

## INTRODUCTION



Yvor Winters

(1900-1968)

## BIOGRAPHY

Yvor Winters was born in Chicago in 1900, the son of a fairly prosperous stockbroker. When he was still a child his family moved to Pasadena, California, and the landscape of this area was to be an important feature of his later poetry. But by this time Winters was in his mid-teens his family had returned to Chicago, and it was here, during his last year of high school, that he became interested in contemporary poetry. He began to subscribe to *Poetry*, *A Magazine of Verse*, the *Little Review*, and *Others*, all publications promoting the then new imagist poetry. In 1917 he entered the University of Chicago and joined the Poetry Club, through which he met the editor of *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe.

A year later Winters discovered that he had tuberculosis and was forced to move to a drier and warmer climate. He returned briefly to Pasadena and then lived for almost three years at Sunmount Sanatorium, near Santa Fe, New Mexico. A great deal of this period was spent in enforced rest, particularly irksome to Winters as he had been comparatively athletic as an adolescent, with a particular interest in boxing. Toward the end of his life he alluded briefly to his experienced during this period, "the only known cure, and this was known to only a few physicians, was a fatigue so heavy that it was an acute pain, pervasive and poisonous." (*Forms of Discovery*). His first book of poetry and most of his second were written at this time.

During his convalescence Winters had a protracted quarrel (over his choice of friends) with his parents, and when he left the sanatorium in 1921 he could no longer count on their financial support. He became a schoolteacher in the mining town of Madrid, New Mexico, and the following year he taught in the neighboring town of Los Cerrillos. This was a period of uncongenial work in relatively squalid surroundings, and Winters seems to have been extremely lonely. A French priest living in Santa Fe, twenty miles away, gave him lessons in French; Winters used his new knowledge to read Rimbaud, of whose poetry the priest strongly disapproved.

Between leaving the sanatorium and taking up his duties as a schoolteacher Winters briefly revisited Chicago and there met his future wife, Janet Lewis. In 1922 she too was forced to interrupt her studies at the University of Chicago because of tuberculosis, and like Winters before her she moved to Sunmount Sanatorium. By 1923 the breach with his parents had been healed, and with their financial support Winters was able to enter the University of Colorado, where he studied French, Spanish, and Latin. He achieved consistently high grades and in 1925 was awarded his M.A with the thesis "A Method of Critical Approach

to Works of Literature Based Primarily upon a Study of the Lyric in French and English." Part of this thesis was taken up by the essay "Testament of a Stone," a concise statement of his early (imagist) beliefs as to the nature of poetry.

Winters himself admitted (in the introduction to his *Early Poems*) that though he could read French and Spanish well at this period he could not speak them; nevertheless, he taught both languages for two years at the University of Idaho, Moscow. Despite the presence of the university Moscow was still a very small town, and he was almost as isolated there as he had been at Madrid and Los Cerrillos. In 1926 he married Janet Lewis. During the first year of their marriage she was still undergoing treatment at Sunmount and Winters lived alone in Idaho.

The poet's late teens and early twenties were obviously an upsetting and difficult period: his severe illness, his interrupted education, the quarrel with his parents, which resulted in two years of uncongenial work and loneliness, and his wife's illness, which prevented their living together during the first year of their marriage, give an impression of a dislocated and unsettled life. But by 1926 he had published his first two volumes of poetry, received his M.A. and was in touch, at least by letter, with some of the most important poets of his own generation, including Hart Crane, Allen Tate, and Marianne Moore.

In 1927 Winters entered Stanford University as a graduate student in English; he was to stay associated with Stanford for the rest of his working life. From this time on he rarely left California and almost never traveled east of Chicago. He never visited Europe, or indeed anywhere else outside the United States. Though it is apparent from his poetry that he had a deep affection for the California landscape and its history, nevertheless his initial move there was perhaps partly prompted by his wife's illness. When Hart Crane visited the Winters household during Christmas of 1927, "Janet Lewis was still convalescing from tuberculosis and was confined to bed each day until four o'clock" (Thomas Parkinson, *Hart Crane and Yvor Winters: Their Literary Correspondence*, p.108). Finding a suitable climate for his wife must have played as large a part in Winters's decision as the desire to return to the scenes of his childhood. There are hints in Crane's letters to Winters (Winters's letters to Crane have been lost) that Winters felt himself to be cut off from the literary movements flourishing in less (at least in the 1920s) conspicuously provincial parts of the country. As he later (1966) wryly commented, "In the 'twenties I was not in Paris, nor even at Harvard. After a year as a student at Stanford I became a full-time instructor of English....I have remained on the same English faculty since" (*Collected Poems*, p.15).

