

Jeffrey Goodman

The Hazards of Mortality: The Uncollected Poems of Yvor Winters, 1919-28, 1929-57

When he died in 1968 (of, ironically, lip cancer), Yvor Winters left behind him over 200 pages of published poems, including more than 250 separate titles. It was the work of almost forty years. Although he had published, too, more than 1000 pages of literary criticism over roughly the same period of time, the poems always stood first. As Winters himself had remarked, repeatedly, from the beginning of his public life as a writer until the end: the only reliable way to understand a poet is through his poetry—through the *substance* of what he has had to say and the *technique* of how he has said it.

Winter's poetry animated his criticism, "like a rapid hand within a glove." For him, criticism, of course, understood the literature of the past and the present. But criticism did this, mainly, for the sake of improving the literature of future—either his own future writing, or the writing of others that he might influence by his poetic example or by critical argument.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1900, Yvor Winters was raised in an enlightened, mercantile home. His paternal grandmother read to him from the historian Macaulay. His father, according to one source, had a nervous and physical breakdown before Winters was four. According to another, he was a successful speculator on the Chicago Board of Trade. During Winters' youth, the major social and intellectual currents in America divided between, on the one hand, a late Victorianism and, on the other, the rise of modern science and technology. Yet the fundamental philosophy of life and education in America had remained a 19th-century Ciceronian humanism. The individual represented the body politic; the body politic, the individual. This was the Chicago of the first two decades of this century—a place of tough guys, plain Protestant earnestness, and plain hard work, a time characterized by what Howard Baker, Winters' friend, once called "Middle-Western stoicism."

The measure of an artist rests not in his background, in what he has been given, but in what he has been able to do with what he has been given. An artist absorbs, lives with and finally transcends his back-

ground—even his heredity—or he is not really much of an artist. Winters' earliest poems seldom indicate an especially unhappy or alienated childhood. They reveal, in fact, a reasonably gay, imaginative temper and a sensibility full enough of sweetness and light. Although the family, for financial opportunities, had moved to Southern California when Winters was a schoolboy, then to Seattle, he had returned to Chicago for high school. At fourteen or fifteen, he became enthusiastic about poetry. If the day's school curriculum had stimulated this—the prestige of poetry was fairly high at the time—this meant English poets like Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley and Americans like Longfellow, Bryant, and Emerson. It meant Virgil and, perhaps, Horace. Soon, however, he had discovered the new, “experimental” poetry in McClurg's Bookstore in Chicago, immediately purchasing copies there of avant-garde journals. Originating in Chicago, one of these journals was Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, the very center, perhaps, of the New Poetry movement in America. Monroe allowed Winters to hang around the magazine's offices, where he read the back issues.

Gazing at the big picture, we view Winters—at this point—as part of a generation of Midwestern writers, including his wife, Janet Lewis, Glenway Wescott, Robert McAlmon, Hart Crane, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, among others whom Ford Madox Ford in *The March of Modern Literature* (1938) praised for “the excellence of their product,” “a conscious literary art,” “realism,” “the Flaubertian message,” and for consanguinity with “those chief ornaments of Southern writing, Misses Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Katherine Anne Porter, and Caroline Gordon,” all three of whom Winters knew personally and admired. Ford speaks further of “a whole Middle Western American group, as a rule from the University of Chicago, an educational institution differing from all the other universities of Europe and America in that it really has fostered imaginative writing and at least one movement—that of the Middle Western novelists and poets. ...It deserves this note,” he goes on to say, “because it is, as far as this writer is concerned, almost the only instance of a similar tendency anywhere discoverable in modern literary history ... and because, with its later Southern extension, it has kept

alive almost the last traces of a conscious literary art in a world everywhere so driven to distraction that *the pen as a weapon* has grown almost as obsolete as the stone arrowhead." For those critics and scholars who really desire to get serious enough to understand Winters, this, surely, is the place to start.

Winters' history, after this, is fairly well-known. Sadly, at the outset of his sophomore year at the University of Chicago, where he had joined a talented Poetry Club, he contracted tuberculosis. For his health, he traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico, spending the next three years at Sunmount and St. Vincent's sanitoriums, mostly bed-ridden, more or less motionless. Yet during this time, he persevered; he read, studied, and wrote poetry; and, in 1919, published his first poems. How these bedridden years might have affected the heart and mind of an eighteen-year-old is impossible to say. Winters' main activity was to stare at the ceiling, the wall, or out the window, noting the angle of sunlight on an aspen leaf. (Is it, therefore, surprising that one of his first classical poems, written a full ten years later, begins, "Death. Nothing is simpler. One is dead") He spent 1921 and '22 teaching in coal mining camps and, between 1923-25, returned to school at the remote campus of the University of Colorado, Boulder, earning a B.A. (Phi Beta Kappa) and an M.A. in nine semesters. He next taught French and Spanish at the still more remote campus of the University of Idaho, Moscow, finally, matriculating in 1927 to Stanford (in part, for the health of his wife, who also suffered from TB), where he taught literature and writing for the next thirty-eight years.

