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THE CRITICAL METHOD

OF YVOR WINTERS

by

Richard William Bollman, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

January

1965

AUTHOR'S LIFE

Richard William Bollman, S.J., was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, March 13, 1938.

He attended St. Clement and St. Saviour parish schools in the Cincinnati suburbs, and was graduated from the latter in June, 1952. The following September he entered St. Xavier High School. After graduation in 1956, he entered the Jesuit Novitiate at Milford, Ohio, and was enrolled in the College of Arts of Xavier University. In August, 1960, he entered West Baden College and was enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts course of Loyola University, Chicago. He received the Bachelor's degree in June, 1961, and that same month entered the Graduate School of Loyola University to pursue studies for the degree of Master of Arts.

In January, 1962, he began research for this present thesis under the direction of Joseph G. Milunas, S.J.

What was all the talk about?
This was something to decide.
It was not that I had died.
Though my plans were new, no doubt,
There was nothing to deride.

I had grown away from youth,
Shedding error where I could;
I was now essential wood,
Concentrating into truth;
What I did was small but good.

Yvor Winters
"A Dream Vision"

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

He is not a tall man, and his frame, once lean and vigorous, has grown stout as the years advance. Dark brown hair, combed straight to the left side, frames a pleasant, benign face; the brow is expansive, the heavy features quietly set above a comfortable chin. But the kindly jowls of age do not completely mask a serious intensity in his eyes and mouth, an almost grave seriousness, which colors his every thought and action. His name is Arthur Ivor Winters, but not many realize this, since he uses only the last two names to sign his writings.

The citizens of Los Altos, California, where Winters lives with his wife, know him as a community man, head of the local Civil Defense unit during the last world war, active on committees against racial and religious prejudice. And in his spare time, Winters breeds dogs, prize-winning Airedales, which he once showed in as many as eight competitions yearly. He is widely read in world history, keenly interested in politics, and an avid boxing fan. But his primary interest is English poetry, and his primary occupation is teaching students at Leland Stanford University how to read, write, and understand English poetry. For his work there, Winters has won the respect of students and fellow teachers alike; but the respect has been slow in coming.

Although Winters has taught at Stanford since 1928 and took his Ph.D. degree there in 1933, it was not until 1949 that the administration granted him

full professorship. The department heads under whom he first served did not know what to make of the man. He was a productive scholar; he wrote and published frequently, both as reviewer and independent critic. But Winters had a way of winning a new enemy for every sentence that reached print. As far as one department head was concerned, he was a "disgrace" to the university.¹ As far as Winters himself was concerned, the rancor dealt him merely proved "the essential confusion of the literary mind of our period."² He has always taken a certain pride in these literary enmities which he calmly describes as "enmities more intense, enduring, and I think I may fairly say unscrupulous, than I should judge have been enjoyed by any other writer of my generation. It was all quite unintentional on my part," Winters adds simply; "I merely took literature seriously."³

Winters took literature seriously in four principal books. The first appeared in 1937 under the title Primitivism and Decadence. It presented a theory of poetic composition and criticism, and in terms of this theory evaluated the structural techniques and artistic development of American

¹Ivor Winters, The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises (Denver: Swallow, 1957), p. 13.

²Ivor Winters, In Defense of Reason: containing Primitivism and Decadence, Maule's Curse, The Anatomy of Nonsense, and "The Significance of The Bridge, by Hart Crane" (New York: Swallow Press and William Morrow, 1947), p. 153.

³Quoted in Twentieth Century Authors: a Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature, edited by Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York: Wilson, 1942), p. 1535.

experimental poetry during the early twentieth century. All of Winters' subsequent work is based on this same theory of criticism. Maule's Curse followed Primitivism and Decadence by a year. It contained seven essays on American writers, from Hawthorne to James, and attempted to trace the origins of the obscurantist state of mind which Winters believed vitiated much of contemporary verse. In the four essays in The Anatomy of Nonsense, published in 1943, Winters tried to delineate the origins and essential nature of the muddleheadedness of American criticism--a muddleheadedness stemming principally from the work of Henry Adams, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and John Crowe Ransom. In 1946, Winters published a shorter book, Edwin Arlington Robinson, for "The Makers of Modern Literature Series." The work, for the most part, is a close criticism of Robinson's poetry. Winters champions the poet as heartily as he condemned the obscurantists and experimentalists in his earlier volumes.

In 1947, Mr. Winters' first three works appeared in a large single volume called In Defense of Reason, with no revision except for the addition of a new "Foreword" and a final essay on Hart Crane. The Function of Criticism, ten years later, collected five subsequent essays in book form as a companion to In Defense of Reason. He is presently finishing a history of the short poem in English, a work which will be his seventh hard cover volume of criticism, but only the fifth to offer a large body of new material.

What was it in these critical writings which so antagonized the reviewers? Winters' opinions were unique and unpopular. They were expressed in a style whose cool and clear directness occasionally lapsed into sarcasm. Consequently, the hasty reader, confused by the new ideas and offended by the acid clarity, was often unable and unwilling to grasp what Winters was actually saying, and

so merely lashed out against the way some of the ideas were put, or against isolated critical judgments he could not agree with. This has been the typical approach taken in the frequent essays and reviews that have found fault with Winters' work. One of the longest of these appeared in Stanley Edgar Hyman's The Armed Vision.

Hyman devotes very short space in his long critique to Winters' theory of criticism, an inexcusable failing which is largely responsible for his missing the point of Winters' practical evaluations. Confronted, for example, with the idea that poetry is the moral evaluation of human experience,⁴ Hyman professes inability to understand what "moral" could mean. He quotes snatches of sentences in which Winters explains the word, or in which he describes the consequences of morality in literature. Hyman obtusely asserts that all these snippets, out of context as they are, are meant to be synonymous with "moral." Understandably enough, he concludes that the word "means almost a dozen things, some of them completely inconsistent with others."⁵

Hyman does attempt a survey of Winters' critical works, but deals in detail with only a few of the essays in Maule's Curse, which he feels is Winters' best work. From the poetry criticism, Hyman is content to excerpt nothing but adjectives of praise or blame, which sound suitably absurd strung

⁴The basis of Winters' critical theory. Below, p. 36.

⁵Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Yvor Winters and Evaluation in Criticism," The Armed Vision: a Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 61.

together into several paragraphs and removed from the context of the critical analyses which would have given them meaning. Furthermore, since Winters has a way of challenging "approved" opinion, Hyman seems confident that all he need do is indicate that in Winters' mind "Bridges' poetry is superior to that of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Marianne Moore,"⁶ and the knowing reader will quickly conclude that Winters is clearly incompetent. This is a rather indirect way of refuting Winters, and one Hyman resorts to constantly.

William Barrett, in his review of In Defense of Reason, is equally wary of grappling directly with Winters' practical critiques, and also professes inability to understand his theory of criticism. He cannot find, he tells us, Winters' criterion of critical judgment. He is baffled by Winters' assertion that poetry is moral evaluation. "What does it mean?" Perhaps Winters masks an "unconscious desire to make literature more than it is, to extract from it something that has to be learned elsewhere."⁷

T. Weiss, in an unmannerly review of The Anatomy of Nonsense, handles Winters' critical principles in sweeping generalizations, and levels unsupported and meaningless objections: "Winters overestimates the significance of the intellect;" he is a "theologian without religion."⁸ After a list of Winters'

⁶Ibid., p. 50.

⁷William Barrett, "Temptations of St. Yvor," Kenyon Review, IX (Autumn, 1947), p. 543.

⁸T. Weiss, "The Nonsense of Winters' Anatomy," Quarterly Review of Literature, I (Spring, Summer, 1944), pp. 212, 316.

critical evaluations, Weiss offers as refutation, "Interesting. . . . I do not see it."⁹ The Anatomy of Nonsense also drew contemptuous response from Delmore Schwartz, who titles his short review "A Literary Provincial." "What [Winters'] view comes to, in the end," Schwartz concludes, "is a preference for the correct platitudes of statement; and this is just where his predecessor Irving Babbitt soon arrived."¹⁰

The list of Winters' critics could be extended; the method of castigation, however, remains largely the same. Having dealt very casually with Winters' critical theory, Hyman, Weiss, Barrett, and the others, quote heavily Winters' most unorthodox critical judgments; and rather than examining the principles that could explain these judgments, or even offering a critique of their own to counter them, they release a chorus of epithets which are presumably meant to be the final word on Winters' competence as a critic. He is "an excessively irritating and bad critic,"¹¹ "unable to read . . . to write . . . to understand poetry."¹² He is a "doughty provincial," guilty of "grotesqueries of interpretations," and "fumblings;"¹³ "wrongheadedness, idiosyncrasies, [and]

⁹Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁰Delmore Schwartz, "A Literary Provincial," Partisan Review, XII (Winter, 1945), p. 142.

¹¹Hyman, p. 72.

¹²Weiss, Quarterly Review of Literature, I, p. 225.

¹³Ibid., pp. 212, 300.

rancorous eccentricities."¹⁴

These comments merely echo the general tone of the reviews in 1937 when Primitivism and Decadence first appeared. The Saturday Review found the work a "collection of individual remarks rather than a rational sequence of thought."¹⁵ The Nation observed: Winters is "narrow, dogmatic, parochial; . . . intelligence and sensibility are put to rout before the antics of a distinctly tipsy intellect."¹⁶ The New Republic used metaphor: "He climbs onto his standard and hauls tight while he whips: the standard, like all standards, rears, paws, and stands still, lathered for nothing."¹⁷ The Times Literary Supplement regrets that in "seeking to analyze and condemn the lawlessness of modern poetry, [Winters] has condemned originality."¹⁸

Such accounts of Winters' criticism are in no way adequate. Some have been the result of misunderstanding and misreading; others have been motivated by deliberate bias and characterized by name-calling and personal abuse. It cannot be denied that Winters' own forceful writing and occasional sarcasm have been partly responsible for the heated rejoinders on the part of his critics. But such reviewers, by returning sarcasm for sarcasm, by allowing their capacity to understand to be dulled by their eagerness to fight back, have done no one a service. Very little has been clarified and many issues

¹⁴Barrett, Kenyon Review, IX, p. 551.

¹⁵Saturday Review of Literature, XVI (August 14, 1937), p. 18.

¹⁶Nation, CXLIV (February 21, 1937), p. 216.

¹⁷Richard P. Blackmur, New Republic, XCI (July 14, 1937), p. 285.

¹⁸Times (London) Literary Supplement (August 7, 1937), p. 572.

have been obscured. But the issues are important ones. Winters' contribution to literary criticism deserves our careful understanding. This present account of his critical method has been written as a contribution to this careful understanding.

I do not mean to imply that Winters has never before been treated sympathetically or honestly. He has had his defenders, and some of them, besides offering praise, have offered essays endeavoring to explain and even defend his critical principles. In 1941, John Crowe Ransom devoted over sixty pages of The New Criticism to an account of Winters' work. Ransom's sincerity is unquestionable, but unfortunately he has only added to the confusion surrounding Winters' critical principles.

Ransom has high praise for Winters' grasp of the importance of structure in poetry and for his sensitive analyses of the structural methods of contemporary verse. But Winters, in his opinion, has fallen a "victim of the moralistic illusion."¹⁹ Ransom cannot see why Winters insists upon the "moral relevance" of form."²⁰ Winters, it would seem, regards poems without visible ethical content, such as nature descriptions, as essentially second-rate, "off the real line of poetry."²¹ Winters actually does no such thing, as I hope subsequent chapters will make clear. Ransom's confusion in this matter stems

¹⁹ John Crowe Ransom, The New Criticism (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941), p. xi.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

²¹ Ibid., p. 213.

from his univocal concept of "morality." Morality in literature, in Ransom's mind, is literal didacticism, a kind of "lesson for the day." This is an acceptable, if narrow, notion of "morality," but it is not Winters' notion. Ransom concludes his article by reducing Winters' criticism to a structural theory of poetry, disposing of all moral implications.²² In other words, he tells us what he thinks Winters should have said, but not what he actually did say.

Some of Winters' other defenders have been more alert to his ideas and more sensitive in discussing them. The brief essays written by Donald Drummond²³ and Geoffrey Stone,²⁴ and two longer studies by Keith McKean²⁵ and Marshall Van Deusen²⁶ are very helpful to the student of Winters' critical method. These essays, however, would have gained in clarity had they considered Winters' mature theory in the light of his earlier thought about poetry, and traced the line of development from those early years. Winters' critical principles are all the more impressive and understandable when we see them as the result of ideas which developed slowly and logically over the

²²Ibid., p. 267.

²³Donald F. Drummond, "Yvor Winters: Reason and Moral Judgment," Arizona Quarterly, V (Spring, 1949), pp. 5-19.

²⁴Geoffrey Stone, "Poetry and Morals: a Defense of Both," American Review, IX (April, 1937), pp. 58-79.

²⁵Keith McKean, "Yvor Winters," The Moral Measure of Literature (Denver: Swallow, 1961), pp. 98-125.

²⁶Marshall Van Deusen, "In Defense of Yvor Winters," Thought, XXXIII (Autumn, 1957), pp. 409-36.

course of years, with the urgency of personal search. His principles are also more impressive when they are generously complemented by examples of his critical practice. Critical principles, it goes without saying, are ultimately proven in performance. Though they often seem rigid and narrow in the abstract, their very inflexibility might enable them, in practice, to pry with all the more strength into individual poems, revealing facets otherwise unseen. But on this count too, Winters' defenders have been negligent.

A third defect, which one observes in both sympathetic and unsympathetic accounts of Winters' criticism, is the attempt to assess too much of his work. Not only are his principles enunciated and his poetry criticism surveyed, but his critiques of novelists are also taken up, together with his evaluation of other literary genres, or his frequent controversies with other critics. This failure to limit one's scope of attention results in oversimplification and even the distortion of Winters' ideas.

The particular goals of this present essay should therefore be apparent. Besides adopting a more objective approach to Winters' work than his detractors have taken, I shall try to make up for the few inadequacies I have noted in the critical accounts written by his defenders. First of all, I will limit my attention chiefly to Primitivism and Decadence, Winters' fundamental work, in which appear the principles that have guided all his later criticism. But since my second objective is to trace the evolution of this book, I shall also have to devote some time to Winters' earlier essays and reviews, and to the principles which guided them. Finally, in providing examples of Winters' critical method in action, my third objective, I shall limit my selection of examples to Winters' critiques of lyric poetry. It was because of his

extensive work with this genre, as critic, poet, and teacher, that his principles of criticism first materialized; and it is in the criticism of poetry, quite understandably, that both critic and method show themselves to best advantage.

CHAPTER II

THE EARLY WRITINGS

Ivor Winters was born in Chicago, in mid-October of 1900. Before he was five, his family moved to Seattle and later to southern California, where Winters spent his boyhood years. Toward the end of World War I, he again moved with his family back to the midwest and began his college career at the University of Chicago, a career which terminated temporarily when Winters contracted tuberculosis a year later. He convalesced for three years in Santa Fe, and remained there for two more years teaching elementary and secondary school classes in a school for the children of the workers in the coal camps south of the city. His consuming interest in lyric poetry must surely have been maturing during these years, for he published his first book of verse, The Immobile Wind,¹ in 1921, and wrote his first critical reviews for Poetry in 1922, even before he resumed his education.

In 1923, Winters matriculated at the University of Colorado, where after three years he received the Master of Arts degree in Romance languages. For the next two years, Winters taught Spanish and French at the University of Idaho, during which time he married Janet Lewis, an aspiring novelist whom he

¹Ivor Winters, The Immobile Wind (Evanston, Illinois: Monroe Wheeler, 1921). The book was thirty-two pages long, stapled rather than bound. It is not readily available.

had met through mutual acquaintances in the Poetry Club at the University of Chicago. He returned to California in 1927 where he began teaching and studying for the doctoral degree at Stanford University, beginning an association with that institution which has lasted to the present.

Of these years it is the period from 1920 to 1929 that primarily interest the student of Winters' critical theory. These are the years during which, "in a relatively desultory manner,"² he began the close study of the French and English lyric which culminated in Primitivism and Decadence.

