

## ANALYSIS

The Brink of Darkness (1965)

Yvor Winters

(1900-1968)

"Near the end of Yvor Winters' only short story, 'The Brink of Darkness,' the unnamed protagonist describes his encounter with an 'insidious' and indeed demonic power, one that remains, even in defeat, an ominous threat: 'It was as if there were darkness evenly underlying the brightness of the air, underlying everything, as if I might slip suddenly into it at any instant, and as if I held myself where I was by an act of the will from moment to moment.'

Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that Winters wrote only one story because he had only one story to write, and that in his verse, and in his critical works as well, he enacted again and again this never definitive confrontation. All his work is poised on the brink of this darkness--on the edge of what cannot be spoken or comprehended, of what undermines and betrays those efforts to speak and comprehend that constitute 'from moment to moment,' our always imperiled human identity.

I suppose Winters is still widely regarded as a rationalist. Even his early free verse notably aspires to 'cold certitude,' and his subsequent return to traditional meters and logical structure was taken, as it was no doubt partly intended, as a challenge to the experimentalism of his contemporaries. His criticism is full of strictures against hedonism, obscurantism, and 'spiritual drift'; from the time of his earliest essays and reviews, he has been enamored of classifications and lists--the three possible kinds of image, the five greatest English poets, the chief heresies of the Western world. This has sometimes seemed cosmic; detractors and disciples alike have accepted too unquestioningly the apparent neatness of Winters' universe. We will not grasp the urgency of these painstakingly articulated forms until we feel too the constant pressure, seductive as well as terrifying, of the vacancy against whose encroachments they are set in place. The irrational in nature and in man is for Winters a perpetually present possibility. Such darkness is not dissipated by the light of reason but only held precariously at bay. It is the horizon of the spirit, whose task, Winters wrote in 1929, is perpetually to fortify and extend its own boundaries, 'to differentiate itself a little more distinctly from the remainder of the universe...which will eventually absorb it and which is continually endeavoring to absorb and destroy it.'

This is why it seems to me inadequate to say that the subject of 'The Brink of Darkness' is derangement, hallucination, or schizophrenia. Such language is at once too blandly general to indicate the scope of Winters' concern, and too narrowly psychiatric. For all his preoccupation, here as in his verse, with the vicissitudes and barely formulable nuances of inner life, Winters has never been engaged by the merely psychological. The real themes of 'The Brink of Darkness' are moral and metaphysical: the precariousness of identity and the ambiguity of the universe by which it is threatened. Much of the story is based transparently on Winters' experience in Idaho; perhaps it is in some ways misleading even to refer to it as fiction, so pervasively is it grounded in the specific incidents as well as the general tenor of its author's experience. But it is in no way a case history or a confession, and to speculate about Winters' mental health in the twenties would be, in both senses of the word, impertinent.

"The Brink of Darkness' is Winters' attempt to take stock of his own past, as a man and as a poet, in order, not to abolish that past, but, in consciously articulating its terrors, to consolidate the terrain of a possible future. In describing Baudelaire's response to the 'metaphysical horror of modern thought'--*le regard du demon embusque dans les tenebres*--Winters might well have been describing his own encounter, and suggesting why 'The Brink of Darkness' is so appropriate an entry into the whole span of his career: 'There is now no further escape from the thing [he] found and fixed. It would have existed, a vague and terrible background anyway. And it is better to have it defined and incorporated into a dynamic attitude than wandering about like an unladen ghost....Baudelaire, having himself felt those...eyes in the dark, was strong enough and skillful enough to stare till he could find them and face them.'

## The Precariousness of Identity

Winters' story begins by evoking a landscape whose violent extremes--'an unbearable blaze of heat' in summer, sixty below zero in the winter--are almost uncannily oblivious to human life. Men and women seem to be reduced by such rigors to mute centers of merely physical resistance, becoming as hard and inert as the landscape itself, featureless in a way that makes it difficult, indeed, to distinguish them from the landscape. The first human figure to whom we are introduced (she has no place in the story's action) is a hired girl, 'coarse-boned,' dusty and preoccupied, 'almost featureless, her mouth open.' Tome and hardship do not mature the aged but leave them shrunken and corroded. Children are 'smaller and harder' than their parents, but without serenity, 'their features obscured with sorrow.'

What such details record, however unassuming the tone in which they are uttered, is a frightening effacement of the human, an effacement that is one of the continuing preoccupations of Winters' verse about New Mexico and Idaho. There is no complacency, though there may be something like an obscure fascination, in his contemplation of a world always on the edge of sheer mechanism--animal brutality or the randomness of bare matter. [He remarks in a letter to Tate [31 January 1927] that his experience in the West has made him more familiar with physics than with metaphysics.] In 'The Brink of Darkness,' this perception becomes most grotesque, even hallucinatory, in the person of Eli, the hired girl's deformed brother. He is 'a man of great power and agility, but without forearms; where his elbows should have been, there were thick, red, wrinkled wrists, and on each wrist there were two long red fingers without nails.' We see him only in his physical monstrosity: although the tone of the narration is even, it is not disinterested, its revulsion held barely in check.

