is not a mannerism--but when it does it is unforgettable. There is, for instance, his glossing of Stevens' 'as a calm darkens among water lights,' and his setting of a Hopkins commentator right about the actuality of a falcon's dive, and his challenging of the description of a hunted rabbit in Cunningham's 'The Chase,' and his casual beautiful reference to 'the tremendous and impersonal quiet of the virgin American wilderness.' And of course there are the Airedales. A good deal of fun has made of Winters' references to them, and his own image would doubtless have been a good deal helped had he had the romantic good sense to breed falcons or Afghans instead. But the amusement is sentimental and, as Winters might say, foolish, and it was foolish of F. O. Matthiessen, years ago, to imply that it was somehow unseemly of Winters to write a serious poem about the loss of an Airedale bitch. Thom Gunn in one of his better poems has brought out some of the implications of Winters' being a breeder of those intractable terriers, and Winters' use of them for analogies is brilliant...

Equally telling, incidentally, is the analogy that he draws in that introduction [to *Forms of* Discovery] from boxing, a craft of which, I believe, he had some firsthand experience: 'The great poet resembles the great boxer in the ring. Joe Louis was trained by a great scholar, Jack Blackburn. He was taught every move and when to make it; he was born with the ability to make it instantaneously and with great precision. His knowledge did not bind him; it set him free--with the result that he seemed to move by instinct. So with the great poets.' And we are recognizably still in the same world when we come upon some of the more general observations that contribute to the greatness of *Forms of Discovery* (it seems to me indeed a great book) and of which the discussion of Jonson's 'To Heaven' furnishes one of the most memorable examples:

> '[Jonson], in middle age, does not fear death, as Shakespeare professes to fear it and as Donne apparently fears it; his temptation is "weariness of life"; his duty, which he accepts with a semi-suppressed despair, is to overcome this weariness. There is a recognition of reality here, distinct from a literary convention (as in Shakespeare) and from a gift for personal drama, or perhaps melodrama (as in Donne), which is very impressive. Much the power of the poem resides in one of the elementary facts of life: the fact that a middle-aged man of intelligence is often readier to die than to live if he merely indulges his feelings, Jonson deals with the real problem, not with a spurious problem.'

When he speaks in such terms, one knows that Winters knows what he is talking about, that he does not enjoy what he is saying, that he is not playing the conventionally dignified game of 'creative' suffering.

Faced with passages like that, and with the reiterated emphasis throughout Winters' criticism on clarity, control, discipline, it would, however, be a serious mistake to start deploying terms like 'stoicism' or even 'classicism' (neo- or otherwise), at least if one hoped thereby to be able to substitute for an individual mind a familiar tradition. It is true that in a few of his poems, such as 'To Edwin V, McKenzie,' Winters advances more or less classical commonplaces--commonplaces the truth of which is nevertheless easy to lose sight of and the reaffirmation of which can be very moving. But the generalizations in a number of others, such as 'On Teaching the Young' or 'A Testament,' are far from commonplaces, however classical their form. And in a number of his best poems one has no large controlling generalizations at all and sometimes not even that familiar modern substitute for them, the manipulating of crude dichotomies (the human and the natural, the organic and the mechanical, and so on) in the interests of creating a comfortably ironical stance. 'By the Road to the Air Base' is an obvious example, so of course is 'A Summer Commentary'; so is the very lovely 'California Oaks,' in which it is remarkably hard (in a way appropriate to the facts themselves, I judge) to decide precisely what values to assign to the different modes of behavior described. Which is not to imply that poems of the latter sort are Winters' best. Some of them are among his best, but so are poems like 'To the Holy Spirit'....

The kind of mental turmoil observable in poems like 'Prayer beside a Lamp' is presumably part of what Kaye had in mind when he commented that 'the fatal temptation towards ecstatic oblivion, the derangement of the senses, immersion in oceanic feeling, was as real to Winters as it was to Crane or to Rimbaud.' However, it is plain that beyond a certain point we arrive at modes of being or perceiving, related perhaps to the insights derived from his experience of tuberculosis in his early twenties (and none the less valid on that account), that are not really structurable in terms of ideas at all, and one facet of which we get perhaps the clearest view of in 'Brink of Darkness'....