We have little record of Winters' thought during the first half of the twenties. He published about half a dozen critical reviews in Poetry; but these essays, though they indicate a general familiarity with the poetic craft and a somewhat discerning taste, fail to reveal any consistent critical method and seldom offer very illuminating comments on the poetry under discussion. Winters simply indicated whether he liked the poetry, and then attempted to define the qualities which recommended it. The attempts do not thrust home. "Mr. Robinson's greatness," we are told, for example, "lies not in the people of whom he has written, but in the perfect balance, the infallible precision, with which he has stated their cases."³ Winters' abiding concern for precision and balance is evident here, but he does not say exactly what is precise. He praises a certain unity between Robinson's images and his use of

²Yvor Winters, Primitivism and Decadence (New York: Arrow, 1937), p. xi.

³Yvor Winters, "A Cool Master," Poetry, XIX (February, 1922), p. 281.

meter and rhyme, but ascribes the unity vaguely to a "basic philosophy and emotional viewpoint."⁴

Later that same year, in a review of William Carlos Williams' Sour Grapes, Winters speaks with a more definite critical vocabulary. Williams concerns himself with certain phases of American life. . . and up to date is not the dupe of his material. That is, he knows that stenographic reports of snowbirds or hawthorns do not suffice. . . . He looks for relations, and the sharpest way to get them down.⁵

The relations the poet looks for are those existing between image and "meaning."⁶ This is a more definite articulation of the need for poetic balance enunciated earlier. Winters has assigned names to the two elements whose relationship must be kept in proper focus; but unfortunately, the terms are not further clarified, and the grounds for their "sharp" relationship are not discussed.

Although Winters did not formulate a critical method during these years prior to 1925, his vast reading of verse made him acutely aware of what happens in a poem, and acquainted him with the new techniques and artistic goals of the contemporary poets. In his Master's thesis for the University of Colorado, he proposed, ambitiously enough, to provide a "complete analysis of the mechanical structure of the lyric," in order to "extend the range of a poet's technique and to provide the critic with a critical viewpoint fruitful

⁴Ibid., p. 284.

⁵Ivor Winters, "Carlos Williams' New Book," Poetry, XI (June, 1922), p. 218.

⁶Ibid.

of accurate judgments."⁷ The thesis does not wholly fulfill its promise. It concentrates almost entirely on poetic technique, and devotes but little attention to critical evaluation or to the relationship between technique and evaluation.

The opening section of the work, whose thirty pages constitute a third of the thesis' total length, describes minutely the "Mechanics of the Poetic Image." The bewildering detail with which images and "anti-images," sense and thought perceptions, are described, and the exhaustive analysis of the different ways in which they can be joined, seems more a display of scholarly virtuosity than a practical aid to poetic understanding or criticism. Some of the image types described are so subtly distinguished one from the other as to have only one or two extant examples in the whole of English literature.⁸ In such instances, we are left not with a useful definition of a new rhetorical device, but with only an abstract, and more or less inadequate, description of a single poet's use of metaphor or meter. The ultimate value of these analyses, however, need not concern us here; for it is an issue Winters dropped,

⁷Yvor Winters, "A Method of Critical Approach to Works of Literature, Based Primarily on a Study of the Lyric in French and English" (unpublished Master's thesis, Dept. of Romance Languages, University of Colorado, 1925), p. 1.

⁸One type of image, for example, is "composed of two physical facts, each fused with the sound, and, while neither fused with each other nor commenting upon each other, altering and defining each other's value quite definitely, simply by the juxtaposition of their physical qualities or by the action of the one upon the other: 'The maidens taste/ and stray impassioned in the littering leaves.'" (Ibid., p. 22.).

after two subsequent unpublished revisions, "since their interest appears to be one purely of rhetoric."⁹

The second part of the thesis, "Notes on the Mechanics of the Mood in Lyrical Composition," together with the "Specimens of Analysis," comprises a much more important part of Winters' development as a critic, and displays a more profitable use of his analytic skills. This is the first draft of the analysis of structural methods, an analysis which will pass through two revisions to play a very important role in Primitivism and Decadence.

Winters distinguishes five methods of lyric composition: the "Scattered," which develops a single idea through repetition or rephrasing; the "Logical," in which image and idea proceed according to an inevitable, reasoned development; the "Psychological," in which the connections between the parts of the poem are "lowered" so that the ordered movement is similar to a dream or reverie; the "Double Mood," in which two states of mind are played against each other within a single structural method; the "Double Method," in which two methods are used alternately.¹⁰ A detailed consideration of these methods will be more fittingly undertaken when the whole analysis is treated in its final revision as an integral part of Winters' fully developed critical method. The important thing to observe here is that Winters presents these structural methods without considering their relative value. No single method, nor any poem used to illustrate a method, receives a trace of adverse criticism. With

⁹Winters, Primitivism, p. xii.

¹⁰Winters, "A Method of Critical Approach," pp. 31-39.

equal enthusiasm Winters praises the traditional techniques of Thomas Nashe or John Donne, and also the dream-like melancholy of an experimentalist like Rimbaud, or the chaos and irony of Gautier, LaForgue, and Eliot, who habitually alternate the logical with the psychological method in a dialogue of self-mockery. We will find subsequent revisions of this essay greatly altered in this respect.

Since Winters does not pause to evaluate the poetic structures he describes, the analysis does not offer a great deal of help to the evaluative critic. Winters, as a matter of fact, devotes only five pages to critical evaluation, and does not say anything incisive on any of them. "In judging the value of a lyric it is necessary, first of all, to judge of its originality, and if it be not original . . . the degree to which it improves upon or alters the original."¹¹ Along with originality, the good lyric should be free from "verbosity and cliché;" its rhythm should have an "emotional rise and fall;" images and anti-images must be handled "successfully," and the image value should be "definite, and not of a facile nature."¹² Consideration of these criteria enables us to make an evaluative judgment, since "as a poem approaches perfection in all these areas . . . some poems will strike us more than others. . . . These have exhausted more the possibilities of the medium."¹³

These criteria of artistic value are more fully developed in a review of Marianne Moore's Observations which Winters wrote for Poetry the same year he

¹¹Ibid., p. 60.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 61.

completed his thesis. The poem which most fully exhausts the possibilities of the medium is one "which contains the greatest possible imagic and symbolic intensity."¹⁴ The successful poem is one whose images, sense perceptions, and sound perceptions "set into harmonious action and reaction the widest possible range of life-connotations in the smallest possible space--it is purely a matter of specific density."¹⁵

Statements like these, and others from the same review, especially when read together with certain "Miscellaneous Notes" which constitute the last section of his thesis, reveal finally a certain consistency in Winters' critical orientations during these early years. He prefers poetry characterized by the particular, the concrete; "the metaphysical can attain imagic existence and hence the greatest possible intensity only when expressed in terms of the physical."¹⁶ The poet, "preoccupied with his object,"¹⁷ should strive to present in the poem his "fusion . . . with his material,"¹⁸ in a style "not clouded by unessentials, . . . a speech without idiom . . . without mannerism."¹⁹ Winters, in other words, though he is able to analyze

¹⁴Ivor Winters, "Holiday and Day of Wrath: Review of Marianne Moore's Observations," Poetry, XXVI (April, 1925), p. 40.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁷Winters, "A Method of Critical Approach," p. 84.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 84.

After completing his graduate studies at the University of Colorado, Winters continued writing critical reviews for the literary magazines, but devoted most of his attention to his own verse. He was, as he would describe himself later, "a minor disciple of William Carlos Williams, doing little impressionistic notes on landscapes."²² By 1927, however, when he resumed studies, this time at Stanford, Winters was beginning to see serious limitations in the imagist techniques he was using. When he had first learned them from Ezra Pound, they had "seemed new;" but now Winters realized that they were theories of poetry which merely restated "principles which had been flourishing for over two centuries: the corrosive principles of eighteenth century sentimental-romanticism [sic] and associationism."²³ He had exhausted such principles; they offered no further room for poetic development. Imagic intensity was turning into madness. "Winters' free verse was becoming

²²Yvor Winters, "The Poet and the University: A Reply," Poetry, LXXV (December, 1949), p. 176.

²³Winters, Function, p. 12.

irrational to the point of hysteria."²⁴

Winters turned now to poetic forms that were more traditional, "particularly the sonnet, the heroic couplet, and the iambic line of three or four feet."²⁵ The demands of such forms became for him a means of disciplining and controlling experience, of confronting the temptation to hysteria without

²⁴Stanford, Sequoia, VI, p. 22. The following is an example of Winters' later free verse, to illustrate what Stanford means. The title is "See Los Angeles First." It appeared in Transition, IX (December, 1927), p. 130, and in Winters' small collection, The Proof, "Songs of Today Series, 1930," (New York: Coward-McCann, 1930), pp. 17-18.

Rosyfingered cocklehouses
burst from burning
rock red plaster hollyhocks
spit crackling mamas
tickled pink

on tiptoe
yawn into the dewy dawn
dark wettish plushy lawn

MIZPAH

The Temple glittergates
Ask God He Knows

o pyramid of Sunoil Dates

The mockingbird is singing
eighty languages a minute
swinging by his toes from
highpower

jagged geometric currents
roar along aluminum gashed
out of gulleys rending
night to one blind

halo for your cold

concrete Egyptian nakedness
O watertower of cleanliness

²⁵Stanford, Sequoia, VI, p. 22.

giving in to it. Furthermore, the use of abstract statement, so common in traditional forms, enabled him to handle more serious and complex material.

These were discoveries Winters made as a poet trying to come to terms with human experience in the modern world of the late Twenties. But such discoveries also affected his reading, teaching, and criticism of literature. A lengthy essay which Winters published in the American Caravan Yearbook for 1929, clumsily titled "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit Through the Poetry, Mainly French and American, Since Poe and Baudelaire," reveals this new critical mentality.

Winters no longer believes that it is enough for a poet to be intensely "preoccupied with his object." This emotional and sensory relationship with the world must be brought under the guidance and control of a mature, rational understanding of that world. When such an act of understanding is present in the poem, the process of composition can be described as an act of "spiritual discipline,"²⁶ a "moral assertion,"²⁷ a "subtle and powerful manifestation of the spirit."²⁸ Rather than yielding to revulsion or despair in the face of the chaos of modern times, the artist reduces this chaos to order, "organizes it into a dynamic attitude or state of mind,"²⁹ proving that he is "morally

²⁶Winters, "Extension and Reintegration," p. 361.

²⁷Ibid., p. 363.

²⁸Ibid., p. 367.

²⁹Ibid., p. 362.

superior to the facts of life."³⁰ The creation of a poem is a "moral evaluation,"³¹ and a triumph of spirit over matter--a triumph available only to the poet who is willing to struggle toward understanding, which struggle will be evident in the discipline and spiritual control of the poetic line.

Such a "manifestation of the spirit" cannot be attained with every technique of composition. In the second section of the American Caravan essay, Winters again analyses the "Mechanics of the Mood;" but what in the Master's thesis had been a "sympathetic elucidation of the methods of the Experimental poets" was now "an elucidation of their short-comings."³² Some of these methods, Winters asserts, betray a spiritually weak attitude of mind on the part of the poet:

The psychological or dream method is definitely subversive unless modified by a strong intellectual substructure as well as a rigid technique. . . . The alternation of mood as a consistent system is a trifle childish . . . [and] tends to an interpretation of the universe in black and white and without perspective.³³

Winters devotes special attention to the weaknesses he finds in the "naive" principles of "the imagist program." Pound's imagist theory was "concerned with nothing more than a few elementary principles of style."³⁴

³⁰Ibid., p. 363.

³¹Ibid.

³²Winters, Primitivism, p. xi.

³³Winters, "Extension and Reintegration," pp. 403, 392.

³⁴Ibid., p. 397.

It produced poems that dealt "with a simple concrete experience that has no ulterior significance--that is, its meaning is purely literal, regardless of the amount of related but not obviously included experience that may be awakened by it."³⁵ Great poetry, however, should not merely intensify a concrete experience, but should "organize experience into something finer, more accurate than it was."³⁶ It should offer "that most important of artistic phenomena, the relation of the balanced and unified individual to the facts of existence."³⁷

During this same year, 1929, Winters began publishing his short-lived (four issues) quarterly, the Gyroscope, in which he planned to exemplify the literary ideals described in the American Caravan essay. Its editorial policy declared open warfare against "all forms of spiritual extroversion . . . and emotional expansionism," and promised to present the works of young poets and prose writers whose "stylistic precision" manifested their "spiritual precision and strength."³⁸

In a short essay entitled "Notes on Contemporary Criticism," published in the third issue of the Gyroscope, Winters described the philosophy of life

³⁵Ibid., p. 398.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. 401.

³⁸Ivor Winters, Janet Lewis, and Howard Baker, An Untitled Statement by the Editors of the Gyroscope, Gyroscope, I (May, 1929), p. 19.

grounding his critical principles. The Greeks, he tells us, and especially Aristotle, have shown that man can rationally determine Good and Evil and rule his life accordingly. "Good rests in the power of rational selection in action." But to gratify desires which one knows to be unjust is to "cease to live as a man." To live by emotion is to live mechanistically.³⁹ Though he cannot yet explain precisely what he means, Winters believes that there is a direct correlation between a poet's submission as an artist to a traditional technique of composition and his submission as a man to a rationally determined standard of moral conduct. For not only human reason, but also "the forms of art are . . . satisfactory means of evaluating the phenomena of life."⁴⁰

Further on in these same "Notes," Winters stresses that he does not wish to be considered a disciple of the neo-humanistic movement sired by Irving Babbitt. Although he would later admit a "general indebtedness" to Babbitt,⁴¹ the indebtedness reveals itself only in Winters' concern for a "controlled and harmonious life,"⁴² and in his distrust of Romantic philosophy and critical theory, two convictions which may well be due to Babbitt's influence. But with respect to literary criticism, Winters and Babbitt adopted fundamentally different viewpoints. Winters' primary interest was literature and the ability

³⁹Ivor Winters, "Notes on Contemporary Criticism," Gyroscope, I (November, 1929), pp. 26-28.

⁴⁰Winters, Lewis, and Baker, Gyroscope, I, p. 19.

⁴¹Winters, Primitivism, p. xii.

⁴²Winters, "Notes," Gyroscope, I, No. 3, p. 27.

of literary form to clarify and evaluate human experience. Babbitt was primarily a humanist, concerned with literature secondarily as propaganda for the furthering of proper ethical principles. He was not particularly sensitive to fine poetry. His ventures into practical literary criticism were heavy-handed, literal-minded attacks on a poet's ideology, with little reference to the poet's artistic technique.⁴³ Babbitt, in other words, judged a man's poetry by his ethics. Winters would "prefer to judge a man's ethics by his poetry."⁴⁴

And yet how should this judgment be made? How does the ethical imagination enter poetry? These questions do not receive satisfactory answers in either the American Caravan essay or the "Notes on Contemporary Criticism." The new ideas of spiritual discipline and moral evaluation are tossed about imprecisely; they receive repetition instead of development, and do not really provide a basis for principles of practical criticism. These essays are transitional and possess a muddled mixture of past and present ideas. Winters himself has described "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit" as redundant and full of error.⁴⁵

Both essays, however, together with the Master's thesis, retain historical

⁴³Cf. Keith F. McKean, "Irving Babbitt," The Moral Measure of Literature (Denver: Swallow, 1961), pp. 49-69, especially pp. 60-69. Cf. also Winters, The Function of Criticism, p. 12: "Babbitt had a way of saying stupid things about great poems. . . . /He/ all too often misunderstood fine poems."

⁴⁴Winters, "Notes," Gyroscope, I, No. 3, p. 28.

⁴⁵Winters, Primitivism, p. xii.

value as a part of the slow development of Winters' mature critical theory. They indicate that his principles of moral criticism evolved from a careful, critical analysis of the poetic structure and from his own conscientious work as a poet. Winters did not approach literature as a dogmatic moralist who judged poems on the basis of their correct moral platitudes. He was a practical critic who gradually discovered that poetic form is an inevitable manifestation of the human spirit, and that poetic excellence is directly dependent upon the excellence and maturity of that human spirit we call the Poet.