Eli seems scarcely human, most akin to life below man's level and perhaps also above it--to what lies wholly beyond its boundaries, in any case. He has a special sympathy with animals and an aptitude for 'talking religion'; he and his sister are Seventh-Day Adventists, as if their fragile claims on humanity were to be deferred until the coming of some unimaginable transformation. But his 'loud nasal drone, almost devoid of variation' makes his solitary devotions--bellowing hymns across the desolate countryside--as alien to ordinary understanding as the spasmodic movements of his body. To the exacerbated sensibility of the narrator, body and voice alike seem animated by a demonic life of their own, not reducible to any conceivable version of human agency: 'He sat at the kitchen table...his large bony trunk darting suddenly this way and that, his wrinkled fingers squirming about a piece of bread or a knife, his sharp mouth dropping pious ejaculations between swallows.'

An earlier version of Winters' story makes explicit the conclusion its final draft leaves us to infer from the accumulation of such images. The protagonist's own 'bewilderment' begins, he says, with the 'desperate violence of the seasons'; and he sees in the Adventist girl an image of his own situation: 'it required a perpetual effort of concentration to live and act, and any interruption brought one up painfully as from a tenacious dream.' We must pause over Winters' language here. The protagonist's existence is at once effortful and dreamlike: effortful because it is sustained in the face of unremitting opposition, dreamlike because its conditions appear to be defined wholly by what lies beyond his own will, as if he were in the grasp of some process external to the waking self. Even without this explicit acknowledgment, the story's narrative has the peculiar lucidity of a dream or hallucination.

The physical surfaces of things are rendered with exaggerated precision, but everything that pertains to the protagonist's personal life, which is to say his life as a person, a man relating to other men, is oddly omitted. We hear nothing about his relations with students and colleagues at the school where he teaches, or of his attitude to the couple, Mr. and Mrs. Stone, from whom he rents a room. We do not even hear, except in occasional taciturn paraphrase, the sound of human voices--there is no dialogue. The effect is of a strange absence where the 'self' should be, as if all the protagonist's energies were absorbed in coming to terms with the world's assault, from moment to moment, upon his senses; as if he were wholly immersed in, and defined by, what Winters later called 'The rain of matter upon sense.'

The central incident of the story is the death of Mrs. Stone. Although the protagonist seems to have admired her, his reaction is not exactly one of grief. There is no protest, no expression of regret. It is as if

his spirit were too enervated to enter against the course of events any such claims of its own. Whatever feelings we may wish to attribute to the protagonist remain unspoken, an unformulable wash over the rocky surface of mere fact. For what preoccupies him is not so much the pathos or injustice of the death as the uncanniness of what it leaves behind--the corpse shifting with an obtrusive palpability in its flower-laden coffin. The coffin comes to seem the 'visible core' of an indifferent cold that has turned the human strength of the old woman--'a strength employed to achieve gentleness'--into a mechanical grimace, which, the protagonist reminds us, is not a smile. Even more than life's harshness, the chill of death renders problematic the relation between human beings and insensate objects.

Later, at the funeral, the garish hothouse blossoms seem curiously petrified, 'dark heavy green, and clear hard white,' like corpses or fossils themselves, 'lying as if murdered in the colorless air.' In a world so colorless--so devoid of human inflection--consciousness wanders as ineffectually as the gentle ghost the protagonist half whimsically summons up from the coffin, pathetic and forlorn in its 'inexpressible solitude.' Death represents for him the final defeat of the effort to be human, and what is most frightening is his suggestion that the surrender of this attempt may also be a kind of homecoming. 'It was finished,' he says of the stiffening corpse. 'It seemed to have come to an ultimate balance, to have found itself.' As the rest of the story will indicate, mindlessness is a temptation as well as a threat, and clearly for Winters the seductive face of darkness is even more appalling than its violent assaults.

I have said that Winters' concern with identity is a moral concern; but it is not moralistic. Winters' prose can sometimes seem pervasively, even hectoringly, judgmental in tone; and he had a no doubt annoying habit of lecturing his friends, both in and out of print, on what he conceived to be their failings. But for Winters morality is not, in its most fundamental lived urgency, what one does in order to win approbation: it is what one does in order to survive. He was further than perhaps even he supposed from professional advocates of decorum and the golden mean. His morality is not so much a rule of behavior as an inaugurating fidelity to the self, an act, and affirmation, of consciousness. It finds its critical test not in confrontations with others but in the lonely exertion of will by which the mind founds itself--painfully with no sanction other than its own stubborn sense of the fitness of things--in the face of the disintegrating 'invasion' of nature.

What is insidious about the demon confronted in 'The Brink of Darkness' is its insinuation of what Winters describes elsewhere as a spiritual 'consumption,' an enervation of the energies by which consciousness is maintained. Winters has said that 'the basis of Evil is in emotion,' but his remark is not self-explanatory, and it may be misleading if taken out of context. Certainly the protagonist of his story does not succumb to excessive grief or outrage. As I have already suggested, such feelings would be an expression of the claims of personality, an evaluation of experience, a judgment rendered in terms of the values by which people try to make sense of their experience. Grief or outrage would be attempts to grasp the human significance of death, not by classifying it intellectually, to be sure, but by living through the experience toward some understanding. But the protagonist's obsession with the mute physical presence of the corpse is a fascination with precisely what eludes understanding, the brute fact which in its very nature lies beyond any possible attempt to articulate significance--and fascinates for that very reason. Both in 'The Brink of Darkness' and in the essay to which I have been referring, the 'irreducible emotion' by which men are betrayed to evil 'cannot be formulated': it is, in fact, the unformulable as such, the irreducible opacity in all experience the limit or horizon of any act of comprehension.