IV

What is communicated over and over again in Winters' writing is a profound sense of the *created* nature of order and of the intense and steady effort required to maintain it. It is much more than a merely personal struggle not to collapse that is involved; more, I mean, than the kind that writers like Roethke and Lowell have talked about or exhibited and to the seriousness of which Winters himself paid tribute...Poets like Greville, Wyatt, Bowers, Hardy, and Cunningham, for instance, are, at their greatest, among the most intense in the language; and no one can be in doubt, either, about Winters' respect for the more formally turbulent energies of a Melville, a Rimbaud, a Hart Crane even. The conception of order that in fact emerges from his work may well be best epitomized in the poem 'Before Disaster'....

In a dictatorship by scoundrels, the Frosts and the Thoreaus, the amateur anarchists and village eccentrics, would find life somewhat more difficult than they have found it to date.' The operative word in that passage, of course, is 'if.' And it is highly important, I think, that for all his emphatic use from time to time of the word 'evil,' Winters was always able to avoid the easy and seductive dichotomy in which one opposes to each other a 'rational' world of ideas and an irrational world of human beings afflicted irredeemably by something that for a while it was fashionable in intellectual circles to call Original Sin--a dichotomy that invited either a disdainful withdrawal from the political world or a scarcely less disdainful support of authoritarian systems....

He showed up the actual irrationality (both in its own terms and in its implicit relationship to certain demonstrated potentials for greatness) of a good deal of ostensibly rational philosophizing; and he was able...to see the odious behavior in terms not of a mysterious entity called the human heart but of imprecise perception and defective intelligence: 'Stupidity is the result of privation of being; privation is evil; and when a stupid man rises to power he becomes pompous, hypocritical, and dangerous. The phenomenon is a common one: I have seen it a good many times in the academic world, but here [in Charles Churchill's 'Dedication to Warburton'] the evil man is operating on a national scale and becomes a major representation of evil.' ["Let's go Brandon!"]....

Winters diagnosed over and over again the nature of various unsound modes of thought and expression, and charted causal relationships between the forms and formulations of specific writers and their consequences for later writers, most memorably and illuminatingly of all in the great essay 'The Significance of *The Bridge*, by Hart Crane.' He did more than any other American critic to make the question of truth and the pursuit of truth *matter*, not by the customary recourse to a bogus scientism or a vulgarized Platonism, but by demonstrations of the consequences of error....

No less central in Winters' work is the idea of enrichment, not in the sense of acquiring new and fascinating topics to talk about, but in the sense of alternations, sometimes very subtle ones but cumulative in their effects, occurring in one's mode of being and doing. This is most obvious, of course, in his discussions of poetry, especially in a formulation like the following: '[The] nature of the human mind is such that we can enter the [great] poet's mind by way of his poem, if we are willing to make the effort, and share his judgment. In this way we may gain both understanding and strength, for the human mind is so made that it is capable of growth and of growth in part through its own self-directed effort. This is the virtue of poetry; in so far as it is good, and we understand both its goodness and its limitations, it enables us to achieve a more nearly perfect and comprehensive being'....

Twenty or so years ago, when one or two reviewers commented ironically on Winters' claims on behalf of the university, they were no doubt voicing what a good many other readers felt. The real world in those days was clearly the world of politics, of forces and masses, of power. But Winters was right all the same, and not just in the sense that the university is now where a good deal of the power lies. Where the world of politics is concerned, it has been becoming increasingly apparent how things *do*, again and again, come down to questions of character, questions of the actual measure of integrity, intelligence, courage, and will that this or that particular public man in fact possesses--and to the capacity of people to assess those qualities accurately and act effectively on their assessments."

John Fraser
"Yvor Winters: The Perils of Mind"
The Centennial Review
14.4 (Fall 1970) 396-420

"Yvor loves argument....I have seen him, at a very gay dinner party where all the other guests were making themselves wreaths out of the centerpieces, almost came to fisticuffs with Arthur Ficke over Gerard Manley Hopkins."

Louise Bogan
What the Women Lived: Selected Letters
ed. Ruth Limmer
(Harcourt Brace 1973) 48