CHAPTER III

THE CRITICAL THEORY: POETRY AS EVALUATION

From 1929 to 1934, Ivor Winters continued teaching English at Stanford University, and at the same time worked toward his doctoral degree. This latter endeavor demanded, of course, that he write an acceptable dissertation; while the teaching commitment made it necessary for him to clarify in his own mind the new literary principles he had been formulating for the past several years. In 1933 Mr. Winters completed the work which fulfilled both exigencies. In "A Study of the Post-Romantic Reaction in Lyrical Verse," he clarified the literary ideals of the Gyroscope and the American Caravan essay and outlined a fully developed theory of poetic composition and criticism.

In the foreword to his dissertation, Winters defines the post-Romantic Experimentalists as poets who were making a "conscious effort to correct the laxity and shallowness of Romantic style and sentiment, without any clear understanding of the defects in Romantic thought which gave rise to that style and sentiment."¹ Winters, however, tried to be more attentive to these defects. In the dissertation itself he does not pause to explicate them, stating simply that "my objections to romantic philosophy are generally of a

¹Ivor Winters, "A Study of the Post-Romantic Reaction in Lyrical Verse and Incidentally in Certain other Forms" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of English, Stanford University, 1933), p. 4.

sort made familiar in recent years by such critics as Irving Babbitt, Ramon Fernandez, T. S. Eliot, Julien Benda, and Allen Tate."² In the foreword to In Defense of Reason, however, Winters explains more fully these defects of Romanticism. We might profitably consider them here.

The defects in Romantic thought, as Winters saw them, were serious ones. Based largely on the philosophy of the German transcendentalists, the Romantic view of life regarded man as a self-sufficient creative force, according to whose impulses the transcendental world-soul expresses itself externally in a material, pantheistic universe. By reflecting on itself as objectified in the changing face of that universe, this world-soul comes to understand itself. In the same way, the human spirit understands itself through communion with the natural universe and achieves selfhood by living according to natural desires. As a result of such a theory, we find, quite understandably, an exaggerated reverence for the noble savage, the cult of primitivism, and a morality based on sensibility. Implicit in these Romantic preoccupations is the belief "that if man will rely upon his impulses, he will achieve the good life."³

In the theory of literature arising from this view of man and the universe, a poem is simply the expression of the poet's powerful feelings, and "is valuable because it enables us to share the experience of a man who

²Ibid., p. 10.

³Winters, In Defense, p. 8.

has let himself go, who has expressed his feelings, without hindrance, as he has found them at a given moment."⁴ Analysis and evaluation of the poem can be nothing more than the elucidation of its adequacy to the poet's state of mind about something. Thus M. H. Abrams finds "the persistent recourse to the poet to explain the nature and criteria of poetry," to be one of the unifying elements among all the nineteenth century Romanticisms.⁵ Romanticism is a form of subjectivism. In the hands of its best artists, the theory can lead to works of lasting value; but in the hands of weaker men it leads to puerile optimism, sentimentalism, and moral degeneracy. Unfortunately, the Romantic theory itself may not castigate these failings. This would bring an objective norm upon the scene, a criterion outside the poet, thus denying the fundamental tenets of the theory.

In opposition to the Romantic view of life, Winters offers his own philosophy, based on "ethical prejudices" which, as we have already discovered from his essay in the Gyroscope, "are of an Aristotelian-Christian variety."⁶ He proposes that the only way to escape the deficiencies of Romanticism would be to assert the existence of objective norms according to which human life must be lived. His position is that of the "absolutist," who "believes in the

⁴Ibid., p. 8.

⁵Meyer Howard Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Oxford, 1953), p. 7.

⁶Winters, "The Post-Romantic Reaction," p. 10.

existence of absolute truths and values."⁷ He does not, however, believe "that he personally has free access to these absolutes and that his own judgments are final; but he does believe that such absolutes exist and that it is the duty of every man and of every society to endeavor as far as may be to approximate them."⁸

Since truth and goodness are objective realities, life is the process of understanding them and of making choices according to one's understanding. This sort of absolutism, Winters admits,

implies a theistic position. . . . I see no way to escape this conclusion. I merely wish to point out that my critical and moral notions are derived from the observation of literature and life, and that my theism is derived from my critical and moral notions. I did not proceed from the opposite direction.⁹

The sentences just quoted conclude Winters' foreword to In Defense of Reason. They reaffirm a point made in the preceding chapter:¹⁰ that Winters is first a poetry critic, and only secondarily a moralist. It was the defects in Romantic style that led him to discover the defects in Romantic thought; and similarly, his own search for a better style of composition led him to formulate his "absolutism," and ultimately, his "theism." Even though, in the interests of clarity, and following Winters' own lead, I have discussed his view of life first, we may not forget that Winters' work proceeded

⁷Winters, In Defense, p. 10.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁰Above, p. 26.

inductively: from rhetorical analysis, to poetic theory, to a philosophy of life.

Now that we have secured a footing in Mr. Winters' universe, we can more profitably scrutinize his poetics. The first chapter of the dissertation, "The Morality of Poetry," presents the theory itself; the following four chapters concern the practical use of the theory and its critical implications. With some minor alterations and rearrangements, these chapters constituted the whole of the 1937 edition of Primitivism and Decadence.¹¹ Winters has often restated his poetical principles at the outset of his more important critical essays; so I have drawn on some of these capsule statements in the following presentation, since they occasionally clarify what Winters is saying in "The Morality of Poetry."

In the most elementary terms, Winters' fundamental assertion, and I think it a highly defensible one, is that a poem "offers us new perceptions . . . of human experience."¹² The implication behind these words is that the poet has had a personal understanding of, or insight into, an area of human experience, as well as the creative intelligence and patience required to express the insight in the poetic medium. But just as any insight, whether

¹¹Throughout this discussion I will refer to the reprint of Primitivism and Decadence appearing in In Defense of Reason, pp. 15-150. This is the more readily available text. The only exceptions will be the occasional references to the short introduction to the 1937 edition, pp. xi-xiii, which was not reprinted in the later book.

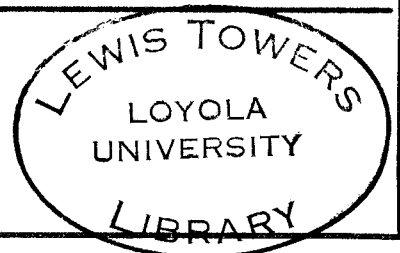
¹²Winters, In Defense, p. 17.

scientific or artistic, is understood only in the process of conceptualization or objectification, so the poet's insight is not perfectly grasped at once, only to be copied down on paper. The process of shaping or expressing the "new perception" in the form of a poem is itself the poet's act of understanding human experience; and that perception is not fully grasped until the expression is complete: "The very exigencies of the medium as the poet employs it in the act of perception should force him to the discovery of values he never would have found without the convening of all the conditions of that particular act."¹³ (Italics mine.)

A poem then is the formulation of a "rational . . . statement in words about a human experience."¹⁴ At first glance, this is a painfully bare and imperceptive description of the creative process, one which fails to distinguish poetry from a psychological or ethical treatise. The awesome reality of man's mortality, for example, might be expressed in a declarative sentence of no great length; or it might be expressed in several sentences, beginning "Because I could not stop for Death," as Emily Dickinson has done. If we call both utterances "statements," we have not said very much about the nature of the poem as distinct from an ordinary sentence. On the other hand, if you wish to call Thomas Hardy's short lyric, "New Year's Eve," a statement in words, you are nonetheless prevented from calling that statement wholly rational, unless you wish to adopt a theology of pessimistic fatalism, and to

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Winters, Function, pp. 161, 26.



assert that the only intelligibility in the universe is its absurdity. Not everyone is prepared to do this; Winters surely is not, although "New Year's Eve" is a poem he values highly. It should be at once evident, therefore, that Winters cannot mean "rational" and "statement" in their most ordinary sense. We shall have to come to some understanding of the words as Winters uses them.

Consider first the term "statement," a word Winters uses "in a very inclusive sense."¹⁵ Literary works as diverse as the Iliad, Macbeth, "To the Virgins to Make Much of Time," are all statements. That is, all three are composed of words which present some rationally apprehensible content. The same is true of a poem like Stevens' "Domination of Black," or Pound's A Draft of Thirty Cantos, even though in these works the order of the words and images is not always logical, the content not clearly paraphrasable. Poems, Winters means to say, are words about something. Insofar as poems tend to be about nothing, they fall short of perfection and become trivial or valueless.

Winters is careful to distinguish these poetic statements about human experience from scientific statements about the optic nerves or ethical principles about social justice. The poet does not present the simple factual content of the poem for its own sake; he is not concerned merely with paraphrasable ideas. He objectifies in the work of art his feeling--his total human response of intellect, will, and emotion--toward these facts or ideas he has experienced. The poet objectifies what it is like to experience humanly;

¹⁵Ibid., p. 26.

he offers a way of feeling about something.

This unique expression of the poet is possible because words, besides being able to denote rational meaning, also possess powers of connotation. Words have a feeling content, which together with meter, rhyme, and other mechanical devices of prosody, allow the poet to fashion a "new word," a total experience.

Such a word . . . is composed of an almost fluid complex . . . of relationships between words, a relationship involving rational content, cadences, rhymes, juxtaposition, literary and other connotations, inversions, and so on, almost indefinitely. These relations, it should be obvious, extend the poet's vocabulary incalculably. They partake of the fluidity and unpredictability of experience and so provide a means of treating experience with precision and freedom.¹⁶

Since there are two aspects to the completed poem--what it is about, and the poet's response to that "what"--we will discover the "rationality" of the poem in the proper balancing of these two aspects.

In each work there is a content which is rationally apprehensible, and each work endeavors to communicate the emotion which is appropriate to the rational apprehension of the subject. The work is thus a judgment, rational and emotional, of the experience--that is, a complete moral judgment insofar as the work is successful.¹⁷ (Italics mine.)

This evaluative relationship of the motive, or content of a poem, with its

¹⁶Winters, In Defense, p. 19.

¹⁷Winters, Function, p. 19. Winters uses "moral" here as the Christian philosopher understands the term: a moral judgment is one made with advertence to an absolutely obligating norm of living. The "norm" is the natural law, those principles, known by right reason, by which man achieves his perfection, or the fulness of humanity--natural beatitude, and ultimately the Beatific Vision. Winters has called Thomistic Christian philosophy "the most thorough and defensible moral and philosophical system that the world has known." (In Defense, p. 374.)

emotion, as embodied in the form of the poem, is itself the poet's perception, his insight, his poetic objectification of a human experience. When motive and emotion are balanced, the experience is rational; when emotion is inadequately motivated, the experience is sentimental, false, or even insane.¹⁸

Poetry then is moral evaluation.

The moral imagination "gets into poetry"¹⁹ by way of form. The search for the proper words, for their proper arrangement, for the proper meter, and for the necessary deviations from that meter--this is the shaping of the human response, the act of evaluation. It can be stated further that a poet's characteristic formal excellence is the reflection of his mature ability to evaluate experience, to understand it for what it is worth; and "it may have been an important means by which the poet arrived at a realization of spiritual control" in the first place.²⁰

Thus we see that the poet, in striving toward an ideal of poetic form at which he has arrived through the study of other poets, is actually striving to perfect a moral attitude toward that range of experience of which he is aware. Such moral attitudes are contagious. . . . The presence of Hardy and Arnold, let us say . . . should make it easier to write good poetry . . . by providing standards of sound feeling, to test the soundness of our own poems, /and/, since their range of experience is very wide, they should aid us, as we are able to enter and share their experience, to grow into regions that

¹⁸Cf. Jesuit theologian Robert W. Gleason: "The adult should be able to integrate his emotions into his personality, keeping them firmly under the control of reason and in contact with objective values." And again, "The emotions play an important role in man's life. Most mental diseases, for instance, are based upon an excess or a deviation of emotion." (To Live Is Christ /New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960/ pp. 69, 71.)

¹⁹Winters, Primitivism, p. xii.

²⁰Winters, In Defense, p. 21.

we had not previously mastered or perhaps even discovered.²¹

It would be a misunderstanding, however, to accuse Winters of naively adopting a dualistic creative process in which a poet first chooses his subject matter and then proceeds to treat it "morally," adding an emotional coloring of motivated emotion. Rather it is in one act of composition, in one search for form, that the poet both defines the content of his poem and discovers the just evaluation, creating in that single act the objectification of a human experience. We cannot separate form from content; it is the content which is formed. Even before the poet begins to write, content and form exist together in his first vague inspiration, waiting to be precisely set down.

The poet has, for example, a certain subject area: death, envy, the sight of Madrid, delirium, the taste of tobacco—anything in the vast complexus of human experience--and an "emotional response created by the original experience . . . immediate, provisional, and confused."²² In forming the experience, the poet "simultaneously" clarifies the emotion, because it is inseparable from the form which embodies it.²³ The shaping of the experience, the search for form, the evaluation of the experience--all are the same act. And so, formal defects are defects in moral evaluation. As Geoffrey Stone put it, "If the evaluation manifested in the verse is repugnant to reason and experience, the poetry has a serious defect, not only morally, but also

²¹Ibid., p. 23.

²²Ibid., p. 521.

²³Ibid., p. 464.

technically, for the poet has, so to speak, either failed to use certain chords he might have struck, or has struck them in an inept manner."²⁴

It will be helpful to examine two poems at this point to demonstrate concretely two different poets' evaluation of experience, and to indicate how formal elements can contribute to such an evaluation. For the sake of brevity and clarity, oversimplification will be inevitable. Consider first a poem we have referred to earlier: Thomas Hardy's "New Year's Eve."

"I have finished another year," said God,
 "In gray, green, white and brown;
 I have strewn the leaf upon the sod,
 Sealed up the worm within the clod,
 And let the last sun down."

"And what's the good of it?" I said,
 "What reasons made you call
 From formless void this earth we tread,
 When nine-and-ninety can be read
 Why nought should be at all?"

"Yea, Sire; why shaped you us, 'who in
 This tabernacle groan'--
 If ever a joy be found herein,
 Such joy no man had wished to win
 If he had never known!"

Then he: "My labors--logicless--
 You may explain; not I:
 Sense-sealed I have wrought, without a guess
 That I evolved a Consciousness
 To ask for reasons why."

"Strange that ephemeral creatures who
 By my own ordering are.
 Should see the shortness of my view,
 Use ethic tests I never knew,
 Or made provision for!"

²⁴Geoffrey Stone, "Poetry and Morals: a Defense of Both," American Review, IX (April, 1937), p. 67.

He sank to raptness as of yore,
And opening New Year's Day
Wove it by rote as theretofore,
And went on working evermore
In his unweeing way.

What is "New Year's Eve" about? What is the poet's central idea, and how does he handle it? He does not write simply about God, or about creation, or about lack of trust; he attempts to present the experience of hopeless, fatalistic pessimism. The value of the poem does not at all depend upon the objective grounds for such a religious conviction, but on the evaluation of that conviction. Is the experience of pessimism validly presented? Although the poem's evaluative attitude is hardly translatable in terms of percentages (nine-tenths despair, one-tenth defiance), I believe that the poet has his subject matter in perfect control; his "new perception" is valid, in proper focus.

To begin with, the poet does not claim comfort from his religious philosophy; nor does he try to avoid the bitter consequences of his position by seizing the upper hand in his short dialogue with God. Having conceived a God of loveless, unconcerned, and total power, he evokes that God consistently and compellingly in the cold haughtiness of the first, fourth, and fifth stanzas. The terse phrases in lines sixteen and seventeen are brutally crushing, and reminiscent of the smug "gray, green, white and brown" of the second line. The click of the unnerving, heavily emphasized rhyme scheme further adds to God's aloofness; so does the Creator's reference to man as a mere "Consciousness," an "ephemeral creature."

The second and third stanzas are a peculiarly subtle combination of the protagonist's bitter anger at the injustice of the situation, and his calm, reasoned self-control in the face of his inability to alter the situation.

The bitterness is evident in the triple repetition of his question (lines five, six, eleven), in the almost sarcastic hyperbole of lines nine and ten, in the spiteful quoting of Scripture in God's face (lines eleven and twelve), and in the terrible, but seemingly irrefutable, logic of the argument in lines thirteen to fifteen. The self-control, on the other hand, is conveyed in the formal precision of the lines. Although the placing of the caesura, the phrase lengths, the basic iambic foot are all greatly varied throughout these two stanzas, the meter holds together and the stanzas remain clear units. The diction is straight-forward, matter-of-fact; and, with the exception of line eight, there are no wasted words or vague connotations.