The protagonist says that he came to be obsessed with 'the obscure and the irrelevant.' This formula is worth scrutinizing, not only because it is on the face of it rather odd, if not merely insensitively brisk, in its apparent dismissal of the mystery of death. It is clear, in any case, that this mystery does not manifest itself in terms with which we may have become familiar elsewhere. The old woman's corpse is not frightening by reason of any monstrosity, any hint of unspeakable terrors: we are far, in Winters' story, from the world of Poe, for example, with its rotting flesh and glaring eyes. On the contrary, the protagonist is betrayed by the deceptive familiarity of what he sees in the coffin, as if it were 'a friend bidding me be quiet with raised hand.' Deceptive, because that familiar gesture masks what is in fact utterly strange and 'inchoate': the friend is no longer there. Betrayed, because the narrator's elusive sense of a coherence just beyond the boundary of consciousness, like a memory of what one has once known--like a smile inscribed in the corpse's grimace--slides away and leaves behind only a 'demonic silence.' It is the silence of objects. The

corpse is irrelevant because in its naked facticity it cannot be brought into relation with human values or standards of significance. And it is demonic because its imperturbability tempts the protagonist to surrender those standards.

The earlier printed version of 'The Brink of Darkness' is, once again, more explicit about the nature of the protagonist's delinquency. A kind of moral exhaustion speaks through his complaint that 'Consciousness was perhaps nothing but change' and in his dangerous speculation, contemplating the strange finality of the corpse, about the kind of 'permanence [that] might transcend it.' Even without this formulation, however, the stages of the protagonist's 'madness' make clear enough what is involved in his abdication--a progressive shrinking of the claims of the spirit, a surrender of its boundaries. After Mrs. Stone's death and the departure of her husband, the house, its lower story stripped of furniture, becomes as bare of human feature as the landscape itself. Society contracts to the upstairs room where, with the physical warmth of the stove and whatever spiritual warmth his dogs may provide, the protagonist huddles above an 'echoing desolation.'

Then the dogs too are gone, reverting to wildness in an indecipherable landscape, their tracks covered by the anonymous snow. The empty building is 'invaded' by mice, 'shadowy' creatures, 'natives of [a] dissolving wilderness.' The protagonist, giving up the attempt to read, spends his evenings watching their play with an intensity quite unlike the 'indifferent curiosity' his hounds had displayed. The delicacy and grace of the little creatures, 'their feet as sensitive as ants,' are set down with remarkable precision. But the recording mind has all but disappeared, as if the movements of consciousness had faded or been absorbed into the random scurrying all about it. The presence of consciousness is felt only as a dim sort of nostalgia: the mice sip from saucers like 'far-away gazelles,' emblems of a serene vitality the mind senses somewhere on the other side of its own dissolution.

It is not surprising, so totally has he surrendered himself to this alien life, that the protagonist should find uncanny his own face reflected in a window: 'Again I had the illusion of seeing myself in the empty room, in the same light, frozen to my last footprints, cold and unmeaning. A slight motion caught my eye, and I glanced up at the darkened corner of the window to be fixed with horror. There, standing on the air outside the window, translucent, a few lines merely, and scarcely visible, was a face, my face, the eyes fixed upon my own.' Such confrontations, when the self looms up suddenly like a stranger, at once alien and disturbingly familiar, have a deeply unsettling power, suggesting as they do the slipperiness of what we take to be the ground of our ordinary awareness.

The theme of the doppelgänger fascinated many nineteenth-century writers, to whose romantic egoism it seemed to pose the threat of an infinite regress: if I am not me, then who am I? The question informs the anxious moral dialectics of Conrad and Dostoyevsky, as well as Poe's facile evocations of the frissons associated with schizophrenic withdrawal. Doubtless, as Albert Guerard has pointed out, Winters' story owes something to this tradition. But its central concern is not so much with a splitting of the self as with its objectification. The particular horror of the moment by the window derives from its being the climax of the process of denudation we have traced, first, in the landscape and its inhabitants, then in the death of Mrs. Stone, and finally in the incidents of the days following her funeral. The furthest point of the protagonist's excursion to the brink of darkness is a vision of the self become as 'cold and unmeaning' as the old woman's corpse--mere line and volume, the frozen trace of a significance now barely remembered.

No writer was more important to Winters in his youth than Emily Dickinson, and it is not surprising that she should often have treated death as Winters does here, as an instance, perhaps the crucial one, of the obliteration of intelligibility, the effacement of the human feature of things....It is in his essay on Dickinson in *Maule's Curse* that Winters formulates most explicitly both the moral dilemma underlying his story and the principle by which consciousness can, if not resolve that dilemma, at least come to terms with it, achieve the degree of mastery that will preserve its own being. In contemplating this alien cold, Winters says, the 'soul is taken to the brink of the incomprehensible, and is left there, for retreat is impossible, and advance is impossible without a transmutation of the soul's very nature.' It is not accidental that the solution should be formulated in terms almost identical to those of the problem. Dickinson's protagonist characteristically 'follows the friend to the brink of the comprehensible, sees her pass the brink, and faces the loss.'