This sense of separateness from literary fashion, at first partially enforced, later deliberately cultivated, was to remain with Winters throughout his life and is an important factor in his stance on many literary issues. He belonged to no clique (though one was later to gather about him), and he felt that this gave him a clear perspective where others had been carried away by cant or fashion. His deliberately literal reading of texts, his earnest common sense and refusal to be hood-winked by specious rhetoric have about them much of the sturdy independence of the skeptical outsider, and more than a hint of the down-to-earth provincial unmoved by the meretricious and glib. His nonliterary pursuits--the breeding of Airedales, the keeping of goats and a large vegetable garden, the continued interest in boxing (though he could no longer participate in the sport), his deep sympathy for the culture and life of the American Indian, all support the picture of a self-reliant man wary of cabals and movements. His sympathy for the independent outsider is evident in two of his most moving later poems--significantly, on figures from California history, John Sutter and John Day.

At Stanford Winters was a student of William Dinsmore Briggs, then chairman of the English department, who was to have a significant influence on the development of his thought. But his relations with the Stanford faculty were not entirely cordial. When an employer of the university, David Lamson, was convicted, as Winters believed unjustly, of murdering his wife, Winters was active in the demand for a retrial. A Member of the Stanford School of Medicine had been an expert witness for the prosecution, and Winters was felt to be meddling in affairs about which he knew very little. In 1941 Briggs died. His successor, the Anglo-Saxon scholar A. G. Kennedy, heartily disliked Winters. He informed Winters that his publications were a disgrace to the department. Winters was so upset that he tried to join the army (he was rejected because of his health). When that failed he attempted to move to another university. This incident

rankled so deeply that Winters remembered it for the rest of his life and referred to it in an essay first published in 1956, fifteen years after the event.

Despite these upsets Winters did have close friends at Stanford, and certainly his life there was more stable and ordered than it had been in his early twenties. Kennedy was succeeded by Richard Foster Jones, to whom Winters dedicated his *Collected Poems* "with admiration and affection," and Jones's successor, Virgil Whitaker, was also on good terms with Winters. Apart from his academic work at Stanford and the writing of his poetry and criticism, Winters maintained an interest in the little magazines that had first awakened his enthusiasm for contemporary poetry. For a time he was the western editor of *Hound and Horn*, and he briefly (1929) produced a mimeographed magazine of his own, *The Gyroscope*, which contained Katherine Anne Porter's first published story, *Theft*. Throughout most of his career he held fairly junior posts at Stanford. It was only in 1962, four years before his retirement, that he was appointed to a position of any distinction: he was named Albert Guerard Professor of English.

Apart from the quarrel in his early twenties, Winters's relations with his father were in general good: Janet Lewis has described her father-in-law as "a charming, gentle, and generous man," and this is borne out by the brief glimpse we are given of him in Winters's poem "On a View of Pasadena from the Hills." Winters's relations with his mother, however, were far more equivocal, and after his father's death (in 1931) the two were estranged for awhile. A poem from *Before Disaster* (but not included in Winters's own edition of his *Collected Poems*), "The Werewolf," would seem to refer to his mother. It begins "Wolf-bitch who suckled me," and continues in much the same vein. She seems to have been a difficult woman who quarreled at one time or another with most of her family. She was something of a spiritualist, and her son's pronounced distaste for anything remotely connected with the supernatural, a distaste that seems to have amounted to actual fear, may well be traceable to her occult interests.