The poet's attitude in the final stanza adequately concludes the poem. Here is neither weak submission nor unmotivated defiance, but a controlled acceptance of the situation as he sees it, with the hint of an angry, but suppressed (as it ought to be in the face of such a God) retort in the between-the-teeth grind of "rote" and "his unweeing way."

William Ernest Henley's "Invictus" offers an interesting contrast to Hardy's poem. Both works present their author's basic religious conviction, but Henley's is one of hearty optimism.

Out of the night that covers me,
 Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
 I thank whatever gods may be
 For my unconquerable soul

In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
 Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

The rousing vigor of these lines stems principally from the poet's heavy diction and flamboyant rhetoric (e.g., lines two, five, eight, twelve, fifteen, and sixteen). After several readings, however, the heroic courage the lines may have at first conveyed by the novelty of their noise dwindles to bombast. The ideas in the poem are too vague and confused to hold the rhetorical devices together; there is really nothing underneath all the fury.

The poet, for example, shouts his firm defiance with the words "clutch" and "bludgeonings"; but the shout is a bit silly against things as inadequately designated as "chance" and "circumstance." "The fell clutch of circumstance" evokes nothing more frightening than harsh consonants, yet the poet is proud at not having "winced nor cried." Bravery remains spineless unless we know what one is brave in the face of. "Wrath and tears," "the horror of the shade," the "menace of the years," are not difficult to face; they are hollow, undeveloped references. The poet does not understand the struggle he faces; his courage is unmotivated and unconvincing.

The place of the "gods" in the poem is sadly ambiguous. In the first stanza, the poet professes to believe in his origin from some sort of fate or divinity, though he is not sure about that divinity's power or significance. By the last stanza, however, having done little more than stamp his foot about the matter, he convinces himself that he alone is the captain and

master of his existence. Now poetry can be written about the religious experience of the believer, the atheist, or the skeptic, but not about all three at the same time. Had Henley made up his mind, his poem might have made more sense, and its feeling have been more explicable.

"New Year's Eve," then, is a successful poem. The experience is balanced, in focus. "Invictus," however, lays claim to heroism in the face of inadequately defined perils and draws spiritual security from what is at best an ambiguous relationship with a supreme deity. The poet deceives himself; the experience is not fully human. The poem is out of focus, and might be termed "immoral."

But a qualification is in order. A poet's failure to adjust emotion (or form) to subject matter will not always be an evaluation as seriously inadequate as Henley's in "Invictus." Very often formal imperfections are slight matter: a poorly chosen word, the use of a cliché, or an occasional mishandling of meter. There are few works over which some critic or other could not quibble; but surely none of them would argue that a small flaw vitiates the whole.

Again, perhaps the experience evaluated is one that is morally indifferent--the human response to a rural landscape, for example. The resulting poem might be thought sentimental by some, or childish, or obscurely melancholy. The judgment of the critic may depend heavily on taste, depending on his antecedent bias in the matter of rural landscapes. There should be, however, no arbitrary evaluative bias in more serious matters. Things like love, death and immortality, God, human happiness, moral choice--these are not indifferent matters, and the poet who wishes to deal with them is limited

by the very nature of his chosen subject; just as the painter who wishes to work with yellow and mauve and purple is limited in his arrangement of the colors by their intrinsic values, and the musician writing in D major must be very careful about inserting chords in D sharp minor. In dealing with subjects such as these, no haphazard choice of meter or image will be sufficient.

Coming to understand and give artistic form and evaluation to such experiences will be a difficult matter; yet the resulting poem, if it is successful, will be much more valuable than the simple nature idyll. Such poems have great power over us because they embody a human experience that is both important and also difficult to understand without the poet's insight. I would not want to call Shakespeare a didactic poet, but I think there is much truth in the statement that we learn more about the evil of murderous ambition from Macbeth than we do from a textbook in moral theology.

And how, one may wonder, can Shakespeare evaluate these actions truly except from the position of a moralist? To evaluate a particular sin, one must understand the nature of sin; and to fix in language the feeling, detailed and total, appropriate to the action portrayed, one must have a profound understanding not only of language, for language cannot be understood without reference to that which it represents, not only of the characters depicted, but of one's own feelings as well; and such understanding will not be cultivated very far without a real grasp of theoretic morality.²⁵

If a poet, therefore, evaluates human experience, what is the role of the critic? In an introductory chapter to The Anatomy of Nonsense, Winters has stated explicitly the five steps of the critical process. The first three of these are not unusual; most thorough poetry explications would follow them.

²⁵Winters, In Defense, p. 516.

The first step demands an investigation of "such historical or biographical knowledge as may be necessary in order to understand the mind and method of the writer." The second consists in an analysis of his literary theories, insofar as this helps us "understand and evaluate what he is doing." The third step is a paraphrase of the poem, and a "rational critique" of the paraphraseable content. That is, Winters stresses that we know not only what is said, but how important the ideas may be.²⁶

The final two steps in the critical process are the distinctive points of Winters' method. The fourth demands a "rational critique of the feeling motivated--that is, of the details of style, as seen in language and technique." Depending on how thoroughly this and the three prior investigations are carried out, the critic can judge, in the fifth step the poet's "own final and unique judgment of his matter."²⁷

To see more clearly what is involved in these last two parts of the critical process, we must return to Primitivism and Decadence, where Mr. Winters demonstrates in detail the moral implications of poetic form. I will present his analyses of "language and technique" in the following chapter.

But in passing on to examine Mr. Winters' more explicit critical method, we must be careful not to suppose that his theory of poetry and the view of life it implies have been left behind. Winters' highly-praised close analyses and perceptive interpretations of poems are actually his poetic

²⁶Ibid., p. 372.

²⁷Ibid.

theory and philosophy of life at work in the concrete. As he himself warns at the end of the first chapter of his dissertation, the transition from theory to critical method "translates my discussion wholly out of the terms of general morality and into the terms of poetic technique, but I trust that the reader will keep in mind that I have merely made a translation and not a change of subject."²⁸

²⁸Winters, "The Post-Romantic Reaction, p. 39.

CHAPTER IV

THE CRITICAL METHOD: FORM AS EVALUATION

The remaining four chapters of Primitivism and Decadence are titled: "The Experimental School in American Thought,"¹ "Poetic Convention," "Primitivism and Decadence," "The Influence of Meter on Poetic Convention." There is not space to deal thoroughly with each chapter, so I shall limit myself to those parts of each one which are most central to Mr. Winters' critical procedure. These I will present in an order slightly altered from their presentation in the book, an order which seems to me more systematic. I shall begin with "poetic convention," and then consider the two different kinds of convention and the ways in which meter and structural methods establish convention.

By the term "convention" Winters does not wish to designate a literary technique, such as the pastoral convention; nor does he have in mind the overtones of banality and artificiality often suggested by this word, as in a conventional chord pattern, or conventional rules of conduct. He uses the word to name something else: a concept he considers "fundamental to any discussion of poetry," but an elusive concept, "a quality, and not an objectively demonstrable entity."²

¹Subtitled, "An Analytical Survey of Its Structural Methods." This is the final revision of the analysis originally called "The Mechanics of the Mood."

²Winters, In Defense, p. 75.

The evidence for this quality is the fact that poems often do not seem to be "all poetry," as Coleridge put it.³ There are moments when the work seems to rise to a brilliant pitch; but surrounding these moments, leading up to them and perhaps away from them, are lines less intense, not characterized by important thought or perceptions, providing little else than necessary information. Nonetheless, if one concentrates on the brilliant lines in isolation, their brilliance either diminishes considerably or appears artificial. The lesser lines, however, when taken alone, either disintegrate into prose statements, or possess a trace of lingering emotion, due perhaps to metrical variations or diction, which is out of character with the meaning of the lines. Obviously the two sorts of passages need each other. Despite the difference of intensity, the lines have something in common, "something essentially poetic [which] suffuses the entire structure." That "something" is convention.⁴

Convention is not something obvious and handy, like the meter or structural method of the poem (although both play an important part in establishing a convention, as we shall see later on). Convention is nothing you can designate explicitly in the poem. It is that which underlies all the poetic materials and makes those materials significant, poetically "right." Winters defines it best as the "basic assumption of feeling in any poem, from which

³In the Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIV.

⁴Winters, In Defense, p. 79.

all departures acquire their significance."⁵ He illustrates the concept by analyzing a poem by William Carlos Williams.

By the road to the contagious hospital
 under the surge of the blue
 mottled clouds driven from the
 northeast--a cold wind. Beyond, the
 waste of broad muddy fields
 brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
 the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
 purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
 stuff of bushes and small trees
 with dead, brown leaves under them
 leafless vines--

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
 dazed spring approaches--

They enter the new world naked,
 cold, uncertain of all
 save that they enter. All about them
 the cold familiar wind--

Now the grass, tomorrow
 the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined--
 It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
 entrance--Still, the profound change
 has come upon them: rooted they
 grip down and begin to awaken.

Winters comments:

Consider the opening lines of the poem by Williams. The nervous meter, words like "surge," "driven," "mottled," suggest an intensity of feeling not justified by the actual perceptions in the

⁵Ibid., p. 81.

lines. . . . More feeling is assumed, or claimed, by the poet . . . than is justified by his language.⁶

We can see what Winters means if we imagine, for a moment, that the poem ended with its thirteenth line. The description would not be less exquisite or precise, the language less captivating, the physical details of the scene less complete. But the expectancy, the "intensity of feeling," would be frustrated, unexplained, unresolved. Another poem by Williams, "On Gay Wall-paper," though composed totally of descriptive elements artfully arranged, without comment beyond their own prettiness and pleasing order, is nevertheless a perfectly whole poem. These first thirteen lines, however, are not a whole. They attain significance only in relation to the next eight lines where the "greatest power" of the poem is reached.⁷ Their tempo, their feeling, the information they convey

are all necessary to, in fact are a part of, the effect of the eight central lines. With the lines beginning "lifeless in appearance" the intensity claimed by the opening is at once justified and increased by the quality of the perception: the initial assumption prepares one for the exact increase which occurs, and the preparation is necessary.⁸

Whether one agrees in every detail with Winters' description of the poem's power is unimportant. The point he makes (and it stands regardless of the fact that he oversimplified his analysis "for the sake of momentary

⁶Ibid., p. 79.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., p. 80.

convenience"⁹), is this: there is a norm of feeling in relationship to which we can consider some lines of the poem quiet, some intense; some not self-sufficient in the motivation of their feeling, others perfectly balanced. This standard of feeling is what makes the poem a unit. It is the guiding norm, a reflection of the poet's characteristic emotional attitudes and moral perceptivity, against which every decision in the composition of the poem was made.

Winters distinguishes two kinds of conventions, the traditional and the experimental. Poets writing in a traditional convention compose verse according to an ideal norm of human feeling which the great poetry of the past has clarified and expanded for them. The traditional poet's conformity to the norm cannot be precisely demonstrated. It is surely not a matter of imitating stylistic mannerisms of the past. But even though we cannot "lay a finger precisely on the norm, . . . we can recognize the more or less normal."¹⁰

Again, specific examples will be helpful. Greville, Jonson, Herbert, Bridges, Robinson--these are a few of the poets who Winters would claim work according to the same norm of feeling, the same moral wisdom, although no single one of them could claim to have originated the convention. The "Miltonic" convention, however, is an experimental norm of feeling, a conscious departure from the traditional, recognizable in the work of Milton and also in some of Thomson and Wordsworth. In the same way, a "Hopkinsian" convention easily identifies the work of its creator and of his imitators.

⁹Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 82.

Winters sums up the particular qualities of traditional verse as follows:

Traditional poetry possesses these closely related qualities: (1) equivalence of motivation and feeling; (2) a form that permits a wide range of feeling; (3) a conventional norm of feeling which makes for a minimum of "strain"; (4) a form and a convention which permit the extraction from every unit of language of its maximum content, both of connotation and of denotation.¹¹

Poets who do not understand the norms of feeling guiding the traditionalists, but who imitate them nonetheless by using their external traits of style and diction as a kind of check-list of good poetic mannerisms, are termed pseudo-traditional poets. These are men impressed by technique, with no understanding of how or why a technique arose, and no ability to make the technique their own. They "come to regard certain words, phrases, or rhythms, as intrinsically poetic, rather than as instruments of perception or as clues to generative ideas."¹² The resulting verse is self-conscious, derivative, ornamental, "literary."

The experimental poet often works in reaction to a period of pseudo-traditionalism, such as the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. He endeavors to widen, alter, or completely avoid traditional poetic wisdom by setting up norms of feeling and moral evaluation which are abnormal, insofar as they are consciously new and disjointed from the past. Poetry can experiment, however, without totally abandoning the traditional stream, and as such the experimentalist is valuable. He provides new techniques, new and valid ways of feeling. Donne, Milton, Hopkins are successful experimentalists

¹¹Ibid., p. 83.

¹²Ibid., p. 14.

in this sense, and poetic technique and moral perception are indebted to them. The experimental poet, however, limits his range of feeling directly in proportion to the extent to which he abandons tradition; for to this extent he denies himself the range of experience open to the centuries before him. He runs the risk of writing himself out quickly, and of having nothing left to do but parody his earlier works.

Since the experimental poet is easy to imitate (the talented college student can easily write a Hopkinsian stanza, but only with difficulty can he produce a meditation in Bridges' style), the existence of much pseudo-experimental poetry is not hard to explain, and not difficult to recognize.

Whether traditionalist or experimentalist, the poet establishes a convention through his choice of a method of composition. The poet might choose his structural method prior to composition, or during the course of composition; he might make the choice many times or only once, as the search for and attainment of a characteristic method. Winters describes seven structural methods, three of which establish a traditional convention. The chapter describing these methods is the final revision of the analysis we saw begun in the Master's thesis in 1925 and continued in the later essay, "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit."

The simplest structural method, formerly termed "Scattered," is here renamed "The Method of Repetition," after the terminology of Kenneth Burke in his Counterstatement.¹³ "It consists in a restatement in successive stanzas

¹³Kenneth Burke, Counterstatement, 2nd edition (Los Altos: Hermes, 1953), p. 125.

of a single theme, the terms, or images, being altered in each restatement."¹⁴ Winters offers as examples Nashe's "Adieu! farewell earth's bliss," and Raleigh's "The Lie." The method is also common in modern verse, forming the basis for poems as diverse as Frost's "The Pasture," Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy," and Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." Though a fruitful method, it tends to grow monotonous and diffuse if used as the structure of a very long poem.

The second method is simply termed "Logical," and is described as the "rational progression from one detail to another."¹⁵ The method is most obviously demonstrated by the Metaphysical Poets, by whom it was very subtly used and "frequently debauched."¹⁶ But great intricacy of thought is not necessarily the trait of the logical method. Any poem having a "clearly evident expository structure," whether it be a description, a dramatic monologue, a meditation, or an argument, proceeds according to a logical structure.¹⁷ Besides poems of the Metaphysical school, much modern verse, such as Frost's "Window Tree" or Housman's "Cherry Blossoms," illustrates this technique.

A third structural technique, which Winters formerly considered as a sub-division of the preceding one, is the "Narrative," which "achieves coherence

¹⁴Winters, In Defense, p. 31.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

largely through a feeling that the events of a sequence are necessary parts of a causative chain."¹⁸ Narrative structure quite often supplies the background for individual stanzas which themselves are chiefly logical (Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young"); but there are many examples in which the dramatic element far outweighs any reasoned progression or commentary (Robinson's "Eros Turannos," Frost's "Out, Out . . .").

These traditional structural methods employ a regular, not a free verse pattern; and the metric foot is most often the iambic. Curiously enough, the simpler the meter and stanzaic form, the more complex the rise and fall of the emotional intensity. The reason for this is that the iambic foot, the normal meter of poetry, provides a norm of feeling so standardized that any variation from it is at once significant.