'And we, we placed the hair,  
And drew the head erect;  
And then an awful leisure was,  
Our faith to regulate.'

The speaker in Dickinson's poem differs from the protagonist of Winters' story only in the will to assert the boundary between the human and the inhuman, between what can be apprehended in terms of human values and what must finally, if painfully, be dismissed as irrelevant. It is never a question of plumbing the mystery, or of dissipating that irrationality, in life as well as in death, which threatens to 'corrupt, dissolve, and destroy human character and consciousness.' One clings to what one has been able to win from the inchoate, and accepts both the partiality of the victory and the certainty of ultimate defeat. It is a matter, in the Dickinson essay, of accepting the 'limits of judgment,' and, in 'The Brink of Darkness,' of returning--after a long seepage out of the self, a drift away from any human center--to the limits of [one's] old identity.' As the protagonist of Winters' story learns, this embrace of limits is not a passive acquiescence but a discipline of will, the self held in place--and as Winters' prose and verse again and again suggest, in terrible isolation--against a universe largely foreign to its most fundamental demands.

Winters has said that his view is essentially a tragic one, and he has perhaps more nearly won the right to so grandiose a term than most of his contemporaries. In his ethical writings in the late twenties, he is emphatic in his rejection both of the mysticism that would claim to discover some ultimate kinship between man and the universe, and the nihilism, represented especially by the poetry of T. S. Eliot, which is thrown into despair by the magnitude of the gulf between them. The tragic sense of life, according to Winters, does not permit the immensity of what is (and must be) lost to call into question the value of what may be retained. It assumes that being human is worth the effort.

This moral calculus in 'The Brink of Darkness' explains why its resolution is apparently so abrupt, unrelated, except chronologically, to what has gone before. The protagonist's recovery is in fact quite simply the negation of what has gone before, a drawing back from the brink, a consolidation of boundaries. Winters' almost exclusive concern with the dynamics of will is not easily accommodated to an ordinary narrative logic, which presupposes that our moral interest is centered in complications gradually spun out in behavior. The 'story' of the protagonist's brush with madness is not a cumulative weaving of a causal chain. The incident--which, as I have already suggested, are often no more than isolated moments of perception, a worn face or a snowy landscape, burial flowers and scampering mice--are bound together by what Winters would at the time, speaking of poetry, have called the 'scattered method.'

Despite the appearance of narrative progression, they are in fact like 'searchlights...illuminating a given idea or feeling from different angles,' rays converging on a common center: the enervation of the narrator's will to be human. Similarly, the account of his recovery suggests its nature without attempting to reconstruct its sources or the processes by which it was generated. Indeed, it would not be an unwarranted extrapolation to say that the defining characteristic of the will's revival--or better, its abrupt turn, its conversion--is precisely a rejection of causal mechanism. Human identity constitutes itself in this act of freedom, which, though it changes the direction of the narration, remains always unavailable to it, a subterranean shift visible only in the fault it creates in the surface of the story.

The final incidents of 'The Brink of Darkness' do not, then, attempt to 'explain' the protagonist's recovery. Rather, they articulate the stages of his reinvestment in himself, and in order to do this, they often provide mirror images of the stages of his abdication. The death and funeral of one of his students, another victim of the harshness of the winter, might at first glance seem redundant. The description of the coffin has in fact been taken as symptomatic of the derangement already betrayed in the narrator's response to Mrs. Stone's death. 'The boy's fraternity came in a body, twenty or some boys, seated in two front rows at one side, looking curiously young and helpless before the coffin. The waxen petals of the chrysanthemums glowed in the dusk of the church; they seemed almost to move, curling and uncurling ever so little. There was something innocent and pathetic about the flowers, these earthy blossoms, cut clean from the ground from which they had struggled, foaming dimly, still dimly alive in the gloom, struggling imperceptibly, curling imperceptibly inward, as if they were the sluggish dead incarnate, dying slowly again in pity, returning numbly to the earth.'

The rhetoric, to be sure, is overwrought, off balance, as if grasping for an assurance beyond its reach. But it is the same rhetoric Winters used in an early poem dealing with the same incident, and it represents an attempt at understanding rather than capitulation before the brute fact. If the flowers are seen with an abnormally heightened intensity, it is because they must bear the burden of all the narrator's sense of the fragility of human life in this hostile place. Consciousness struggles its way up from earth for a short blossoming, momentary foam on the wave of matter to which, as to numb sleep, it must return. The flowers at Mrs. Stone's funeral were corpses, tokens of an irremediable absence, about which, in the colorless air, there was nothing to be said. At the boy's funeral, the flowers are struggling, and the very febrility of the images testifies to the tenaciousness with which the protagonist has been roused to assert, in the face of defeat, the worth of what has been lost. In so doing, he affirms the distinctness of consciousness, his own as well as the boy's, from the world that inevitably reabsorbs it.