Winters had a reputation in academic circles as a pugnacious antagonist, a man quick to defend his views by polemic and sarcasm. His many pupils and friends give a quite different picture--of someone who was charming and unfailingly generous both of his time and of his money. Until a little before his death he was never very well off (when his father died the inheritance passed, with the agreement of Yvor Winters and Janet Lewis, directly to the grandchildren) but he often helped others in financial need. An instance of this is the assistance given to Hart Crane when Crane has lost all his possessions in a tropical storm. He was obviously an excellent teacher. The testimony of his students confirms this, but it could have been understood from his criticism, which is rich in the qualities most necessary for a teacher: enthusiasm, clarity of thought, and a profound knowledge and love of his subject. He was clearly a deeply serious man. More than one of his students and friends whom I asked about him made the same remark: "Arthur (the name by which those close to him knew him) had no small talk."

He died, of cancer, in 1968, shortly after completing the manuscript of *Quest for Reality*, an anthology that attempts to define by example the principles of poetry to which his life had been devoted. He was survived by his wife, the poet and novelist Janet Lewis, and two children.

## POETRY AND CRITICISM

I would guess that most readers of his work begin with the criticism and only if they find themselves largely in agreement with its methods and premises do they try his poetry. I have met many teachers of English and American literature who were familiar with a great deal of his criticism but who had never heard that he had published a line of his own verse. If readers of his criticism do try his poetry it is often with the expectation that it will be "academic," the passionless verse of a critic rather than the poetry of a "real" poet; and, as men frequently find in literature what they are looking for, the even tone and understated language of most of Winters's poetry apparently confirm their suspicions.

I had none of these expectations and I could value the poetry simply for itself. I think the first thing that impressed me as an undergraduate was the tone of deeply affectionate love--almost reverence--for the poems' subjects, which I thought I detected in poems like "The California Oaks," "The Marriage," "John Sutter," and "On a View of Pasadena from the Hills." Here was an author far more interested in the world about him than in himself, whose language hardly ever drew attention to itself, whose verse seemed

visionary but never eccentric, intense but never self-obsessed. Yet, paradoxically, for all their lack of idiosyncratic language and violently dramatic effects, the poems did exude a definite character: they never seemed anonymous or simply ordinary; they implied a specific personality. When, later, I began to read Winters's criticism this personality seemed to clarify for me; the famous pugnacity became apparent, the passion for the precise use of language, the impatience with sloppiness of diction or thought, and the insistence that the one always implied the other. The driving force of the criticism seemed to be a passion to *understand*.

Winters remarks of Henry James's novels that they all contain a character whose virtually sole function is to try and unravel what is going on around him--in his criticism Winters often seems to be this character himself. But I found myself thinking back to the poetry: the desire for understanding did not appear to be the ruling passion of most of the poems I especially admired; in these poems the mind often seemed less active than passive, less an organ of reasonable analysis than of rapt contemplation. The dichotomy seemed summed up by the lines of Winters's poem "Summer Commentary": "Some old penumbra of the ground / In which to be but not to find." The poetry was about being, the criticism about finding. But the poem in which these lines occur showed me that this was too simple a description: the poem was to some degree a rejection of being in favor of finding: it recorded a progress from one to the other. So if the poetry was principally about being, not all of it felt equally happy with being. There had been a change at some point.

The edition of Winters's poems I had bought as an undergraduate was the edition prepared by Winters himself, and it contained very few of his early free-verse poems. Still, it did contain enough for the reader to notice a remarkable change from the extremely minimal early work--sometimes consisting of single-line poems--and the later sonnets and heroic couplets. Here was another dichotomy, a sudden and inexplicable break in poetic style. How had Winters passed from writing single-line poems like "Sleep" to poems in heroic couplets like "The Journey"? And *why* had he done it? Surely the more usual progress in twentieth-century American poetry had been from traditional verse forms to free verse, and not vice versa. When, later on, I came to know the extent of Winters's free verse writings, and their evident authority and commitment to the principles of the form as it was practiced in America during the early decades of this century, the change became even more puzzling. Though I never doubted that I preferred the later poems, I felt curious as to how and why someone who had been writing like William Carlos Williams had come to produce them. I seemed to have found two, if not exactly contradictions, at least interesting cleavages in Winters's work: between the fiercely logical tone of the criticism and the rapt, contemplative tone of much of the poetry, and between the minimal free verse of Winters's earliest poems and the more discursive and traditional forms of his later work.