By 1929, however, Winters had already vitriolically broken from Modernism *per se*, having posted his objections—like Luther his theses—in the first issue of *The Gyroscope*, a hand-printed quarterly under his editorship. The journal's aim was the "approximation of a classical state of mind" that was to be achieved, or activated, from "a stable and comprehensive point of view." How had this come about? It had come about when, in the late twenties, Winters had become increasingly dissatisfied with the results of literary modernism, both his own and those of others employing free verse and other experimental techniques, and wished, instead, to write poems like those he had long admired by Baudelaire,

Valery, Hardy, and Bridges—poems, in his view, superior to anything he'd seen in free verse. These poems had modern and classical virtues.

The two books under review, *The Uncollected Poems of Yvor Winters: 1919-1928* (edited by R.L. Barth, 1997) and *The Uncollected Poems of Yvor Winters: 1929-1957*, derive, respectively, from Winters' modernist (1919-28) and classical (1929-57) periods. The modernist period was experimental; the classical, more traditional. Now, the fundamental difference between classical and modern art is simply this: whereas classical art measures the norm of human experience against the heroic or ideal, modern art individual, unique experience against the normal (or average). Romantic art appears to be something of a half-way house between classical and modern art. The ultimate aim of Romantic art is to arouse the senses to more intense connotative experience.

The Uncollected Poems of Yvor Winters: 1919-1928 (edited by R.L. Barth, 1997) contains thirty-nine poems that, long buried in obscure journals, have not appeared before in book form. Even setting aside the author's centrality to our understanding of 20th-century American literature, the intrinsic merit of Winters poetry alone makes this, along with its companion volume, an important, must-own publication. Barth's brief afterword explains: "the earliest poems included are the earliest poems Yvor Winters published; the later ones date from the period of his experimental mastery." The collection, Barth remarks, contains "surprises." These include "the verse tribute to Carl Sandburg. The charm ... of Maestro Winters taking his schoolchildren on a field trip. ... The strange Gothic trappings and decadent tone of 'Concerning Blake.' In brief, this volume contains a number of poems unlike anything Winters ever wrote."

For the student of American poetry and criticism, this book fills in spots in the big picture that, heretofore, have been blank.

We find, indeed, poems unlike anything else Winters wrote — the style more relaxed and casual, the idiom less strained and introspective, perhaps, than in the select poems that, in the fifties, Winters himself preserved for posterity.

The first volume contains the poetry, in short, of a sensitive young man who has been, temporarily, touched by tragedy.

A first example, a love poem called "White Song:"

Snow,
Silencer of footfalls,
Guard my thoughts,
Let them run with no sound
—They will be unseen against you—
Let them run with no sound
And pick quietly
At a certain window
Till they push in
Breathlessly.
Maybe
—If they come suddenly—

She will love.

A second example, "The Schoolmaster Writes to a Poet:"

Again the summer,
Santa Fe,
And a few people—
A moment
When one speaks
Beneath low trees.

You are not here.
I wrote:
"The villages
Are pressed flowers
Laid away."
And you rode through them.

So my letters—
Yet drifting
To the mailbox,
I leave them
From old habit

The summer ages.
The people come and go.
And I shall go —
For my gray fence is old,
My letters quiet,
And these lines forgotten.

Third and fourth illustrations reveal the influence of Imagism but are tinged with Virgilian sadness and piety. In one stanza,

My eyelids stony
Like the light of day
Where hopping birds
Are heavy—

“Old knots” in trees are “little fist-rubbed faces/Of gargoyles grief; While shadows/ Slip down the trunks/Like tears.”

Then the pathos, finally, of “Chicago Spring” (before returning to Santa Fe):

My body is gentle
As the light on the pavement.
My fingers play on the air
Like evening wind running in leaves.

But, ... The hand of God
Is heavier than mountains.
It stands on the air

Like an odor.

Behind each of these poetic examples, we hear a classical, humanistic sensibility through which the brilliant sound and the cleansed light of the New Poetry have beamed. "My aim from the first poem in this collection," wrote Winters in 1966, in the introduction to his *Early Poems*, "was a clean and accurate diction and movement, free of clichés; in other respects, my methods have altered with the years."