The protagonist himself identifies the beginning of his recovery with his 'immersion in the brute blood' of his Airedale, who has returned from the wilderness horribly impaled with porcupine quills. The narrative insists upon the brutality of the process by which the bitch is subdued and, 'screaming, her mouth foaming with blood,' has the quills one by one removed. But the protagonist is not 'immersed' in this bloody violence in the passive way he had been immersed in the numbing violence of the seasons or the more insidious blankness of his inner landscape. He grapples physically with the crazed dog, sitting astride it and working in the dim light to the point of exhaustion.

The battle is one that is often enacted in Winters' later poems, poems like 'Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight' and 'Heracles' that deal with 'hand-to-hand or semi-intuitive combat with experience.' The brute blood is countered by human will--the will to be human, to extend the realm of the human. The values by which 'man' is constituted--and this is the basis of Winters' quarrel with stoicism--are not realized in pure thought, as if one could find in abstraction or nostalgia a sinecure from the world's brutality. Those values impose themselves through action upon the irrational stuff of experience itself, and shape it in terms of human concerns. The protagonist of Winters' story does not proclaim his abhorrence of nature's cruelty, much less lose himself in horrified musing on its effects. So busy is he nursing the dogs that he loses 'the habit of noticing'; which is to say, to be sure, that he ceases to care about the 'dire squalor' of the room, which winds him some dubious glances from visiting neighbors, but also that he is no longer thrall to a demon 'who gains power over one only in proportion as one recognizes and fears him.' In the end, blood and violence are shaped into something more palpable than mere compassion: the dogs are cured. For Winters, distinctly human experience is precisely this informing of the inarticulate by values that exist not abstractly but 'on the naked edge of the act'--values that become visible only in the human disposition of the world they bring into being.

This is the world we see in the closing paragraphs of 'The Brink of Darkness': mechanism ordered by human will, blind vitality channeled by human values. The spring thaw marks the advent of a season conceived in terms quite different from the alien intensities of winter and summer in the opening of the story. 'On most of the hills the winter wheat was already high, and the hills lay green as the snow vanished. Far across the valley I could hear the puffing of a tractor, and now and then I could see the tiny iron thing crawling rapidly in straight lines across the hills, appearing and disappearing suddenly and in unlikely ways, leaving black earth behind.'

The narrator hears an old phonograph playing on the new grass and the sound of children beneath his window all 'part of the season,' he says, a season in which mind and nature seem to have reached an equilibrium. The industrious tractor renders in more whimsical terms the transformation achieved so bloodily in the struggle with the Airedales. The interplay between the determined rationality of the 'tiny iron thing' and the irregularity of the terrain leaves behind the palpable richness of newly turned soil. The narrator anticipates, with the same delicacy of perception he previously lavished on the mice, the tottering grace of newborn kids, 'leaping here and there in the cold shadows, balancing and spinning on a single foot.' But all this random vitality is now contained firmly within a human landscape, and it is further domesticated by the comfortable anthropomorphism, quite unlike the hints of mysterious distance associated with the rodents, with which the passage concludes: the kids, the narrator supposes, would try to befriend the dogs, 'to the patient embarrassment of the dogs and the consternation of their mothers.'

The last image of the story is at once an intimation of the altered perception of the protagonist and an emblem of his new situation. 'The plow came down the slope swiftly and started about the base of the hill to circle slowly upward again, the horses arching and rippling, the driver bending forward and moving rapidly here and there to urge them on.' The bounding vitality of the beasts is reined by the matching solicitude of the driver, as if Plato's charioteer, instead of mounting to the heavens, had been set the practical task of preparing soil to bear its crop. But the driver is no abstract embodiment of pure reason. It is, in fact, Eli, the deformed ranch hand, and the protagonist sees him not in his eerie physical presence but as a man going about his job, his 'strange movements' the agency of a resourcefulness he will himself need in the continuing struggle he foresees. For the moment at least he feels sunlight.

### The Demonism of the World

Near the end of his life, Winters asked that any future printing of 'The Brink of Darkness' be prefaced by a statement that it deals with 'the hypothetical possibility of a hostile supernatural world.' The frequency of their occurrence, in his correspondence as well as in his published works, suggests that for Winters demons were somehow more than figures of speech. But if we are to cling to our feeling that 'The Brink of Darkness' provides us with more than a good scare, we must determine the sense in which the demonic hypothesis might seriously be entertained. All three words of Winters' formulation are important. He was, in the first place, annoyed by naturalistic explanations of the story that seemed to reduce it to a psychological case history, an incident wholly within the mind of its protagonist. If, as we have been assuming, the story engages us on a moral level, it is because it has something to say about the world itself.

The demon is objectively 'there' as an aspect of the constitution of things, and it is only upon this understanding that the protagonist's experience has more than a clinical interest. What he encounters, furthermore, has its 'there' beyond any terms known to our everyday understanding of the world. His experience is an experience of the supernatural in that it calls into question the finality or autonomy of the kind of nature we see at the conclusion of the story, nature as it is lived and shaped by human concern. In the absence of such sustained concern, the story suggest, nature itself becomes unrecognizable and therefore uncanny, preternatural in the sense of lying beyond--and, indeed, contradicting, undermining--everything we are able to regard as 'normal.' Finally, to say that this world is hostile or malignant is not to attribute to it a deliberate intention, but, on the contrary, to acknowledge the threat it poses to all man's structures of intention, identity, and intelligibility. Winters was fond of citing Aquinas' observation that an entity is demonic 'in so far as his existence is incomplete.' Evil, as Christianity traditionally has defined it, is privation, but that privation is objectively present in the world. It is not a mere deficiency but a gaping Absence that threatens to draw into its orbit all the articulations of the conscious mind.