There is a group of verses in the *Collected Poems* which, I would guess, are rarely those that the new reader of Winters's poetry chooses as the most attractive. It takes perhaps a certain familiarity with the rest of his oeuvre, and a sympathy with his preoccupations, to fully appreciate them. They are often occasional poems--for example, the three written around the Lamson trial and the poems to William Dinsmore Briggs--but what chiefly unites them is their concern with understanding and wisdom. Unlike the poems which had initially attracted me, they seemed at one with the atmosphere of Winters's prose--or the difference in tone was slight, the poems showing perhaps marginally less confidence in the strategies of reason than the prose.

The majority of these poems were written fairly late in Winters's career. They exist at the opposite extreme, chronologically, thematically, and technically, from the free verse of his early period. This early verse is imagist and concerned with the clean evocation of the natural world. It mentions virtually no human artifacts, indeed it often seems to exclude humanity altogether and to record a prehuman landscape, a wilderness where man has hardly trod, except perhaps as a passive observer. By contrast, the later poems concerned with wisdom rarely mention the natural world: their concern is wholly with abstractions like justice and probity and the ways in which these abstractions inform, or fail to inform, human life. The concern has moved from the evocation of the American wilderness to the formulation of the nature of human wisdom.

I came to realize that this was a fundamental dichotomy which underlay Winters's work. He was a poet from his late teens until his mid fifties, though few poems were written after his early forties. He was only

spasmodically a critic during his twenties, but he continued to write criticism until shortly before his death. In general, then, his energies can be said to have passed gradually from poetry to criticism (as was the case with Matthew Arnold, a poet-critic with whom he had much in common), and this is paralleled by the development within his poetry from being to finding, from wilderness to wisdom. There was a period, during his thirties, when the two extremes seemed to be held in balance, and to this decade belong his most-applauded works of criticism and, in my opinion, most of his finest poetry. In a poem addressed to Herman Melville he wrote, "Wisdom and wilderness are here at poise," and the phrase sums up with remarkable accuracy both the nature of his own concerns and that integration of their opposing claims which informs his best work.

This book discusses his writings in terms of his development from being to finding, from wilderness to wisdom. Throughout I have treated Winters not as a critic who happened to write poetry, but as a poet who also wrote criticism, often in order to clarify for himself and others the situation in which he and his contemporaries functioned as poets. This was, I believe, the way Winters saw his situation. A man is, of course, far more complex than his published writings, and it is to those writings that I address myself. My chief concern has been to explicate what I take to be the most important preoccupations evident in his published work, and incidentally to bring to the reader's attention--if he is not already aware of them--those works which seem to me especially fine: the book is in no sense a biography, or even a "biographical explanation" of Winters's oeuvre.

Dick Davis

*Wisdom and Wilderness: The Achievement of Yvor Winters*  
(U Georgia 1983) 5-9, 1-4

I took a course in poetry from Yvor Winters at Stanford in about 1963. It was a large class of over 50 graduate students, as Winters was highly respected as the preeminent scholar-critic specializing in the history of the lyric, and himself a poet besides. He was the most imposing physical figure among all the professors I ever had, a somber heavysset pipe-smoking power in the English Department who raised hunting dogs as I recall. Before joining the Stanford faculty he had taught on Indian reservations, leading to his discovery of the Indian fiction writer Scott Momaday. After several black children were killed by a racist bomber in the South, Winters wore a black armband and did not remove it.

Winters loomed at the podium as an intimidating embodiment of literary and moral authority. Students thought carefully before venturing to express an opinion, and no one disagreed with him. It was understood that Winters represented a specific literary perspective: Neoclassical, moral, and religious in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas. He discovered the best American epigrammist, J. V. Cunningham, and other poets. He did not conceal a glowering contempt for Romantics such as e. e. cummings and he became internationally known for reviving neglected poets and in particular for promoting women poets. He was unusual in the emphasis he placed upon prosody and how a poem should be read: in a sober monotone calling attention to accented syllables. His voice was deep, slow, and profound.

Michael Hollister (2021)