A man who speaks habitually at the top of his voice cannot raise his voice, but a man who speaks quietly commands attention by means of a minute inflection. So elaborately and emphatically joyous a poem as Alisoun, for example, can be only and exclusively joyous; but Hardy, in the more level and calmer song, During Wind and Rain, can define a joy fully as profound, indeed more profound, at the same time that he is dealing primarily with a tragic theme.¹⁹

It is the iambic foot therefore, and the traditional structural methods described above, which provide a convention capable of expressing the widest range of human experience. The poet using, let us say, a logical structure, has a framework in which the slightest turn of thought can hardly pass unnoticed. He has at his disposal the full denotative as well as connotative

¹⁸Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 130.

power of all his words. If he works at the same time in the heroic couplet, seemingly the most straitening stanzaic form available, he will find himself able to

move in any direction whatever, and his movement will be almost automatically graduated by the metronomic undercurrent of regularity; and if he chooses at certain times to devote himself to prosaic explanation, the meter is capable of giving his prose an incisiveness possible in no other form.²⁰

Such a poet is not confined by his commitment to a traditional technique, but is, rather, free to objectify the subtlest feelings, provided that he proceed carefully, conscious of the meaning, feeling, and metrical length of each word he uses, fully aware of the technique's demands upon him. "The poet who suffers from such difficulties instead of profiting by them is only in a rather rough sense a poet at all."²¹

In the hands of a powerfully original, yet balanced, personality, traditional structural methods can be the basis of precisely controlled experimentation; and in this way the traditional norm of feeling can be expanded. The jolting images and meters of John Donne, Crashaw's habit of pushing metaphor beyond reason, the splendor of Milton's blank verse--these are all inventions which would be impossible without a norm from which to vary. This is experimentalism "under full control," and "subject to the check of a comprehensible philosophy."²² It broadens our capacity to understand human experience

²⁰Ibid., p. 142.

²¹Ibid., p. 17.

²²Ibid., pp. 133, 102.

without distorting or abandoning traditional values.

During the past half century, however, many poets have attempted to expand the range of feeling by an experimentalism cut off from traditional convention. This attempt Winters feels has been "in the main regrettable."²³ He arrived at this opinion, as we have seen, after reading the experimentalists extensively and even using their methods in his own verse. Winters often displays sensitive awareness of the goals of such poetry, according successful works the praise they deserve. But although such poetry has "ineliminable virtues,"²⁴ Winters wishes to stress that it is also intrinsically limited, unable to deal with the most important areas of experience, and in certain cases built on forms which are fundamentally imbalanced.

Of the four methods Winters describes as those most commonly used in establishing an experimental norm of feeling, one is not at all the exclusive property of the experimentalists, and might have been better placed among the traditional methods. I refer to the "Alternation of Method,"²⁵ which is nothing more than the use of two or more of the methods described elsewhere. Such a method is experimental if the methods used in alternation are experimental, but the alternate methods might just as well be traditional. Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" uses the repetitive method in each stanza, though the

²³Ibid., p. 30.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., p. 64.

three stanzas themselves follow a logical progression. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" alternates passages of logical description and discourse with passages of pure narrative.

The three remaining experimental methods are more properly new techniques, and Winters is more thorough in dealing with them. One of these, "The Double Mood," while not precisely a new structural method, is experimental in that it uses a traditional method without a traditional norm of feeling. Two moods permeate the work, either in opposition to each other or combined without clearly defined alternation. Although a long poem might understandably involve many different types of feeling, it is a modern tendency to combine two moods in a short poem, and to make the one an ironic comment on the other. Winters notes this phenomenon in "Yeux Glacques" and "Sienna Mi Fe, Disfecimi Marenna" from the sequence Hugh Selwyn Mauberley by Ezra Pound.

The two attitudes at variance in /Mauberley/ are a nostalgic longing of which the visible object is the society of the Pre-Raphaelites and of the related poets of the nineties, and a compensatory irony which admits the mediocrity of that society or which at least ridicules its mediocre aspects. Even in the midst of the most biting comment, the yearning is unabated.²⁶

This irony should not be confused with the classical irony of Dryden or Pope, who criticized others' failings from their own tenable philosophical position. This is rather the romantic irony of one who ridicules himself for an attitude he can neither avoid nor approve. The emotional quandary is at least superior to "the uncritical emotionalism of such poets as Hugo or Shelley, in so far as it represents the first step in a diagnosis."²⁷ But

²⁶Ibid., p. 68.

²⁷Ibid., p. 93.

when pushed too far, such an approach to poetry presents a view of life that is naively black-and-white, the result of careless thinking, careless feeling, and ultimately careless writing. "Instead of irony as the remedy for the unsatisfactory feeling, [Winters] recommends the waste-basket and a new beginning."²⁸

The two genuinely new structural methods the experimentalists of this century have evolved are named "Pseudo-reference" and "Qualitative Progression," the second term replacing the earlier designation, "Psychological Method," again after the example of Kenneth Burke.²⁹ Both of these structural methods are distinguished by an extreme reduction of rational coherence, which makes the whole meaning of the poem depend upon a certain coherence of emotion. The only difference between the two techniques is that the first retains "the syntactic form and much of the vocabulary of rational coherence, thus aiming to exploit the feeling of rational coherence in its absence or at least in excess of its presence."³⁰ Any poem written entirely according to this method is nothing but pretense; something seems to be going on, but actually nothing at all is happening. Ideas seem present, but no two readers can decide what they are. Images appear in striking combinations, but after the initial shock, we realize that they appeal to a non-existent symbolic

²⁸Ibid., p. 73.

²⁹Burke, p. 124.

³⁰Winters, In Defense, p. 40.

value, or to a purely private symbolic value. The power of the poem dies as its novelty dies. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is, in Winters' mind, the typical example of such poetry.

The argument is often advanced that a world of confused ideologies and near madness will inevitably produce what T. S. Eliot has called "difficult" verse. "The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning."³¹ It cannot be easily denied that modern times are confused, nor is it unreasonable to expect that poetry which deals with human experience in such times will likely be difficult to write and require intelligence and sensitivity to read. But the reader's difficulty should arise from the profundity and complexity of the thought and feeling of the poem, not from the obscurity of its allusions and dislocated language. As Winters observed, commenting on Eliot's words, "If one cannot be profound, it is always fairly easy to be difficult," in the sense of obscure or confused.³² Though there is reason to expect honestly difficult poetry in a confused world, this is not an excuse for confused poetry. We do not expect a poem that treats of sleep to be somnolent, or a poem about erotic love to be suggestive. "It is an example of . . . the fallacy of expressive, or imitative form."³³

Qualitative progression, because it does not pretend to a rationality

³¹T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, 1932), p. 248.

³²Winters, In Defense, p. 474.

³³Ibid., p. 41.

beyond that of emotional coherence, is not the fundamentally imbalanced technique that pseudo-reference is. Ezra Pound's Cantos are fine examples of this form at its best. Though each statement in the poems, or at least many of them, is rational in itself, the progression from statement to statement proceeds only by emotional "logic." "It is the progression of random conversation or of reverie."³⁴ Rational progression might be implied in such verse; and if it is, one can usually spot it and follow it along without difficulty. In a long poem, however, the implicit rationality must either be supported by logical exposition or disappear entirely.

Since the poet using this technique has no fixed principles by which to select meter or rhyme scheme, and only an emotional coherence to satisfy with his choice of images, he has limited himself severely. His poem can "refer to a great many types of actions and persons, but . . . it can find in them little variety of value."³⁵ Having abandoned the denotative power of words, together with traditional methods of progression, the poet can increase intensity only by multiplying words; he can emphasize only with exclamation points or sudden changes in line length. This makes for diffusion, imprecision. Organization is casual; one could often alter the order of lines without seriously changing the poem's meaning. Although "the loveliness of such poetry appears . . . indubitable,"³⁶ the range of experience it can handle is

³⁴Ibid., p. 57.

³⁵Ibid., p. 58.

³⁶Ibid., p. 59.

extremely narrow. The poem can treat of melancholy, but not despair; fear, but not tragedy; longing, but not love. "The feelings attendant upon revery and amiable conversation tend to great similarity notwithstanding the subject matter, and they simply are not the most vigorous or important feelings of which the human being is capable."³⁷

Mr. Winters' final estimation of experimental structural techniques is that they almost invariably preclude the possibility of a writer's achieving major poetry. Major poetry is that which deals with an important human experience with perfect formal success. Experimental poets, though they may achieve formal precision, cannot handle a wide range of experience. If they realize this limitation in their poetic technique and do not attempt to step beyond the bounds of what they can handle, they can be successful poets, but necessarily minor, or "primitive" poets. Experimentalists, however, who endeavor to deal with material of great moral importance, produce poetry which is "decadent;" that is, poetry which "is incomplete formally (in the manner of the pseudo-referent and qualitative poets) or is somewhat but not too seriously weakened by a vice of feeling (in the manner of the better post-romantic ironists)."³⁸

From what we have seen of Winters' structural analyses and his emphasis on the distinct advantages and limitations of each, it should come as no surprise that he believes that "the primary function of criticism is

³⁷Ibid., p. 145.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 90-91.

evaluation."³⁹ Critical evaluation, furthermore, is not a mere record of personal preferences. Poems can be evaluated objectively on their intrinsic merits. To say otherwise, Winters believes, would be to profess a debilitating relativism. What we should demand of a critical method, therefore, if it is to be valuable, is that it provide a "usable system of evaluation."⁴⁰

It is such a system that Winters wishes to provide with his descriptive analyses of form and of the ethical implications of form that we have just surveyed. For it is only by means of a thorough formal critique that a poem's success can be determined. And since formal relationships within a poem are unintelligible unless we consider at the same time the rational meaning of the words of the poem and the relationship between form and meaning, formal explication necessarily reveals the balance or imbalance between motive and emotion. Critical elucidation and moral evaluation are inseparable.⁴¹

The ultimate value of Winters' critical theory, however, and of the five-point critical method he has elaborated, cannot fully be shown in an abstract discussion of terms and principles. As Allen Tate has remarked of Winters' critical apparatus: "One must remember not the formula itself, but what it enables him to do. No formula is any better than the application and

³⁹Winters, Function, p. 17.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Helen Gardner, in The Business of Criticism (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), discusses the critical tasks of elucidation and evaluation, and decides that "the torch, rather than the sceptre, would be my symbol for the critic. Elucidation, or illumination, is the critic's primary task." (p. 14) Winters sees no opposition between these tasks. To carry the torch is to wield the sceptre.

discoveries that the critic is able to make with it."⁴² We must, therefore, devote some attention to Winters' critical essays, where his concern will be totally directed to the poet and his work, rather than to the illustration of certain critical principles. But before passing on to these essays, I wish to offer a brief summary of Mr. Winters' critical position, lest the details of Primitivism and Decadence be allowed to obscure the central viewpoint which has guided the work.

In cautioning against a poetry of uncritical self-expression, in seriously questioning the value of poetry without rational content, in implying a hierarchy of values in human living, Mr. Winters affirms a style of poetry and a style of life for which he had searched for over ten years. Human action, he believes, must be guided by a rational standard of living, a standard based ultimately on a divine absolute. Life is therefore a process of moral decisions. The writing of poetry also is a process of moral decisions framed against the rational standards of human feeling embodied in traditional poetic forms.

Winters speaks in defense of poetry in which every metrical foot is precisely planned, every rhyme carefully considered. He demands poetry in which every word supports all the weight it can bear, in which every word is used to the full extent of its denotative and connotative powers. There is no room for excess verbiage, the characteristic of half-formulated poetry, fuzzy thinking. Winters wants poetry at its best to deal honestly with important

⁴²Allen Tate, "Homage to Yvor Winters," Sequoia, VI (Winter, 1961, p. 3.

experiences: man's relation to God and to his fellow men, moral choice, courage in the face of difficulties. The poet therefore not only must devote careful attention to rhyme, meter, and images, but must consider maturely the rational progress of the poem as well.

The result of such careful composition should be poetry so satisfying that not a single word could be changed without damage to the whole. This is poetry of total artistic and moral responsibility, poetry which

should offer a means of enriching one's awareness of human experience and of so rendering greater the possibility of intelligence in the course of future action; and it should offer likewise a means of inducing certain more or less constant habits of feeling, which should render greater the possibility of one's . . . acting in accordance with the findings of one's improved intelligence.⁴³

Such poetry mirrors as well as shapes the life of a man who lives according to an external absolute, and who grows by judging his every act and desire in terms of this absolute. It is "a perfect and complete act of the spirit; it calls upon the full life of the spirit; it is difficult of attainment, but I am aware of no good reason to be contented with less."⁴⁴

⁴³Winters, In Defense, p. 29.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 150.

CHAPTER V

THE METHOD IN PRACTICE

A scattered survey of the whole of Winters' practical criticism might give us a vague impression of his scope, but would offer little indication of his skill and thoroughness in handling individual poems. I plan, therefore, to confine attention to only a few close readings from representative essays, and then to offer some concluding comments on the limitations, fictional and real, of the critical approach we shall see demonstrated.

Mr. Winters' gradual disillusionment with post-Romantic experimentalism not only prompted him to investigate the possibilities of writing in more traditional styles, but also led him to take new interest in the history of English verse to discover older examples of the traditional convention. In an essay published in Poetry in 1939, called "The 16th Century Lyric in England," Winters displayed a sensitive ability to locate and catalogue poems of great merit, many of which had long lain unnoticed.¹ From among these poems, representing so many distinct schools-- the Petrarchan, Cavalier, Metaphysical --he discovered the "major tradition of the century," the "plain" style of Gascoigne, Greville, Raleigh, Jonson. The essay is largely literary history:

¹Ivor Winters, "The 16th Century Lyric in England," Poetry, LIII-LIV (February, March, April; 1939), pp. 258-72, 320-35, 35-51.

Winters makes an elaborate, and I think successful, effort to provide a "different view of the century from that which we shall obtain by regarding as primary Sidney, Spenser, and the song-books, to the neglect of the great lyrics⁷, profound, complex . . . sombre and disillusioned in tone," written in the plain style.² Though the essay is heavily illustrated with titles and examples, there is not a great deal of space devoted to the detailed close reading of any single poem.³

In 1958, however, Winters delivered a lecture at the Johns Hopkins Poetry Festival in which he was again concerned with the plain style. On this occasion, Winters used fewer illustrative examples, and consequently commented more extensively on each one. His remarks on two of Ben Jonson's poems are significantly illustrative of the results his critical method can achieve in practice. I will present both critiques here, together with Winters' comments on two poems in a more ornate style, by way of contrast.

Winters begins by praising Jonson for qualities of craftsmanship we have already seen outlined in *Primitivism and Decadence*: "His language is accurate and concise with regard to both idea and feeling; there is an exact correlation between motive and feeling which may easily be mistaken for coldness and mechanical indifference by the reader accustomed to more florid

²Winters, "16th Century Lyric," Poetry, LIV, p. 51.

³The brief analyses of Gascoigne's "Woodmanship" and Sidney's "Highway, since you my chief Parnasus be" (LIII, pp. 269-72, 328-29) should be noted, however, as among the most impressive of Winters' close readings.

enticements."⁴ Winters then proceeds to describe this correlation between motive and emotion in a poem called "An Elegy."

Though beauty be the mark of praise,
 And yours of whom I sing be such
 As not the world can praise too much,
 Yet is't your virtue now I raise.

A virtue like allay, so gone
 Throughout your form, as though that move,
 And draw and conquer all men's love,
 This subjects you to love of one.

Wherein you triumph yet: because
 'Tis of yourself, and that you use
 The noblest freedom, not to choose
 Against or faith, or honor's laws.

But who should less expect of you,
 In whom alone love lives again?
 By whom he is restored to men,
 And kept, and bred, and brought up true?

His falling temples you have reared,
 The withered garlands tane away;
 His altars kept from the decay
 That envy wished, and nature feared.

And on them burn so chaste a flame
 With so much loyalty's expense
 As love, t'acquit such excellence,
 Is gone himself into your name.

And you are he: the Deity
 To whom all lovers are designed,
 That would their better objects find:
 Among which faithful troup am I.

