



Yvor Winters

(1900-1968)

To Emily Dickinson (1930)

Dear Emily, my tears would burn your page,
But for the fire-dry line that makes them burn--
Burning my eyes, my fingers, while I turn
Singly the words that crease my heart with age.
If I could make some tortured pilgrimage
Through words or Time or the blank pain of Doom
And kneel before you as you found your tomb,
Then I might rise to face my heritage.

Yours was an empty upland solitude
Bleached to the powder of a dying name;
The mind, lost in a word's lost certitude
That faded as the fading footsteps came
To trace an epilogue to words grown odd
In that hard argument which led to God.

ANALYSIS

"Already in the twenties he saw an affinity between the 'poetry of the image' and the verse of Emerson and of Emily Dickinson. It was an affinity based upon the conception of a poem as a moment of heightened consciousness of the world, a 'point of intensity,' rather than a discursive statement of a philosophically 'important' idea. (A 'ballyhoo statement of a concept,' Winters complained of Whitman and of the late Victorians, 'is neither fish nor flesh'). Imagism was in fact a restatement of the romantic faith in the capacity of the imagination, evading the dead forms of discursive reason, to possess the world in its living immediacy. Winters' lifelong questioning of this dream of Adamic sovereignty involves him centrally in what has been called the 'continuity' of American poetry...

It was perhaps above all to Emily Dickinson that he turned [as he later wrote] to recognize his 'heritage.' Certainly in his early reviews it is Dickinson who is claimed more than any other as the forerunner or foundation of what Winters sees as the most urgent task for his own generation. In this 'Romantic poet with a Calvinist's sense of things' he finds what he does not find in Pound or H. D. and finds only sporadically in Wallace Stevens [whom Winters considered in 1922 the 'greatest of living and of American poets'] a troubled exploration of what was most problematic in the task imagination had arrogated to itself. As I have indicated, Winters would eventually look to Dickinson for a way out of the impasse into which his

application to that task had led him. But from the start he recognized in her work a kindred perplexity about fundamental questions of the place of mind in a world that seems at some moments to offer itself to man and at others to recede into a wholly alien intensity; the question of finding 'a workable substitute for God,' not as an object of veneration but as a guarantee for those meanings which, in the absence of absolutes, threaten always to drain away from both words and the world....

The three poems Winters identified years later as the summit of Dickinson's achievement seem also to adumbrate much of *The Immobile Wind* and *The Magpie's Shadow*. The 'moral change' Winters identifies in his essay as their common subject is most immediately whatever its 'allegorical' extensions may be, the inevitable alternation in nature between presence and absence: the spring light 'On solitary hills' that 'almost speaks to me,' before the inevitable moment when 'It passes, and we stay'; the 'certain slant of light, / On winter afternoons' that speaks only of 'distance' and loss. Like many of the Santa Fe poems, Dickinson's lyrics are elegies for the fragility of seasons, the elusiveness of plenitude. But it was not only the sense of a shared dilemma that made Dickinson so important to Winters in his early years. Her 'polished stoniness of vision, of mind,' seemed to offer a way of dealing with that dilemma without denying its urgency. A Poem, Winters wrote in 1924, 'is a state of perfection at which a poet has arrived by whatever means. It is a stasis in a world of flux and indecision, a permanent gateway to waking oblivion, which is the only infinity and the only rest'."

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In Defense of Winters: The Poetry and Prose of Yvor Winters
(U Wisconsin 1986) 45-46