Fundamentally, Winters was not an aesthete, a moralist, a pragmatist, a scholastic, a Romantic, a naturalist, a neo-classicist, or a realist—though, in various ways, he was all of these. He was, fundamentally, a humanist. The humanistic poet trusts the power of language and reason to change our lives and thoughts. The humanistic poet seeks the goals of the active life in the contemplative. ("Each line an act,/ Through which few labor and no men retract." The concealed pun on the word "act" — action/dramatic play—contains the kernel of Winters' life's work. For he had grasped from an early age that life is flux *and* form, illusion *and* reality. Of these dialectical term sets, the early poems emphasize the first; the mature poems, the second. It is worth knowing, for example, that Winters' called his first book, published when he was twenty-one, *The Immobile Wind*.) Concerned with the whole person and the whole community—operating at the maximum of consciousness in the flux of experience—the poet mediates between the philosopher's search for general truths and the aesthete's desire for particular forms of beauty, without favoring or diminishing one or the other. The serious poet attempts, if really an artist, to see things from a stable and comprehensive point of view. This is an "objective" view, in Winter's mind.

From the classical period, *The Uncollected Poems of Yvor Winters: 1929-1957*, comes off, like the former volume, as uneven in quality; it too contains a number of poems unlike anything else Winters wrote. The most significant novelty of this second collection of poems is, perhaps, the proportion of satire, the most powerful example of which is certainly "The Critiad."

Composed in the form of the great late 17th- and 18th-century poetic satires by Dryden, Pope, and Churchill, "The Critiad" surveys the state of

American criticism in the early thirties, naming names. This was one of a series of publications that, over a three or four year period, expressed Winters' growing unhappiness with current literary culture, that separated and alienated him from it, and that, to a degree, gave him a pariah's status. It is, furthermore, my guess that this poem—more than *The Gyroscope*—or the infamous reviews of Crane's *The Bridge* or of T. Sturge Moore and Yeats—alienated most directly his literary peers, or, at least, those among its victims who had faced it in *This Quarter* in the fall of 1931. The explanation for this lies close to the surface. "The Critiad" has the fineness of perception and condensed power characteristic of all excellent poetry in any form. Its satire moves, even today, athletically and with wit. It traverses its area of expertise as quickly and surely as that other great scholar-athlete of the twenties, the former heavyweight champion Gene Tunney, the ring.

For historical purposes, it would be nice to quote the whole of "The Critiad" here. Yet, at 170 lines, the poem is far too long for this. It should be read, however, I'm sure, by every careful student of American literature and needs to sit on the syllabus of every every graduate seminar in 20th-century American poetry and criticism.

The poem consists of nine stanzas of varying lengths. The introductory stanza declares the task, the problem at hand. It is evening. Winters is sitting by the warm fireplace, presumably at home. He is reading, or rereading, what his peers have said about him in print and in letters, their curious and conflicting offers of advice, criticism, and correction.

Frustrated, he will this time respond to them poetically, as Dryden, Pope, or Churchhill would have done; or, before them, the great Latin satirists, Juvenal, Persius, or Horace. The peroration that I have been describing concludes as follows;

As the matter stands
I rest a monster in their fumbling hands.
Nay, hardened in the sin of vanity,
I wonder if they might not learn from me.

The second stanza recognizes "that fine poet, Allen Tate," as the solitary "sound" critic among contemporaries. Others critics are "intrepid as are walkers in a dream,/ Masters of every subject known to man/ Save poetry." What are they doing, then? "Dissembling with fine academic smirk/ The faint stupidity of all their work."

The hellish third and fourth stanzas number, among this rank, Matthew Josephson, Malcolm Cowley, Laura Riding, Robert McAlmon, Zukofsky, Krembourg, Mencken, Brooks, and Zabel; (leaving hell, perhaps, for purgatory), the fifth, more positively, Wilson, Blackmur, and Burke; with increasing approval, the sixth, Harriet Monroe; the seventh, Irving Babbitt; the eighth, Pound and Eliot (surely a juicy Ph.D. thesis lurks here, and a still juicier book!)

Level by level, the spiral of criticism sounds as biting and merciless as the rhythm powerful and exact. Take "the dancing circus twins,"

Josephson with sunshade on a rope,
Cowley in tights and bareback on a trope;
The Little Editors in step and firm,
Bright-eyed and pert, a military worm.

The critical point of Winters' satire seems so current today:

The formal rebels, barking out by rote
Rules of Experiment from each dry throat.
These and a hundred more at least as thin
God gave us as a minor discipline.