Who as an off'ring at your shrine,
 Have sung this hymn, and here entreat
 One spark of your diviner heat
 To light upon a love of mine

⁴Yvor Winters, "Poetic Styles, Old and New," Four Poets on Poetry, ed. Don Cameron Allen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1959), p. 62.

Which if it kindle not, but scant
 Appear, and that to shortest view,
 Yet give me leave t'adore in you
 What I, in her, am grieved to want.

The structural method of the poem is obviously logical: the argument is tightly knit; each stanza proceeds inevitably from the one preceding; "every word is necessary to the argument."⁵ As Winters paraphrases it, "this is a poem in praise of a woman who is a friend, not the beloved; she is praised for her virtue and her constancy in love, at the expense of the woman whom the poet loves; and because of these qualities, she is identified with the god of love."⁶ This is an unusually subtle idea for poetic treatment, especially within such short space. Love for the friend; praise for her virtue, a virtue never wholly distinct from her dignity and beauty; devoted respect; the delineation of the qualities of the truly virtuous--these are all part of the central idea.

The form of the poem, supple enough to deal adequately with such variations of feeling, is itself a combination of several distinct poetic conventions.⁷ As Winters notes (and it is his central insight into the poem), "It is a fusion of two kinds of poetry: the song and the didactic poem."⁸ In discovering such a combination of forms, Jonson discovered the adequate expression for the idea in his poem, and simultaneously its appropriate emotion. Winters' analysis of the interplay of the song-feeling with the

⁵Ibid., p. 65.

⁶Ibid., p. 63.

⁷The word is not used here in Winters' specialized sense.

⁸Ibid., p. 63.

didactic element is quite thorough and warrants full quotation.

It is a poem in praise of virtue in love; and, in connection with love, the machinery of the old Religion of Love (in which virtue as here conceived was scarcely an element) is employed discreetly. The stanza frequently suggests a song stanza as it opens, and then seems to stop the song with a didactic close, as if strings had been plucked and then muted; and this effect, more or less inherent in the form of the stanza itself, is sometimes stressed and sometimes softened. In the first stanza, for example, the effect of the single-hearted love song is suggested in the first three lines, but qualified by though, and by the harsh rimes such and much; and in the fourth line the tone is brought down firmly to the didactic. The second stanza suggests a song-movement throughout, and the subject of love in the second and third lines reinforces the movement; but the treatment of the subject is moralistic, and the song quality is softened by this fact. The third stanza is one of the most explicitly moralistic, yet the first clause suggests another tone, that of the triumphant love song; and this tone dominates the first three lines of the fourth stanza and is only partly muted in the fourth line. The fifth stanza resembles the fourth, but here the Religion of Love, which has been introduced quietly in the fourth, emerges strongly; and in the first two lines especially the accented syllables are heavy and lone, and the unaccented are light, in such a way as to suggest a triumphal chant. In the remainder of the poem the didactic tone dominates, but it has already been so qualified by the other that the echo of the song is present most of the time, most plainly, perhaps, in the eighth stanza and most muted in the last.⁹

In the final paragraph of Primitivism and Decadence, Winters summarized his rigorous demands for poetry: the understanding of motive should be clear; the evaluation of feeling, just; and the justice of the evaluation should persist "even into the sound of the least important syllable."¹⁰ It seems perhaps, an unduly stringent ideal. However in the above passage, Winters

⁹Ibid., pp. 63-64.

¹⁰Winters, In Defense, p. 150.

describes that ideal being met, line by line--indeed, almost word by word.

Jonson's "Elegy," with its precise logical argument and abstract diction, can be usefully compared with one of the finer examples of "ornate" Renaissance poetry, Shakespeare's sonnet, "Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear" (LXXVII). This is also a poem addressed to a friend of the poet, offering along with real affection for the recipient, a clearly didactic moral.

Although the poem is written in the ornate style of sonneteering, Winters finds the decorative elements in perfect control; the poem is not marred by the vices of merely ornamental verse. Its images serve as paradigms for a logical argument and honestly exemplify the argument rather than distract attention from it. However, the poet who advances his argument with metaphor rather than abstract diction is able to suggest more than is immediately explicit on the page. Unlike Jonson's, "Shakespeare's approach to his subject is indirect and evasive."¹¹

The sonnet was written to accompany the gift of a blank book:

Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear;
 Thy dial how thy precious minutes waste;
 The vacant leaves thy mind's imprint will bear,
 And of this book this learning may'st thou taste.
 The wrinkles which thy glass will truly show
 Of mouthed graves will give thee memory;
 Thou by thy dial's shady stealth may know
 Time's thievish progress to eternity.
 Look! what thy memory cannot contain
 Commit to these waste blanks, and thou shalt find
 Those children nursed, delivered from thy brain
 To take a new acquaintance of thy mind.

These offices, so oft as thou wilt look,
 Shall profit thee and much enrich thy book.

¹¹Winters, "Poetic Styles," p. 58.

The first quatrain presents the literal theme of the Poem: although we grow older as the years advance, we can record our thoughts on paper and so be able always to learn from them. The second quatrain re-emphasizes the passage of time and the approach of death; and the last six lines repeat the advantages of a blank book. In commenting on these final lines, Winters displays great sensitivity to Shakespeare's "evasive" approach, and brings the poem's subtle undertones into clear focus.

He notes that after the second quatrain,

something very strange occurs. The imperceptible coming of wrinkles displays the physical invasion of the enemy, just as the imperceptible movement of the dial's shadow displays the constant movement of the enemy. In the ninth line, however, the enemy invades the mind, the center of being; it was the figure of the book which enabled the poet to extend the poem to this brilliant and terrifying suggestion, yet so far as the development of the theme is concerned, the extension occurs almost by the way, as if it were a casual and merely incidental feeling.

Look! What thy memory cannot contain

Commit to these waste blanks. . . .

This command, in isolation, is merely a command to make good use of the book, and the remainder of the passage deals wholly with the advantages of doing so; yet the command follows the lines in which we have observed the destruction of the physical being in time, and in this position it suggests the destruction of the mind itself. This terrifying subject, the loss of identity before the uncontrollable invasion of the impersonal, is no sooner suggested than it is dropped. . . . In order to express the invasion of confusion, the poem for a moment actually enters the realm of confusion instead of describing it. The poem, I think, succeeds; but . . . I cannot decide whether the success is due to skill or to accident.¹²

I want now to pass on to the other of Jonson's plain poems, this one on a religious theme, and then to contrast Jonson's approach to religious verse

¹²Ibid., pp. 59-60.

with that of Gerard Hopkins. Winters is very clear in describing the adequacy of each poet's approach.

The poem by Jonson bears the title "To Heaven," and is perhaps the most familiar of his serious works.

Good and great God, can I not think on Thee,
 But it must, straight, my melancholy be?
 Is it interpreted in me disease,
 That, laden with my sins, I seek for ease?
 O be Thou witness, that the reins dost know
 And hearts of all, if I be sad for show;
 And judge me after: if I dare pretend
 To aught but grace, or aim at other end.
 As Thou art all, so be Thou all to me,
 First, midst, and last, converted One and Three!
 My faith, my hope, my love; and in this state,
 My judge, my witness, and my advocate.
 Where have I been this while exiled from Thee,
 And whither rap'd, now Thou but stoop'st to me?
 Dwell, dwell here still! O, being everywhere,
 How can I doubt to find Thee ever here?
 I know my state, both full of shame and scorn,
 Conceived in sin, and unto labor born,
 Standing with fear, and must with horror fall,
 And destined unto judgment after all.
 I feel my griefs too, and there scarce is ground
 Upon my flesh t'inflict another wound:
 Yet dare I not complain or wish for death,
 With holy Paul, lest it be thought the breath
 Of discontent; or that these prayers be
 For weariness of life, not love of Thee.

Winters first discusses the rhythmic structure of the poem. It is written, of course, in heroic couplets, but of the "post-Sidneyan" variety. That is, there is great variation in the degree of syllable accentuation so that the line "is flexible and subtle, rather than heavy and emphatic."¹³ The firm regularity of line length and rhyming couplets serves as the support

¹³Ibid., p. 67.

for a counterpoint rhythm of shifting caesuras and varied sentence lengths. But a long quotation of Winters' line-by-line metrical analysis of the poem is not to the point here.¹⁴ Let us rather consider his remarks on the few rhetorical devices Jonson employs.

Winters cites, first of all, the word-play occurring in the eighth couplet (everywhere and ever here). This is a kind of ingenuity rife in Renaissance poetry, often employed for mere prettiness or humor. In the present context, the device embodies a profound theological assertion: the great God who is omnipresent, is by that fact present in my own life. The word-play is more akin to paradox than pun; it heightens the importance of the idea rather than merely describes it. It is an emotional device that "seems not only justifiable but inescapable: it is an essential part of the argument."¹⁵ This is a fine example of form correlative with idea, of emotion perfectly motivated by the paraphraseable content.

Winters points secondly to the three lines of triads which surround the idea of the Trinity and direct attention to the paradox of the threefold One (lines ten to twelve). The triad series "occurs in brief space and rapidly; it is not forced, but seems a natural series of comparisons; it speeds the rhythm for a few lines." And to this, Winters adds parenthetically: "(at a

¹⁴Winters is a virtuoso at metrical analysis. I call attention not only to this essay, but to the thorough analyses of H. D.'s "Orchard" and Dickinson's "There's a certain slant of light" in In Defense of Reason, pp. 118-120, 297-98.

¹⁵Winters, "Poetic Styles," p. 67.

moment when the increased speed is a proper expression of passion.)"¹⁶ There is, in other words, just motivation for the intensity. The triads themselves are the rational expression of the motivation: the Trinity itself, Jonson's judge, witness, and advocate; the object of his faith, hope, and love. Furthermore, the lines are not an isolated rhetorical flourish. They have an integral part to play in the poem: emotionally, as a "fine preparation for the slower and more sombre movement of the later lines;" and rationally, "preparing us likewise for the final series of theological statements . . . in couplets nine and ten."¹⁷

Jonson, Winters concludes, has handled a great theme and has mastered an important experience. "His temptation is 'weariness of life'; his duty, which he accepts with a semi-suppressed despair, is to overcome weariness."¹⁸

Jonson has come to terms with this duty; he has not allowed the poem to resolve itself in the natural flow of a literary convention, as Renaissance sonnets often end, their concluding couplet resolving the poem without resolving the issue. Nor has Jonson given in to a gift for personal drama, or melodrama, letting the enthusiasm of his religious experience obscure the fact that he hasn't given it the attention it deserved. This last is a fault Winters finds in the verse of Hopkins.

"The Starlight Night" will offer us a very clear example of this

¹⁶Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

stylistic defect. It is one of Hopkins' many poems which describe a landscape or some natural occurrence and offer a comment on the scene, usually a religious interpretation. The poem is a sonnet; the octet presents a typically ecstatic description (eleven exclamation points) and the sestet comments.

Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!
 O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
 The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!
 Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves'-eyes!
 The gray lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!
 Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare!
 Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!--
 Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize.

Buy then! bid then!--What?--Prayer, patience, alms, vows,
 Look, look: a May-ness, like on orchard boughs!
 Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with yellow shallows!
 These are indeed the barn; withindoors house
 The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse
 Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.

In the octet, Winters notes, the "description is sometimes extremely brilliant and is interesting everywhere."¹⁹ But the poem provides no explanation, artistic or rational, for the brilliance and enthusiasm. An explanation is hinted at in the final line of the octet, but the sestet, which should develop the hint, fails in its task. We are simply told that the universe is somehow the home of "Christ . . . and all his hallows," and that we are to "buy" this universe--the "prize." The meaning of the prize, Christ dwelling in all things, is left undeveloped. Even more important, the price that must be paid is passed over in half a line (line nine) to allow the poet to indulge his descriptive talents for three lines more. Yet, this price is

¹⁹Winters, Function, p. 125.

the real theme of the poem. . . . A devotional poet of the Renaissance dealing with "prayer, patience, alms, vows," would have a good deal to say of each and of what each meant in terms of daily life and toward salvation. The reader who wishes to orient himself might begin by rereading Ben Jonson's "To Heaven." . . . In no other literary period, I think, save our own, would a poet who was both a priest and a genuinely devout man have thought that he had dealt seriously with his love for Christ and his duty toward him by writing an excited description of a landscape: this kind of thing belongs to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the period of self-expression and the abnegation of reason.²⁰

It would be unfair to Winters' competence as a critic to presume that his opinion of Hopkins' "The Starlight Night" constitutes his final word on the Jesuit poet. Although he disapproves of the approach Hopkins frequently takes to religious experience, and although he is skeptical of the value of his more extreme metrical experiments, Winters still stands in genuine admiration of much of Hopkins' work. His choice of Hopkins' five best poems, a choice that "is the outcome of more than thirty years' reading of Hopkins," is a

²⁰Ibid., pp. 125-26. Thomas P. McDonnell, in a reply to Winters' essay on Hopkins ("Hopkins as a Sacramental Poet: a Reply to Yvor Winters," *Renaissance*, XIV /Autumn, 1961/, pp. 25-33), accuses Winters of insensitivity to the theological doctrine of God's immanence in nature, a belief very important to Hopkins and one which supposedly motivates his descriptions of nature. For Hopkins, the world is literally charged with God's grandeur. "The universe everywhere shouted its identity to him, from 'the dearest freshness deep down things' to 'Look up at the stars! Look, look up at the skies!'" (p. 29) Winters "arbitrarily excludes from . . . consideration one of the major concepts of the work [he examines]." (p. 33) I believe Winters would answer the objection with two comments. First of all, the question is not whether Hopkins believed in a sacramental aspect in nature, but whether he succeeds in making this idea a motivating part of his poem. To exhort that we "Look up at the skies!" is hardly to convey a sense of the universe shouting its identity. God's immanence cannot be felt by the mere force of exclamation points. Secondly, the poem under consideration is not primarily about sacramental nature, but concerns the price of our being able to find Christ in all things. I have already noted Winters' comment on the development of this theme.

challenging, thought-provoking reappraisal of the poet's achievement.²¹ One of these five, "In Honour of St. Alphonsus Rodriquez," is another sonnet on a religious theme. Winters' comments on the poem are just and incisive.

Honour is flashed off exploit, so we say;
 And those strokes once that gashed flesh or galled shield
 Should tongue that time now, trumpet now that field,
 And, on the fighter, forge his glorious day.
 On Christ they do and on the martyr may;
 But be the war within, the brand we wield
 Unseen, the heroic breast not outward-steeled,
 Earth hears no hurtle then from fiercest fray.

Yet God (that hews mountain and continent,
 Earth, all, out; who, with trickling increment,
 Veins violets and tall trees makes more and more)
 Could crowd career with conquest while there went
 Those years and years by of world without event
 That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door.

Winters' only adverse criticism of the poem concerns the expression "gashed flesh or galled shield," which draws undue attention to itself.

The difficulty is not merely one of alliteration, but of difficult consonant combinations and excessive length of syllables, so that the phrase is hard to pronounce and receives a forced emphasis; . . . One feels, as one does so often in reading Hopkins, that emphasis has been made a substitute for precision. The phrase is a kind of habitual holdover from his poems in the more violent meter and rhetoric and is out of place here.²²

But for the rest, the poem is perfectly free of Hopkins' typical

²¹Ibid., p. 153. The five: "The Habit of Perfection," "The Valley of the Elwy," "Inversnaid," "In Honour of St. Alphonsus Rodriquez," and "To him who ever thought with love of me." A notable omission is "The Windhover." Winters explains his unorthodoxy in great detail, pp. 127-35.

²²Ibid., pp. 150-51.

flashiness and the obscurity of his personal emotions. It is a work rich in imagery, and it is imagery that counts, that illustrates single-mindedly the theme at hand. The poem is logical; "nothing is superfluous; and the simile in the first half of the sestet is not only precisely applicable to the theme, but is beautifully managed in itself."²³

Winters, therefore, does find successful and important poetry written in styles very different from the Renaissance plain style. He has, as a matter of fact, recently remarked that the plain style, whatever its other advantages, necessarily "sacrifices a part of our experience, the sensory."²⁴ Hopkins recovers sensory experience in his poetry, but mostly in the manner of the ornate style of the Renaissance. Sensory details, even when they meaningfully contribute to a rational argument, are nevertheless illustrations of the central idea; they remain "something added, something attached."²⁵ Winters believes, however, that there is another way to "embody our sensory experience in our poetry . . . not as ornament, and with no sacrifice of rational intelligence."²⁶ Sense imagery can become the embodiment of idea; it can itself advance the argument rather than merely illustrate it.