The threat to the narrator's identity, then, comes not merely from his history in a particular time and place, but also from the constitution of the world itself. The metaphysical context of his ordeal is implicated in a network of images, closely related to Winters' early poems, which only distantly answer to the demands of narrative logic. We may distinguish two sorts of image: those having to do with the cycle of the seasons and those that evoke a more fundamental dynamic, a universal flux. The first Winters associates with problems of perception and knowledge; the second, with the condition of the world and of consciousness, from which these problems arise.

The first paragraphs of the story present a series of apparently dissociated musings on the landscape as it appears in 'bright autumn,' 'shadowy winter,' and in the 'unbearable blaze' of summer. The emblematic nature of these images is emphasized by their temporal disjunction from the events of the narrative. They hover in an ambiguous pluperfect, their sequence uncertain, their temporal relation to the year of Mrs. Stone's death unspecified--as if they were not subject to the ordinary rules of chronology but perpetually and simultaneously present in the consciousness of the narrator. Like the speaker in many of Winters' early poems, he seems particularly fascinated by the mysterious moment of change, marked here by the first snowfall of October, when the chilly clarity of autumn gives way to the obliterating snow of deep winter. It is not the differences between the two seasons that concern him but the fragile boundary they share. In 'The Brink of Darkness,' brightness and shadow, hardness and softness, are continually juxtaposed. They define

not so much stages of a cycle as complementary aspects of a single intuition, the intuition of a world all at once becoming, as Winters writes, 'whiter and darker.'

The peculiar darkness of the autumn landscape is not incompatible with the brightness of the air, which is indeed just what makes possible the stony clarity of trees or hills against the colorless sky. The darkness with which the narrator contends has more than one register, but it is perceived, first of all, as the dense facticity of the world, drained of quality and cold with a chill no thermometer can measure. The hardness of the scene--like rock or steel--is its utter impassivity, as if simply being there, its 'edges definite against the sky with a cold hairline precision,' were its sole property. At one climactic moment, the vault of the sky seems to flatten, and the protagonist is left in a world reduced to surface and outline, 'without distance or dimension.' Such a world is without depth; which is to say that it reverberates with no significance, allows no association to cling to its smooth surfaces. It does not open itself to man or in any way acknowledge his presence before it.

The snow, by way of contrast, is not so much a presence as a process. The first snowfall is described as a kind of invasion--not a frontal attack, however, but the gradual encroachment of what is soft and indefinite, without edge or identity. 'The clouds were of a soft even gray, and they seemed to have no lower edges, so that the sky had no identity--there was merely the soft air. The snow merged into the air from below with no visible dividing line.' The snow seems to be there only in a negative way, as a seeping away of the recognizable world. Sound is muffled, and the protagonist moves in his isolation as through a void, often scarcely able to know if his course lies uphill or down. 'Often I came to the top of a rise and started down with no warning save the change in speed, or arrived at the bottom of a hill with no warning save the sudden slowing.... Sometimes a mouse appeared, floundering as if in heavy air, and the dogs would lunge clumsily after it, snap it up, and drop it dead, leaving a small spot of blood suspended in grayness....'

This is a darkness quite unlike that of the definite and irreducible hills of autumn: a universal white blankness, and therefore a shadowy confusion for the mind. We could say that the world is cold and hard in its implacable presence there over against man, and that it is soft and indefinite in its failure to afford any foothold to his understanding. It is just the world's imperviousness to the probings of intelligence that in the end renders it an impalpable grayness where brute violence hovers without boundary or foundation. Winters is concerned with the shadow not of what is hidden but of what blankly manifests itself--with the shadowy whiteness that reappears, not accidentally, at Mrs. Stone's funeral. 'The skin was preternaturally and evenly white, and in the wrinkles there seemed a trace as of an underlying darkness, even and impenetrable.'

The vitality of summer might at first seem to oppose it to the other seasons, but it is an alien vitality, and its forms are a tracing of the incomprehensible. 'Each tree,' the narrator says, 'was a black void growing shadowy and visible at the edges.' What is different in the summer is the overwhelming sense of the presence, beyond all visible shapes, of this peculiarly *active* void, this force or energy which, because it is beyond the forms of our own understanding, as well as those which nature momentarily assumes, can be described only in negatives or through paradox. Without motion, it batters the earth and induces living things to 'watery blotches, barely discernible' in its pervasive intensity. The evocation of this intensity links the seasonal imagery of Winters' story with images of another sort that might otherwise seem incompatible with it--images that suggest the transience of visible forms, as if phenomena were an ephemeral play on the surface of a mysterious dynamism.