Following long stanzas devoted (positively) to Babbitt and (negatively) to acolytes Seward Collins, Hector Chafer, More and Foerster, and (positively) to Monroe, "Aunt Maria ("Mistress of error and consistency/ I trust no critic as I trust in thee"), Winters turns to Pound and Eliot, the

acknowledged Luther and Calvin of modern American poetry. Pound's portrait is one of a wild giant, a Titan, from a heroic age. It is oddly, in part, a self-portrait:

He made our grandsires slubber in their seats,
Time-serving editors hunt safe retreats...
Each fool was breathless not to make a sound,
Sweating with terror not to waken Pound.

Eliot is a fine, precise critic; his disciples, however, are something else. Montgomery Belgion, for example, "making no pretense/ To any little trace of common sense;... Forming conclusions for no earthly good/ Because each premise was misunderstood." Could any four lines go more directly to heart of our continuing and current critical ills? They finger the dominant intellectual disease of our time—a time in which, without training in philosophy or logic, we accept rather than question major premises; or, when we question them, question without method or general and salubrious purpose.

The ninth and final stanza turns to the neglected and misunderstood pantheon of modern poets that Winters most admires: Hardy, "that heroic oak," Williams, Bridges, T. Sturge Moore, Adelaide Crapsey, Marianne Moore, Stevens, Mina Loy, and Tate. As a whole, "The Critiad" formulates a world of parturient play. The poet-satirist wields the forceps of irony. "Each metaphysic foetus judges best. Great poets all!" Yet Winters, though weary, is undiscouraged. Most literary critics are, after all, worms, their mouths agape, while the food of the gods is running through them:

Yet will I publish still, and if I must,
Share with the great, obscurity and dust.
Like the Arthurian knight on his quest for the Grail, the poet is
on a comparable quest for reality. His guiding light is, it seems, the
example of the great poets, past and present:

They left me richer, having kept the trust.

And if the faint worm try his lip on me,
Such are the hazards of mortality.

In the preface to this collection, Barth describes Winters' attitude toward his uncollected poems. "The *Collected Poems* (1960) had established the canon Winters wished to preserve; the *Early Poems* [1966] formed a kind of supplement. To avoid any possibility of confusion, let me state here that the poems in this volume [and its companion volume] were very precisely excluded" from the *Collected* and *Early Poems* by Winters himself. Barth adds, however, that although he agrees that Winters previously collected poems are his "best work," he is nonetheless unable to agree with the poet that "any other uncollected material is rubbish."

In my opinion, no poem in this book—not even the sonnet entitled "Treading infinity, alone I go"—deserves this epithet. Rather, the poems in this (and its companion) volume reveal to us a more personal, raw, naked, and undigested side of Winters than we have seen elsewhere. They bring out, one might say, the flesh tones of a very big, rich canvass. They are emotional works by an emotional poet.

Despite the unfortunate 19th centurism of its closing couplet (not quoted here), the beautiful song entitled "Epitaph for the American Dead" is typical. Published in *Poetry* in 1944, it is a tribute to the many soldiers and sailors who died, tragically, during 1942 and '43, the darkest, most fearful years of the war:

Few names last, where many lie;
Even names of battles die.
These will stand for many more:
Wake, Bataan, Corregidor,
Attu, and the Coral Sea,
Africa, and Sicily;
Callahan, who ran his ship
To the very cannon's lip.

To sum up. Each of these collections further supports what we already know: that Winters belongs to that very select company of creative and

crucial geniuses "whose minds are living." While others writers dissipate or merely die,

... those whose minds are living
Grow hard and cool and gay,
Elude the unforgiving,
And somehow have their say
In words no fool can touch
Because they mean too much.

Because they mean too much. The common bond between his early and later poems was Winter's humanism. He was heir to Erasmus and Thomas More, to Dr. Johnson and Baudelaire. As a modern humanist it served his mission to restore to modern literature—without diminishing the aesthetic—the classical virtues. This was a mean, ideally, between the critical genius of Irving Babbitt and the aesthetic genius of Ezra Pound, between Hart Crane and Professor X, who is to this day to be found in every English Department in America, a relativist and a spiritual drifter, with especially little knowledge of the art of poetry. Winters argued, throughout his life, that art can be measured with some objectivity a) against experience(reality) and b) against what has been produced in the past. For these reasons and for many others, he stands out thirty-two years after his death as one of the most gifted and original of American poets and one of the important Americans (of any kind) of this century; and yet, in many quarters, he is virtually unknown. His collected works would make a perfect project for the Library of America series, and Barth's collections are an important contribution to keeping interest alive in Winter's life and work.