Winters does not refer here to the method of qualitative progression

²³Ibid., p. 151.

²⁴Winters, "Poetic Styles," p. 70.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., p. 71.

which attempts to achieve coherence by arranging images according to a logic of feeling. As we have seen, Winters doubts that imagery can long sustain coherence on the basis of such a logic. "We get what Frank Kermode has called the romantic image--that is, the mindless image, the impenetrable image, which seems to mean but in reality merely is."²⁷ Winters is speaking of neither Romantic imagery or symbolic imagery, but of a "post-symbolist" imagic technique.²⁸ He turns to Wallace Stevens for an example of what he means. His observations on some of the imagery in Stevens' "Sunday Morning" do much to illuminate the poem, and furthermore demonstrate Winters' ability to understand a type of poetry very different from the examples so far considered.

"Sunday Morning" deals . . . with the rejection of Christianity and with the imminence of death in a universe which is at once infinitely beautiful and perfectly incomprehensible. It is with this view of the universe . . . as the imagery is used to express this view, that I am now concerned, and I shall discuss only a few passages of the poem.²⁹

The passages Winters cites are from the first and the last of the eight stanzas in the poem. Briefly put, the lines are about water and about pigeons. These are the water images:

She dreams a little and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe
As a calm darkens among water lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., p. 72. Winters also finds the post-symbolist sensibility in the work of Paul Valery. Emily Dickinson's verse somewhat foreshadows post-symbolism. (Ibid., p. 75.)

²⁹Ibid., p. 72.

Seems things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound.

These lines from the first stanza are echoed in the last:

She hears, upon that water without sound,
A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water inescapable.

At first the water image is a simile: the old catastrophe encroaches "as a calm darkens among water lights;" the stillness and the sameness of the day is like "wide water without sound." In the line that begins the last stanza, "She hears upon that water without sound," the idea of the infinite, incomprehensible space in which man lives is very tightly joined to the physical image of the water separating the protagonist from Palestine. And in the final four lines quoted above,

infinite space is *mine* water--bright, beautiful, and inscrutable, the home of life and death. Every phrase in this last passage is beautiful at the descriptive level, but the descriptive and the philosophical cannot be separated: chaos, solitude, unsponsored, free, inescapable work at both levels. The sensory detail is not ornament; it is a part of the essential theme.³⁰

The pigeons I referred to above occur in the final four lines of the poem.

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink
Downward to darkness on extended wings.

The lines are sombre and lovely; even out of context they are striking description. But in the context of "Sunday Morning," as the conclusion of the

³⁰Ibid., p. 73.

argument built in the course of eight stanzas, the passage becomes something more than description, something more than simile or metaphor.

And the words responsible are: isolation, casual, ambiguous, and darkness. Out of context, these words would not be suspected, I imagine, of carrying any real weight of meaning beyond the descriptive meaning. Their significance has been prepared by the total poem, and they sum the poem up.³¹

One can see the point Winters makes especially when one compares Stevens' pigeons with the lark from Shakespeare's sonnet XXIX:

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee,--and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate.

"The lark is an ornament . . . burdened with the unexplained emotions of the poet . . . not representative of any explanatory idea."³² But in Stevens' poem,

the pigeons embody an idea as well as a feeling, and the idea motivates the feeling. . . . The rational soul and the sensible soul are united . . . and there is no decoration. The universe which Stevens describes is ambiguous in its ultimate meanings, but there is nothing ambiguous in the style: ambiguity is rendered with the greatest of precision.³³

It is interesting to note a further comment Winters offers on this poem.

"Stevens' universe is one which we can recognize as our own, even if we disagree with Stevens' philosophy."³⁴ It is clear, then, that Winters, in demanding precision and reasoned balance of motive and emotion in modern

³¹Ibid., p. 74.

³²Ibid., pp. 56-57.

³³Ibid., pp. 74-75.

³⁴Ibid., p. 75.

poetry, is not closing his eyes to the fact that the modern world is a difficult, chaotic place. (One might say this of the pre-modern world also.) His assertion is simply that poetry need not be chaotic to be true to chaos. Such verse merely exhibits unrest and irrationality; it succumbs to chaos.

But the artist who can feel the full horror, organize it into a dynamic attitude or state of mind, asserting by that very act his own life and the strength and value of his own life, and who can leave that state of mind completed behind him for others to enter, has performed the greatest spiritual service that can be performed.³⁵

I wish to make some final observations about Winters' critical practice in order to forestall some misapprehensions common among those whose knowledge of Winters has come from hasty reading or from secondary sources. The objection is often raised that Winters' splendid concern for the serious and traditional has led him either to neglect less serious verse, or has distorted his sensitivity to its values. His distrust of modern structural methods might arise from nothing more than stodgy dislike.

There is a measure of truth in such an objection, but a small measure, and I shall discuss that matter shortly. But I first wish to indicate that neither Winters' theory nor his practice of criticism has seriously neglected light or experimental verse. According to his theory, to begin with, no human experience, however slight, is unsuited to poetry, provided it is dealt with honestly. Moral evaluation in verse is simply the adequacy of form to subject matter; it need not always carry the graver overtones of morality in the properly ethical or philosophical sense. A poem such as Collins' "Ode to Evening" merits censure not for the commonness of its subject matter, but for

³⁵Winters, "Extension and Reintegration," p. 362.

the disproportionate pretentiousness of Collins' approach to his subject.

Theoretical issues aside, Winters' critical practice has extended sympathetically and honestly to the work of poets whose sensibility and poetic techniques are widely divergent from his own. He has praised the work of William Carlos Williams, for example, even though he considers him to be "an uncompromising romantic" who believes in surrender to the feelings, and who finds no ideas except in things.³⁶ No matter how sharply Winters might disagree with Williams' philosophy of life, he cannot disagree with his poetic treatment of that range of experience his philosophy helps him to understand. Williams' awareness of the world of sensuous feeling, of direct confrontation with nature, is "rich and perfectly controlled."³⁷ Such a sensibility permits him to deal with the simple events of ordinary human life with a tenderness and emotional awareness impossible in the poetry of a Jonson or a Bridges. "The Widow's Lament in Springtime," for example, is "rich, sombre . . . one of the most moving compositions" with which Winters is acquainted.³⁸

Mr. Winters also disagrees with the personal philosophy of Robert Frost. Frost, he feels, places entirely too much stress on the desirability of acting upon impulse, or retreating from intellectual activity. Frost believes, if we can trust his verse to reflect his attitude toward life, "that affairs manage themselves for the best if left alone, that ideas of good and evil need

³⁶Ivor Winters, "Poetry of Feeling," Kenyon Review, I (Winter, 1939), p. 104.

³⁷Ibid., p. 106.

³⁸Ibid., p. 105.

not be taken seriously." His handling of major issues is "usually whimsical, sentimental, and evasive; and in his latter years his poetry is more and more pervaded by an obscure melancholy which he can neither control nor understand."³⁹

Winters cogently argues his case against Frost, and although it may not be the last word in the matter, he does cite shortcomings noted by other contemporary critics in recent years.⁴⁰ The important thing to note is that Winters neither neglects nor dismisses Frost. In describing the limitations of Frost's verse, he helps us to a better understanding of the poet and of his particular virtues.

Winters sees Frost as a poet involved in a predicament: he is possessed of a nostalgic love for the chaotic and the dreamlike but at the same time hesitates to give in to these longings. His poetry conveys this predicament fairly and movingly. Winters cites famous examples: "Tree at My Window," which is "an acceptable version of the feelings of a man in this predicament;" "The Last Mowing," which "deals with the same subject, and even more beguilingly;" "Spring Pools," whose "extraordinary sensitivity of execution" Winters admires highly; and finally "Acquainted with the Night" and "The Most of It," in both of which especially "the poet confronts his condition fairly

³⁹Winters, Function, pp. 179-80.

⁴⁰Cf. Denis Donoghue, "The Limitations of Robert Frost," Twentieth Century, CLXVI (July, 1959), pp. 13-22; and George W. Nitchie, "A Momentary Stay Against Confusion," Robert Frost: a Collection of Critical Essays, "The Twentieth Century Views Series," edited by James M. Cox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 159-76.

and sees it for what it is."⁴¹ Frost, Winters concludes, is "one of the most talented poets of our time."⁴² Such praise is surely genuine, especially when it comes from a poet and critic so very different from Frost in temperament and outlook.

Similarly, we can hardly doubt that Winters is genuine in his admiration of Pound's use of the qualitative progression technique in the fourth "Canto"; in citing the successful and ingenious metrical experiments of H. D. and Mairanne Moore; in praising Eliot's use of pseudo-reference in "Gerontion."⁴³ The praise is accompanied, I think, by a sure grasp of what the individual poets were trying to achieve. It is praise, however, that is also accompanied by relentless references to the faults and limitations of either the poem at hand or of other more characteristic performances of the poet. Winters admires these poems with reservations, with a certain reluctance.

This reluctance is not difficult to understand. Winters' endeavor as a critic has been to re-establish traditional verse, not only as the finest English poetry, but also as the surest path by which contemporary poetry can profitably develop. His dedication to this task, let us remember, arose primarily from his conviction of the shortcomings of the experimentalism that had replaced traditional methods of composition. Obviously, his effort at reevaluating English poetry is well served by the explication of these

⁴¹Winters, Function, pp. 181-83.

⁴²Ibid., p. 159.

⁴³Winters, In Defense, pp. 58-59, 118-120, 87.

shortcomings. Concentration on the virtues of the experimentalists would distract attention from the principal issue.

It must also be pointed out that even though Winters' principal concern is evaluation, he has no wish to belittle literary works which do not meet his high standards. He is concerned that we be aware of relative values, not that we destroy the less valuable. He has stated in the foreword to In Defense of Reason that

there are many poems which seem to me obviously imperfect and even very seriously imperfect, which I have no wish to discard. . . . I have dealt with few works which do not seem to me to have discernible virtues, for to do otherwise would seem to me a waste of time.⁴⁴

But Winters' evaluative approach to poetry does have its limitations. Whatever his sensitivity, for example, to the "discernible virtues" of the poems he finds "imperfect," his brief, and sometimes half-hearted, attention to these virtues can distort our ultimate picture of a poet's achievement. To measure Hopkins or Frost against the standards of Ben Jonson and E. A. Robinson might legitimately show the superior wisdom and greater maturity of the latter two poets. But it does not sufficiently elucidate the peculiar gifts of Hopkins and Frost.

Winters' preference, furthermore, for the lyric form above all others has caused him to misunderstand the particular goals and de-emphasize the particular merits of the other literary genres. Finally, one can hardly deny that the seriousness with which Winters takes his work has led him to state

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 12.

his case sometimes with a vigor that is irredeemably uncharitable⁴⁵ and with superlatives that are often unfounded or even absurd.⁴⁶

But these are not seriously debilitating faults. They neither constitute the bulk of Winters' poetry criticism (though the lavish attention his critics pay them would make the unsuspecting think otherwise), nor do they obscure the central thrust of his work as we have presented it here. Winters' personal preferences and foibles have been indirectly responsible for his having something distinctive to say to us, for his being a voice apart from the amorphous mass of professors and reviewers who merely repeat the same acceptable things over and over again. By limiting his scope, Mr. Winters has not weakened himself, but has defined and channelled his strength.

⁴⁵He has accused Frost, for example, of "willful ignorance" and "smug stupidity." (Function, p. 176.)

⁴⁶We are told, with little explanation or evidence, that William Carlos Williams, in The Destruction of Tenochtitlan, "achieved one of the few great prose styles of our time." An even greater surprise is the fact that "Adelaide Crapsey . . . is certainly an immortal poet, and . . . has long been one of the most famous poets of our century." (In Defense, pp. 94, 568.)

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Over thirty years have passed since Yvor Winters published the Gyroscope and launched, in relative obscurity, his career as a serious critic. It has been twenty-five years since the publication of Primitivism and Decadence; the later collection of his works, In Defense of Reason, has been available for more than fifteen years. One might expect that the limited influence Winters' writings had at the time of their publication would be very much on the wane by now. Actually the reverse is true. His ideas have persisted, and in the past decade they have won an increasing number of adherents. If one can judge from the impressive awards and honors accorded Mr. Winters since 1958, he may well prove to be one of this century's most remarkable and most permanent critics.

In November of 1958, Winters was chosen one of the eight "foremost poets" of America who would appear as readers and lecturers at the Johns Hopkins Poetry Festival.¹ In 1960, Alan Swallow published the second edition of Winters' Collected Poems. The book was substantially the same as the first edition published in 1952, but this time it was given both the Bollingen Prize

¹Don Cameron Allen (ed.), Four Poets on Poetry, (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1959), p. iii.

and the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award for poetry. A year later, Stanford University nominated Winters the first professor to occupy the endowed Albert Guerard chair of literature. That same year the undergraduates published a special issue of the Stanford literary quarterly, the Sequoia, in Winters' honor. In December of 1961, the Modern Language Association devoted one of its meetings at the Chicago convention to Winters' poetry, criticism, and teaching. The following year Winters was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for the completion of his projected history of the English lyric.

In 1960, Routledge and Kegan Paul published the first British edition of In Defense of Reason, and in 1962 they followed this with The Function of Criticism. Fifteen years previously, these works had been regarded as the "fumbings" of an "excessively irritating and bad critic." But now, London reviewers were more receptive. The British Journal of Aesthetics found Winters' criticism "bold, shrewd, and lucid. . . . He is the most consistent and clear-headed critic now writing."² The Spectator was in agreement: Winters is "wonderfully sensitive to the sort of poetry he most reveres." His criticism is "lucid, courageous, dignified," the work of "a major critic."³ Frank Kermode, in the New Statesman, called In Defense of Reason "the most

²Laurence Lerner, Review of The Function of Criticism, British Journal of Aesthetics, II (October, 1962), pp. 374-75.

³Tony Tanner, Review of The Function of Criticism, Spectator, CCVIII (March 2, 1962), p. 279.

important rationalist critique of modern literary theory;" and regarded The Function of Criticism as a book which "keeps up the good work of its predecessor."⁴ The critics in general had a high regard for Mr. Winters' "demand, imperious yet just. /that literature/ undertake also to understand, evaluate, judge . . . experience."⁵ In making these demands, "that cannot be made too often, too vigorously, too crankily,"⁶ Winters upholds "values and responsibilities which civilization neglects at its peril."⁷

This praise has not been without a realization of Winters' limitations; one would suspect the thoroughness of the reviewers' reading if they had found nothing to criticize. One reviewer lamented Winters' disregard for the validity and actuality of the irrational in human experience. For Winters, he asserts, "Freud has lived in vain."⁸ What we have seen of Winters' understanding of the qualitative progression method of composition ought to modify such an opinion. He does not ignore irrational experience (especially when it is rendered with "the greatest precision," as in "Sunday Morning," above, p. 85); nor does he ignore the illogical method of composition, though the latter

⁴Frank Kermode, Review of The Function of Criticism, New Statesman, LXIII (March 16, 1962), p. 382.

⁵Tanner, Spectator, CCVIII, p. 279.

⁶Kermode, New Statesman, LXIII, p. 382.

⁷Tanner, p. 279.