Winters always claimed that his interests were ethical rather than metaphysical. He was more concerned with making sense of his experience, with holding onto the sense he had been able to make, than with arriving at any total understanding of the universe; in fact, he often doubted the possibility of such an understanding. But he found in twentieth-century science, much to the annoyance of friends like Tate and Hart Crane, if not a systematic explanation of the world, at least a set of metaphors to articulate the conditions that made such an explanation unlikely. He was less influenced by writers like Whitehead or Sir James Jeans who attempted to derive a metaphysical idealism from the conclusions of atomic physics than he was by Jacques Loeb, a Chicago biophysicist who liked to claim that 'our existence is based on the play of blind forces...[and] we ourselves are only chemical mechanisms.'

Most modern scientists would probably consider so reductive a statement naive; and Winters himself, for all his interest and early training in biology and physics, was no doubt haunted by Loeb's formulations--he called him the John Donne of modern physics--on grounds that were imaginative as much as they were scientific. What must have struck him most urgently in Loeb's work was how rigorously--and therefore, to his way of thinking, how bracingly--it enforced what was to Winters the fundamental tragic imperative: the need to think the invisible but absolute, and absolutely crucial, difference between matter and consciousness. The individual soul is not matter, Winters wrote in a letter to Tate, but a relationship temporarily assumed by matter (15 February 1927). The precariousness of the place mind makes for itself in such a universe would for Winters have made all the more heroic the assertion of its peculiar values. If force or matter is indeed, as Winters sometimes appeared to suggest, a kind of deity, then man defines himself in Promethean opposition.

Such ideas are most fully expressed in the poems of *The Bare Hills* and, especially, in *Fire Sequence*. But they also provide the basis for one of the most evocatively mysterious episodes in 'The Brink of Darkness.' In the midst of the anonymous winter landscape, the narrator comes across a pen of young coyotes, 'the only sign of life amid four hours of snow.' Like the mice later in his room, and the kids at the conclusion of the story, these delicate creatures, sniffing the air 'detail by detail,' are perceived as an abrupt jutting into form, a vivacious precision of movement quite different from the static presence of inanimate nature. The mice, as I have already suggested, seem to represent the invasion of man's world by the natives of a 'dissolving wilderness,' while the kids represent the incorporation of nature into an essentially human landscape.

But the coyotes--as is often the case in Winters' early poems--seem to be a pure 'precipitate' of the wilderness itself. What the narrator finds appealing about them is the freshness and insubstantiality of their suddenly flaring identities, like 'puffs of smoke precise at the tips.' They are 'innocent' not in any sentimentally primitivist sense but in their vulnerability and fleetingness, without past or future. It is not merely that in the spring they will be slaughtered for their fur, although our knowledge of what lies in store for them affects the way we respond to their soundless apparition. More fatally, however, the snow itself, and its silence, seem even in the present moment to swallow them up, their 'changing, shadowy curiosity'--the precision of their attentiveness--dissipated after an instant 'as if by the quiet of the hills.'

The incident reminds the narrator, although he does not specify the nature of the connection, of a phosphorescent glow he and the Stones had observed in the stubble fields the preceding autumn. As far as the eye could see, the hills were smothered in a 'soft fire,' in which living creatures were reduced to 'dark vortices, blurred and shapeless, stirring rapidly in the motionless flame.' Some such scene appears to have made a great impression on Winters, and he returns to it more than once in his early poems. It seems less a deliberate metaphor than an enigmatic revelation, one whose significance needs to be divined. Sometimes the encompassing fire is identified with matter or with time; it is possible, as Kenneth Fields has suggested, that Winters was thinking of the theory of the interchangeability of matter and energy. But these are approximations, attempts to find a way of talking about a force that is not human or animate but inclusive of both life and mind as accidental eddies in its implacable circulation. This is the force that threw up the momentary forms of the young coyotes, and with a startling juxtaposition, the narrator makes it seem as if it embraces too the slow wheeling of the heavens with all the 'bright powder' of the stars.

*The Hound & Horn* version of the story inserts the first mention of Mrs. Stone's death between these two episodes, between the 'dissipation' of the coyotes in snowy silence and the vision of an entire world reabsorbed into a motionless whirl of fire. Even without this acknowledgement, it is evident that the narrator's reaction to her death is conditioned by his obscure sense of this unnamable dynamism--evident, for example, in his account of the brief foaming of the flowers at the second funeral, or, more dangerously, in the strange equilibrium he glimpses in the face of the corpse. What he feels is a presence--we have seen the sense in which it might be called a supernatural one--moving powerfully beyond the boundaries of the world as it is shaped by man's familiar intercourse, by his reason and his need. This is why there is a disparity between the way we have been describing the narrator's experience and the claims he makes for it at the time. What we have been calling a dissipation of the self seems to him not a loss of consciousness but, on the contrary, the discovery of an intense but specialized new awareness; what we have been calling an abdication or enervation of the will seems like a perilous but daring adventure into new realms.