"Winters, [Arthur] Yvor (1900-1968), born in Chicago, was a member of the Department of English, Stanford University, from 1928. There he edited *The Gyroscope* (1929-31), and was the Western editor of *Hound and Horn* (1932-34). His poetry, published in *The Immobile Wind* (1921), *The Magpie's Shadow* (1922), and *The Bare Hills* (1927)--all collected in *The Early Poems* (1966)--*The Proof* (1930), *The Journey* (1931), *Before Disaster* (1934), *Poems* (1940), and *The Giant Weapon* (1943), is marked by those qualities he asks for as a critic: classical order, dignity, restraint, and moral judgment. His *Collected Poems* (1952) was revised and enlarged (1960) and at that time was awarded a Bollingen Prize. His critical works are *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), showing the obscurity of modern American poetry as the result of romanticism qualified by certain aspects of American history. *Maule's Curse* (1938), on obscurantism in 19th-century American authors, and *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), on 20th-century poets and critics--all three books collected in *In Defense of Reason* (1947); *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (1946); *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (1957), *Forms of Discovery* (1967), and *Uncollected Essays* (1973). He was married to Janet Lewis."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, fifth edition
(Oxford 1983) 838

"Throughout this study I have emphasized that Winters was first and foremost a poet, but it would be foolish and churlish to regret the criticism, which has greatly enriched out understanding of areas as diverse as nineteenth-century American literature, the sixteenth-century lyric and modern American verse. The criticism gains, rather than loses, by having been written by a poet with such a precise and subtly intimate knowledge of style, technique, and the nature of literary creation. In matters of intellectual history he was often content to follow mentors whom he trusted (Babbitt, Parkes); in matters of style he had his own thorough knowledge of technique to draw on. Quite simply, he knew--and knew more profoundly than any save a few other great poet-critics like Johnson and Arnold have done--what he was talking about.

It is ironic that a man committed to a vision of the classical, to what is central and constant in the human experience of the world, should have found himself so much at odds with the poetic practice and critical theory of his own day. In *Maule's Curse*, published in 1938, he ridiculed Poe's 'process of systematic exclusion, in the course of which he eliminates from the field of English poetry nearly all of the greatest acknowledged masters, reserving the field very largely to Coleridge, Tennyson, Thomas Moore, himself and R. H. Horne.' At the time this was written his own judgments had a breadth of sympathy and understanding that made Poe's ad hoc tradition seem absurdly exclusive and eccentric: and yet there are moments in Winters's last book, *Forms of Discovery,* where he appears to have painted himself into a similarly lonely corner. The concern with the classical vision gradually gave place to a related concern with those few who, Winters believed, could discern this vision: in the work of poets as various as Gascoigne, Churchill, Very, and Robinson, it was as much their stoic sense of being disregarded by fortune and men's eyes as the actual vision they recorded that moved Winters's interest. In a similar way, though Winters's version of the poet (after 1929) was always of a man embattled with reality, the metaphysical battles of the criticism of his thirties--were often replaced, as he became more concerned with ethical and social issues, by battles with the 'dead living.' Yet his achievement remains, when all is said and done, major.

The best of his early verse has a freshness and limpidity, and a sensitivity to rhythm, unequaled save in the best work of William Carlos Williams. What he considered to be his major important poetry--that written after 1929--has been unjustly neglected, largely I suspect because of his reputation as a pugnaciously anti-modernist critic, rather than for reasons intrinsic to the verse itself. To live with these poems is to be aware of a mind intensely sensitive to the reality of both the life of the intellect, and the nature of the physical world in which that intellect must live. The consciousness that informs the poetry is perpetually attuned to the claims of both spirit and world; it works toward balance, toward a just vision, toward a true and clear understanding of the nature of our life. The "massive calm" of these poems is intensely moving to one who has experienced the reality of their premises and who can sympathize with Winters's temperamental need to define the limits of our understanding with lapidary certainty. His best poems, "Apollo and Daphne," "The Slow Pacific Swell," "The Marriage," "On a View of Pasadena from the Hills," "John Sutter," "The California Oaks," "Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight," present us with sensory experience--a sense of the mind drenched in the physical reality of the world--and, simultaneously, an intellectual passion for understanding rarely equaled in the poetry of this century.

The significance of his criticism was, for Winters, as I have attempted to demonstrate, intimately bound up with his notions of what was wrong with modern literature, in particular modern poetry. He read literature as a poet, looking for warnings, models, pitfalls. Again his ideal was one of balance, and his dislike of so much modern literature was largely a regret for what it had sacrificed rather than disdain for what it had achieved. He welcomed the increase in sensitivity that he discovered in the work of the late romantics, he merely regretted that this increase had been gained at the expense of logical form, of denotative meaning. His ideal was a combination of such sensitivity with rigorous and verifiable logical structure; he claimed to have found such a combination in the best work of Valery and Wallace Stevens. Yet to a reader more interested in Winters's ostensible subjects than in his own poetic preoccupations, his writings--especially on sixteenth-century poetry and nineteenth-century American literature--are among the clearest and most useful available. It is time he was accorded his true place, as one of the major figures of twentieth-century American literature.