⁸Lerner, British Journal, II, p. 376.

he does consider secondary and essentially limited, for reasons we have already seen. Winters' insistence, however, on interpreting all genres of literature in the light of his theory of poetic composition does lay him open to the charge of a "lack of a certain generosity . . . a flexibility of mind which would allow for the multiple functions of literature."⁹ But regardless of the insensitivity to the novel and drama which such rigidity causes, reviewers consistently have noted his authority with the short poem, and the adequacy of his approach to this genre. "No one understands this sort of poetry better and few have written so well about its qualities."¹⁰ As Mr. Lerner has suggested in the British Journal of Aesthetics, Winters' own violent prejudice in favor of the supremacy of the lyric form has been largely responsible for his lucid understanding and evaluation of that form.¹¹

That mid-century critics in both England and America should grant Mr. Winters awards and sympathetic understanding in place of epithets and rebuttal can be attributed to a marked change of critical temper that has taken place during the past decade on both sides of the Atlantic. The change in American critical thinking is chiefly evident in the decline of the New Criticism. Rene Wellek has been one of several critics to list the causes of this decline: too narrow a sphere of concentration; too sweeping a neglect of history; a study of stylistics that remained dilettantish and refused to

⁹Tanner, Spectator, CCVIII, p. 279.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Lerner, British Journal of Aesthetics, II, p. 374.

profit by the gains of linguistic science; no sure philosophical foundation underlying the aesthetical structure.¹² Murray Krieger has noted similar failings in an essay titled "After the New Criticism." New Criticism, according to Krieger, in its wish to treat poetry as a self-sufficient symbolic system, has cut itself off from life and belief; it has asphyxiated itself with its own straitening doctrine of contextualism.¹³

New Criticism's demise has not been surprising. Over ten years ago, R. S. Crane and the "Chicago Critics" predicted it and began investigating the possibilities of replacing its method by developing Aristotelian criticism "into a flexible and comprehensive method of analysis that would make possible a more thorough and discriminating study of certain aspects of any work than our present methods allow."¹⁴ The Chicago group replaced casual formal analysis with scholarly research and penetrating analyses of plot, genre, and hero-figures in poetry and prose fiction. Wellek remains dubious of the ability of the Chicago Critics to make a permanent contribution to criticism. He finds them guilty of "arid classifications . . . insensitivity . . . ultra-academic exercises."¹⁵ They have, however, firmly restored the art work to

¹²Rene Wellek, "The Main Trends of Twentieth-Century Criticism," Yale Review, LI (1961), pp. 114-15.

¹³Murray Krieger, "After the New Criticism," The Massachusetts Review, IV (Autumn, 1962), pp. 188-89.

¹⁴Martin J. Svaglic, "The Chicago Critics: Yes and Perhaps," Poetry, LXXXII (May-June, 1953), p. 101.

¹⁵Wellek, Yale Review, LI, p. 115.

its historical setting and stressed a scholarly sensitivity to genre, filling two wide lacunae in the New Critical method.

Another well-defined effort to provide for gaps in the work of the New Critics has been a movement which Krieger names Existential Criticism. Influenced by Cassirer's analyses of symbolism and myth and by the French Existentialists' concern for concrete relevance in art and literature, the new approach seeks "to return literature to history and existence . . . by treating it as a unique bearer of an otherwise inexpressible and perhaps unavailable historical, social, and moral vision."¹⁶ Art and poetry are seen as a "mode of revealing culture;"¹⁷ or, in the words of Eliseo Vivas, a way of "creating the values and meanings by which a society fulfills its destiny."¹⁸

In this spirit, Krieger has himself formulated a critical theory which would account both for the organic, self-sufficient laws of poetic form, emphasized by the New Criticism, and would yet see the poem "as opening outward to the world and to externally imposed laws of rational order."¹⁹ He acknowledges that Winters' writings have influenced his work. "Yvor Winters may have been more correct than many of his detractors, in their

¹⁶Krieger, Massachusetts Review, p. 198.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Eliseo Vivas, Creation and Discovery: Essays in Criticism and Aesthetics (New York: Noonday, 1955), p. x.

¹⁹Murray Krieger, "Recent Criticism, 'Thematics,' and the Existential Dilemma," The Tragic Vision: Variations on a Theme in Literary Interpretation (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1960), p. 236.

antididacticism, have credited him with being in his insistence that rational poetic form exerted upon recalcitrant materials is a reflection of the poet's moral control of his disturbing experience."²⁰ Krieger then bases his "literary discipline of 'thematics'"²¹ on the conviction, "in part borrowed from Ivor Winters, that aesthetic and moral resolutions are two sides of a single coin--the work by its very aesthetic order attesting to an orderly universe."²² Clearly, in a critical climate that refuses to analyze formal structure in isolation from history, philosophy, or human morality, Winters' writings are both acceptable and useful.

Another critical trend in America, not unrelated to the work of Vivas and Krieger, has been an increased critical awareness of the influence of the popular arts on national culture. Moral concern in these areas is nothing new; censorship of films, periodicals, television and theatrical productions, has long been a political and religious phenomenon. I bring the matter up at this point because ethical censorship has recently been giving way to artistic criticism; catalogues of suggestive sequences are being replaced by analyses of the moral judgment implicit in artistic forms. As Father William Lynch, S.J. observed in his recent study of The Image Industries,

We must be able to know when we are playing, when we are dreaming, when we are sentimentalizing; we even have a right to be stupid or

²⁰Ibid., p. 239.

²¹Ibid., p. 241.

²²Ibid., p. 249.

tawdry, provided there is the slightest element of the deliberate or conscious judgment in the process. For judgment is all.²³

It is, then, the judgment of the artist that is presented to the reader or viewer; and this judgment is always transmitted, no matter how unimportant or seemingly innocent of all moral concern the materials of the art work may be. Often enough, as Father Lynch has cautioned, it is the "innocent," "harmless" movie or television production, whose values are warped and whose view of life is completely shallow and baseless, that can most seriously delude the public into believing inane fantasy to be real, and life to be devoid of problems and responsibility.²⁴ He who controls "our most intimate and everyday images," controls therefore

our final attitudes and decisions. . . . For it is by our sensibility, by all our passions, feelings, emotions, that we relate ourselves to reality, whether accurately or badly. And it is by the same instruments that we are always appraising reality, accurately or badly.²⁵

²³William F. Lynch, S.J., The Image Industries (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), p. 28. Studies similar to Father Lynch's arriving at similar conclusions, have been made by Robert Warshaw, The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theater, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture (New York: Doubleday, 1962); and by Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy (London: Chatto, 1957).

²⁴Edward R. Murrow voices the same concern: "Surely we must pay for using the most powerful instrument of communications [T.V.] to insulate the citizenry from the hard and dangerous realities which must be faced if we are to survive." Quoted in Very Rev. Msgr. Timothy J. Flynn, "Theological Problems in Mass Communications," Problems and Progress, edited by Robert W. Gleason, S.J. (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1962), p. 99.

²⁵Lynch, S.J., p. 146.

Critics of the popular arts, in abandoning simple censorship of the literal content of the art work and coming to a new critical awareness of the power of the image to evaluate life, have come to conclusions which Winters voiced thirty years ago. They see the artist as one "actually striving to perfect a moral attitude toward that range of experience of which he is aware; and they are convinced that contact with worthwhile art "should offer a means of enriching one's awareness of human experience and of so rendering greater the possibility of intelligence in the course of future action."²⁶

Mr. Winters' warm reception in England, one of the chief evidences of his growing importance, as I have already noted, is principally due to the change in the English critical climate caused by the work of F. R. Leavis and other contributors to Leavis' periodical, Scrutiny (1932-1953). Leavis, whose critical sensibility Wellek describes as a combination of Eliot's taste, Richards' methods of analysis, and Arnold's humanism,²⁷ revived in England a vigorous concern for the cultural effects of good literature and for the evaluative role of the critic. His books, as well as his essays in Scrutiny,

waged a fierce campaign for critical standards, by both precept and example. Scrutiny was committed to a critical policy of unrelaxed vigilance, of a ruthless sifting of the little wheat of good and serious literature from the abundant chaff of triviality, shoddiness,

²⁶Winters, In Defense, pp. 23, 29.

²⁷Wellek, Yale Review, LI, p. 114.

pretentiousness. . . . Its aim was partly to revalue the English literary tradition . . . and partly to expose the laxity of modern criticism . . . by exhibiting its shallowness and confusions.²⁸

The "good and serious literature" which Leavis championed were those works "in which a genuine moral vision of experience was communicated through a fully particularized, fully realized imaginative rendering of life."²⁹ The parallel with Winters' own convictions and critical preoccupation cannot escape notice.

Unlike Winters, however, Leavis never explicitly enunciated his critical theory, nor did he wish to admit any absolute standard on which his judgment of the moral vision present in the work of art could be grounded. Furthermore, Leavis was in general critical agreement with his contemporaries' favorable opinion of the post-Romantic experimentalist revolt in poetry. He reserved his greatest critical energy and originality for the revaluation of the English novel.³⁰

It is not, therefore, with Leavis' work, but with the recent essays of a new generation of British critics for whom Leavis paved the way that Winters' criticism has most in common. Critics such as Donald Davie, Denis Donoghue, Thom Gunn,³¹ and especially Graham Hough,³² retaining Leavis' interest in

²⁸Davis Daiches, The Present Age After 1920 (London: Cresset, 1958), p. 136.

²⁹Ibid., p. 137.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Mr. Gunn is presently in America, teaching at Berkeley, California, and publishing frequently in Yale Review.

³²Cf. his "Reflections on a Literary Revolution," in Image and Experience (London: Duckworth, 1960), pp. 3-83.

reevaluation and in the vital relevance of literature to life, have in the past few years been asking questions of the modern poetic which Winters himself raised in the early thirties. How far can poetry go without a rational structure? What is the ultimate value of the post-Romantic experiment? How fertile are its methods? Are Joyce, Eliot, and Pound the continuance of the main-stream of literary tradition in England, or merely a backwater? Can "The Waste Land" and the Cantos stand close scrutiny? "The real question," Frank Kermode has written, "is why we have so much wanted to accept what is evidently a dubious position--the traditional character of the modern poetic." These questions are so obvious, "so evidently legitimate, that their suppression over all these years suggests a hysterical loss of the critical function."³³

The four critics I have named have explicitly referred to Yvor Winters as a significant and respected voice in the reevaluation movement; Gunn has studied with Winters at Stanford. Their work has helped to carry forward Winters' critical ideals and has won for him renewed recognition. He is acknowledged "the John the Baptist of the Counter-Revolution."³⁴ He sets for the counter-revolutionaries standards of clarity, straightforwardness, dedication to formal excellence, and willingness to set down challenging, thought-provoking evaluations, unswayed by modish opinion.

³³Frank Kermode, "Counter-Revolution," Puzzles and Epiphanies: Essays and Reviews, 1958-1961 (New York: Chilmark, 1962), pp. 45-46.

³⁴Ibid., p. 48.

The ultimate explanation of Winters' growing reputation, however, rests not on the similarity of his thought to contemporary critical trends, nor even on the direct influence he may have had on some of today's younger critics. These have merely been factors accounting for a greater willingness to grant a sympathetic hearing to ideas that once seemed cranky and dictatorial. Winters' increased influence rests chiefly on the merits of his own critical writings. I do not refer to critical theory, nor to his own individual opinions and critiques, illuminating as they can often be. Winters has more than information and opinion to offer. He has provided critical tools of practical value to anyone interested in understanding poetry, whether one wishes to agree with Winters' poetic theory or not. Some final gestures to what I believe to be of greatest practical value in Winters' work are certainly in order.

His analyses of the structural methods of poetic composition are particularly useful, even if we do not agree with Winters' own hierarchy of the best methods. It is only when we are aware of the goals and limitations of a poet's approach to his art that we can understand his work and evaluate its success or failure, its formal excellence or shoddiness. These general analyses, together with the concrete examples of Winters' own close readings of individual poems (there are few critics as clear and careful in line-by-line analysis), repay careful study on the part of students and teachers of literature alike.

Closely related to these analyses is Winters' distinction between traditional and experimental poetic conventions, and his illuminating description of what he believes to be the major tradition in English poetry.

Whether the logical method of composition, in all its rational plainness, with its characteristic concern for what Winters would call major human experiences (moral choice, man's relation to God and to fellow men, fear and despair in the face of confusion), need be called the finest strain of poetry, it certainly is a recurrent strain, observable in many different centuries, and displaying the common moral vision of the race, without sacrificing either the universality of that vision or the particular flavor of each individual's expression of it. In defining this tradition, Winters has made us aware of new poetic values and has called many lost voices to our attention: Greville, Gascoigne, the "plain" Jonson, Edward Taylor, Robert Bridges, Thomas Hardy. He shows us how to observe the history of English poetry in terms of the continuity of artistic and human values, rather than in terms of passing schools, fashions, and mannerisms. Finally, in reevaluating the works of individual poets according to these same traditional standards, he has brought to our attention many fine poems which were formerly obscured by the luster of popular anthology pieces.³⁵

Winters has performed a further service by revealing to a new generation

³⁵Winters' essays on Emily Dickinson (In Defense, pp. 283-299), Robert Frost (Function, pp. 157-88), and his book on Edwin Arlington Robinson (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1946), are examples of the sort of reevaluation I mean. We find, for example, that Robinson is at his greatest in "The Wandering Jew," "Lost Anchors," "Many Are Called," "The Sheaves," "The Three Taverns," and "Rembrandt to Rembrandt" (p. 39). The list is a service to those who know Robinson only as the author of the character sketches and monologues usually anthologized.

of poets the range of experience that is available to the poet using traditional structural methods. The new poets have listened. Open a contemporary anthology; young writers are more often influenced by Hardy, Robinson, Stevens, or even Winters himself, rather than by Whitman, Pound, or Eliot.³⁶ They have returned to the plain style, with its love of abstract statement; or have investigated the possibilities of the post-symbolist technique, in which thought and imagery fuse into a rational whole. These styles do not betray the spiritual and ideological complexity of our age, but handle it with startling accuracy.³⁷

A final contribution of Mr. Winters is not so much a critical tool or method of approach as an attitude that he communicates to his reader. It is an important attitude, which rises from, but is not necessarily dependent on, his moral theory of poetry.

Winters describes the poet as a man endeavoring to master his experience, to bring artistic order and evaluation to his vague half-understood feelings.³⁸

³⁶To list some examples: Kingsley Amis, Edgar Bowers, J. V. Cunningham, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes, Elizabeth Jennings, Donald Justice, Philip Larkin, Robert Lowell, Vassar Miller, Alastair Reid, Theodore Roethke, Charles Tomlinson, Richard Wilbur. Many of these poets are represented in The New Poets of England and America: an Anthology, edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, with an introduction by Robert Frost (New York: Meridian, 1957).

³⁷For their accuracy in expressing the spiritual ambiguity and barrenness of the contemporary world, Thom Gunn's "In Santa Maria del Popolo" or Philip Larkin's "Church Going" need fear nothing from comparison with "The Waste Land"; the latter, however, might appear deficient if all three were submitted to line-by-line analysis.

³⁸Winters, In Defense, pp. 23-29, passim.

The poet is one who clarifies life by attaining "the final certitude of speech," by saying "what one should say."³⁹ Poetry, therefore, is not only a means of "communication among those who are wholly civilized and adult,"⁴⁰ it is itself a humanizing force that can "turn us a little in the direction of civilization."⁴¹

This is not a new attitude toward literature. It is much in the tradition of western liberal education, a philosophy of education which regards the humanities as the finest means by which man comes to understand himself, becomes human. Winters' personal faith in these ancient convictions, however, bears this characteristic emphasis: he links the spiritual, humanizing value of poetry with its formal excellence and its rational understanding of major human issues. He believes that the poet who sacrifices reason and clarity, who fears to think and speak about what is relevant to his times, ceases to communicate, and so removes from society a powerful civilizing force. If the poet and his public, therefore, are estranged today, the reason is not merely that society has ceased to be interested in poetry, but that the poet has ceased to be interested in society.

Ivor Winters and William Wordsworth would be perhaps uncongenial

³⁹Ivor Winters, Collected Poems (Denver: Swallow, 1960), pp. 131, 90.

⁴⁰Winters, Function, p. 74.

⁴¹Winters, In Defense, p. 574.

companions. Yet both men share a fundamental conviction, one the literary world too easily loses sight of. At a time when poetry was preoccupied with decorative fancy and private reveries, Mr. Winters reminded us that the poet is above all "a man speaking to men."⁴² And he has added forcefully that the poet who wishes to be heard will win his audience only by the artistic cogency and human importance of what he has to say.

⁴²William Wordsworth, in the preface to the Lyrical Ballads, second edition.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Richard William Bollman, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Jan. 15, 1965
Date

Joseph G. Malinaz, S.J.
Signature of Adviser