There is in fact a kind of hubris in the narrator's claim to have discovered, receding into uncertain depths beyond the known world, 'a new region of significance, even of sensation.' It is a strange sort of 'significance,' which manifests itself most compellingly in a moment that would seem to deny the premises that make understanding possible. One night the protagonist is startled by the vividness of the light from his room on the glazed-over snow outside, and he stares 'at the smooth surface of the snow thus suddenly revealed to me, like a new meaning not divisible into any terms I knew.' What is involved in this moment is a rejection of divisions, of boundaries, of finitude itself, not only in the mind's act of knowing but also in the object of its knowledge--the undifferentiated snow, smooth to infinity. The glare from the naked room makes visible a seamless white, as if the world might give itself in its totality, without shape or articulation, to a consciousness equally unviolated by mere 'terms.' It is a significance, we might say, without meanings.

And yet, though we may question the vocabulary he uses to characterize it, we cannot dismiss the narrator's experience as a delusion. It is a reaction to something that is there, but a something, Winters implies, that we must recognize as demonic because it is not more than human but less. In writing 'The Brink of Darkness,' he must certainly have felt that he was exorcising not only his own demons but also those of a whole generation of writers who had been betrayed by the elusiveness with which significance informs the naked facts of perception and who lost themselves in an all too easy form of 'transcendence.' Hart Crane was only the most spectacular victim of a spiritual adventurism that had its historical roots and its public sanction, Winters was coming to believe, in the pantheistic ecstasies of Emerson and Whitman. This is a familiar theme in Winters' work, even a notorious one: I shall touch upon it here as briefly as possible.

The study of American literature Winters began publishing in the thirties had as its central theme this preoccupation with new regions of significance and sensation--from the optimistic proclamation of the first transcendentalists, to Ahab's pursuit of whatever demon was summoning him from behind the mask of whiteness, to Emily Dickinson's consolidation of the 'limits of judgment.' 'The Brink of Darkness' can be seen as a wintry hard-bitten account of the sort of experience described in more expansive terms in the familiar passage from Emerson's 'Nature': 'Standing on the bare ground--my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,--all means egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball, I am nothing, I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulates through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds something as beautiful as his own nature.'

Emerson celebrates, at the expense of the boundaries we customarily impose upon the world and upon the self, an enthusiastic identification with the ever-receding horizon of experience. He argues that the self is fulfilled only when it becomes no-thing, when consciousness, relinquishing the attempt to define and articulate, becomes one with the perpetually open-ended process--a 'divine circulation'--that underlies the play of phenomena. Winters agrees that such moments are possible. But he insists that the 'volatile essence' of the world's seeming is not God, or at least not the God of traditional piety. It is the flickering play of atoms in a void, a motionless flame of pure process, and if a deity of sorts, it is the deity whose 'fierce derision' sounds through the verse of Winters' middle period. We may want to claim that the world 'laid bare' is God, but the cold presence that is then revealed is 'The fact that offers neither cause nor gain / Not a reflection of the mind.' It 'Means nothing, makes you nothing,' and it 'will suck you like a drain, / Suck you to shrieking.' The 'demons' evoked by modern science must themselves be laid bare if, like Baudelaire's demonic eyes, they are ever to be set to rest. But it will not do to make them sound like an up-to-date version of God the Father.

Hart Crane's fundamental error, Winters claimed--and he saw it as representative of the whole Emersonian tradition--was to mistake for cosmic significance the intensities of his own unarticulated emotion. Similarly, in 'The Brink of Darkness,' the demon's only power is what has been lent it by the credence of the protagonist, who decodes from mere contingency a mysterious summons. When he supposes he receives messages from beyond the intelligible world, he is in fact transfixed in the 'naked glare' of his own thought--thought without a definable object, consciousness emptied of content (sucked

'like a drain') and bright with its own violence. As we have observed, the featureless landscape beyond his window is illuminated by the 'bright emptiness' of the room where he has increasingly been isolated. We need to consider more closely, by way of summary, what is implied by its bare windows and naked electric glare.

Our ordinary perception of the world gives it a familiar shape--the shape to which it is restored at the conclusion of Winters' story--by interpreting things in terms of human needs and values. And in this interpretation, the self too is constituted, as that which lies over against the world--needing, desiring, manipulating, acting, at home in its 'mean egotism.' But pure perception, divorcing the eyeball from the mind, things from human concern, encounters an intense inane, where objects, no longer offering in their mere facticity any resistance to thought, thin into a universal blankness. The hallucinatory appearance of the face in the window suggests that at such moments of Emersonian transcendence the 'self' becomes as insubstantial as the world, mere line and shadow, the intersection of two bright voids.

The paradox Winters' vision implies but does not here make explicit is that in escaping or evading the habits of rationality one is delivered to a solitude more profound than any merely human isolation. Instead of losing itself in the originary freshness of things, consciousness wheels furiously in place, immobile on the world's glassy surface, incapable of the movement by which it might articulate a destiny for itself. This is why the images of the bright room and the snowy landscape are not antithetical but complementary. On the other side of the boundary of human finitude lies not apotheosis but a solipsism that rends the structures of one's own identity as ruthlessly as it does those of the world. It is a solipsism without a self, meaningfulness won at the expense of meaning, abandonment to a universal circulation that is, in spite of Emerson's complacent faith, empty, mute, and, in the sense we have already considered, profoundly irrelevant.

Terry Comito  
*In Defense of Winters: The Poetry and Prose of Yvor Winters*  
(U Wiscnsin 1986) 1-25