As we have seen (from his remarks, for example, on the poetry of Frost and Yeats) Winters became more and more concerned, as he grew older, with the social and ethical implications of poetry. He characterized himself as a 'reactionary,' and it has even been suggested that his concern with order and form was somehow indicative of an incipient fascism. The charge was somewhat nebulously made by Robert Gorham Davis in the Winter 1949-50 issue of the *American Scholar*. In the April issue Winters wrote an angry and pained reply, setting out his theoretical opposition to fascist beliefs and listing his (impeccably liberal) practical political activities and affiliations. His answer, in part, is as follows:

> 'I believe in the reality of absolute truth; and since I am not a Platonist, I accept the theistic explanation of this reality offered by Averroes, Avicenna and Aquinas--namely that true judgment and true knowledge reside in God, that it is the duty of every man to approximate them as closely as his particular talents permit. Now if this is actually or potentially a fascistic notion, then every believing Christian and Jew is a fascist, to say nothing of many others. Actually this belief is immovably anti-fascist, for it places the responsibility for his own development (and perhaps salvation) solidly on the individual, and it indicates that any

> arbitrary interference with his assuming the responsibility is evil. The fascist, (or any totalitarian) state, however, indicates that true knowledge and judgment reside in the Leader, and that it is the duty of the citizen to accept his verdicts without question. There is no conceivable reconciliation of these points of view.'

In fact, Winters's concern with individual ethical responsibility, with his view of poetry as a process of moral evaluation whose chief end is the modification of the reader's sensibility so that he understands more clearly and fully the nature of human existence in the world, both point to a moral sensitivity hardly compatible with either the glorification of violence or the demand that the individual merge his being in that of a greater whole, be it state or race, endemic to fascism. Further, as we have seen from his own poetry, his ideals of human existence in the world were deeply imbued with notions of self-restraint, dignity and moral decorum. He viewed all suggestions of violation, spoliation, and trespass beyond natural and abiding limits with horror. The whole tenor of his writings indicates that the individual is responsible for his own spiritual state--his ideal is the rational man who understands and chooses, and he frequently seems impatient with determinist psychological models of human behavior which concentrate on the neurotic and the child, both categories in which the role of reason is diminished.

My chief concern in mentioning this aspect of Winters's work is not to refute the absurd charge of his potential fascism--a charge which his own actions and writings amply refute without outside help--but to draw attention to the fact that Winters's classicism and concern for reason and ethical probity were of a piece and prevented his being deluded, either in part or wholly (as to many of the major literary figures of this century have been deluded) by any of the versions of totalitarianism and moral and political nihilism peddled in his lifetime. This in itself should give significant pause to those readers who would dismiss his message and preoccupations as outmoded or trivial. His concern was with the centrally and perennially human, with the individual's apprehension of the nature of his life, here, in time and in the flesh. The focus of his vision was unwaveringly clear, undisturbed by notions, whether political or literary or both, of what Borges has called 'energetic barbarism'."

Dick Davis
Wisdom and Wilderness: The Achievement of Yvor Winters
(U Georgia 1983) 232-36

"There exists a group, many of them students of Winters, or students of students, men and women who have been marked by his personal charisma, for whom Winters stands in need of justification no more than reason itself....These Wintersians are intelligent and articulate people, many of them impressively learned, several of them poets of very considerable merit. I honor the intensity of their commitment, and since I too was Winters' student, I understand its source....Nevertheless, it does seem to be true that the sectarian zeal of some of Winters' disciples has in fact only perpetuated his marginality....

It might be surprising to those for whom Winters remains...a 'reactionary' [that] in fact, he was a New Deal Democrat, a member of the NAACP and the ACLU, and [during the war] an air-raid warden. He was never tempted by any of the fascisms, incipient or actual, to which so many of his contemporaries and elders were driver in their distaste for industrialism, capitalism, or mass society. At the same time, one could scarcely claim he was any sort of Marxist....The scandal of his attacks on [say] Yeats or Frost lies in his willingness, with a blunt common sense one suspects was not altogether innocent, to take what purports to be social doctrine as precisely that, rather than subsuming it in myth, symbol, or some other figuration that would turn its implications back within the safe confines of the page....

Terry Comito
In Defense of Winters: The Poetry and Prose of Yvor Winters
(U Wisconsin 1986) ix, xi-xii,