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THE LIMITS OF JUDGMENT

ON THE SHAPE OF YVOR WINTERS' POETIC CAREER

by

PAUL TYNDALL

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

Dalhousie University

Halifax, Nova Scotia

February, 1994

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Abstract

In his few brief comments on his poetry, Yvor Winters provided a compelling account of his development as a poet, one which has been adopted and elaborated upon by subsequent commentators. While this account is both detailed and insightful, it does not tell the whole story of his development. In fact, it leaves unanswered several important questions about why his poetic career assumed the shape it did. For instance, it does not explain his sudden rejection in the late 1920s of free verse in favor of traditional meters and forms. Nor does it address the striking thematic continuities that exist in his poetry long after this change of direction. Finally, Winters' own account of his development does not adequately address the criticism that his poetry suffered from his adherence to a strict formalist poetic. This thesis examines the internal dynamics of Winters' poetic career by focusing on precisely those questions which Winters' own account of his development leaves unanswered.

The aim of this project is to define Winters' career as the product not only of authorial intention, reason, and will but of several other determining factors as well. The introduction is devoted to a general discussion of the need for a revisionary reading of Winters' poetry, and to a

summary of recent theoretical discussions of the concept of the literary career itself. Chapter One examines Winters' comments on his poetry in order to reveal both their insights and their limitations. In Chapter Two, his sudden rejection of free verse is related to his problematic encounter with modernism, while in Chapter Three, his adoption of traditional meters and forms is seen as the consequence of an intellectual conversion which Winters experienced during the late '20s and early '30s. Chapter Four focuses on the ideology of the social and the political poems which Winters wrote in the '30s and '40s, while Chapter Five addresses the claim that Winters' formalism hindered his development as a poet. The conclusion summarizes the findings of this investigation into the internal dynamics of Winters' poetic career.

Introduction

What is the nature of an author's authority over his or her own work? To what extent is an author's development within his or her own conscious control? To what extent is this development the product of external influences such as language, preexisting literary traditions and the writer's social and historical environment? Finally, to what extent is it the product of the internal dynamics of the literary career itself?

In the chapters that follow I propose to approach these questions by way of Yvor Winters' poetic career. In many respects, Winters provides an ideal test case for such a study. To begin with, his poetic career is quite unlike any other in this century. While there are countless modern poets who have begun as traditionalists only to turn to free verse--one thinks of Williams, Pound, Lowell, Rich, Roethke and Purdy--Winters is unique in having done just the opposite. After eight years of experimentation with free verse, imagism and other modernist techniques, he suddenly abandoned these methods in 1928 to devote himself exclusively to traditional meters and forms.

Yet despite this change of direction, there are several deeply mysterious continuities in his work. Even after he had renounced his early experimental methods in favor of

traditional meters and forms, the same themes which had preoccupied him in his early poems continued to preoccupy him in his mature verse. His attitude toward and treatment of these themes changed with his methods, of course, but there is a very real sense in which his mature poetry is haunted by or obsessed with problems first encountered in the early verse.

In addition, there is the question of the relationship of the poetry to the prose, since Winters was not only a poet but a critic, with a professional interest in the shape of the poet's career. He writes, for instance, of Stevens' career in terms of the "hedonist's progress," and of Frost as a "spiritual drifter." Similarly, he describes Poe's career as a "crisis in the history of obscurantism," and Eliot's as representing a mere "illusion of reaction" against the excesses of modernism. In fact, for many readers, Winters is primarily a critic and only secondarily a poet.

Yet this is not the way that Winters himself viewed his literary career. In fact, he regarded himself as a poet by nature and a critic by necessity. Yet he defended his academic career as one that poses fewer "hazards" for the poet than many other professions. Moreover, he claimed that it had been necessary for him to "divert" a good deal of his energy into prose because in a period of "critical muddleheadedness" that was the best medium with which "to

keep my own ideas in order" ("The Poet and the University: A Reply," (UER 308).

His use of the word "divert" here clearly suggests that in his view the poet's career is central, flanked on the one side by the professor's and on the other by the critic's. Yet the tension between the poetic and the critical careers raises several interesting questions. One would like to think that the two careers can exist harmoniously, that they can offer mutual enrichment. And most of Winters' most sympathetic commentators have insisted that they do, arguing that his poetry was materially aided and enriched by his activities as a critic. Yet his detractors have often argued that the poetry has also been hindered by his criticism. In fact, this is the most persistent charge leveled at Winters. After he abandoned free verse for traditional meters and forms, critics complained that his work suffered. Most blamed this perceived decline on his adherence to ideas contained in his prose. But what exactly is the relationship between the poetry and the criticism? And do the two activities nourish one another, as Winters' most sympathetic commentators have claimed? Or do they encroach upon one another, as his critics have charged?

One could argue, of course, that English literature has produced several major poets who were also major critics. One thinks of Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold and Eliot. Yet it is significant that each of these careers follows a

recognizable pattern, with the poetic career gradually giving way to the critical career. The reasons for this remain unclear. Often it is assumed that as the poet's vitality wanes, he turns to criticism, just as some poets turn to writing novels or to translation when their muse deserts them. But isn't it also possible that a poet-critic might turn from poetry to prose for other reasons? Again, if one thinks of the most famous examples, it seems clear that this development occurs because each has come to feel the criticism more important than the poetry. The same might appear to be true of Winters.

Finally, Winters is an ideal test case for such a study because of the challenge of finding or defining the overarching context of his career. One of the persistent errors of criticism has been the labelling of him as a "New Critic." In one light, of course, he seems to be the most extreme case, the very caricature of the New Critic: a critic who thinks a great poet is someone who has written one great poem, and who thinks some poems are valuable merely for one line or less. Yet Winters was also interested in history and historiography long before there was a New Historicism. Moreover, he was interested in the influence a writer's critical and theoretical principles might have upon his or her work long before such issues became fashionable. Thus the difficulty in "pegging" Winters, since he is neither, or at least not simply, a

formalist, a moralist, or a "New Critic." Instead, he seems to have belonged to a school of one, with various and at times conflicting allegiances.

These puzzles about the nature of his critical enterprise raise important questions about the relevant context of his work, but they also demonstrate the need for and potential value of a sustained examination of the dynamics of his literary career. The state of Winters scholarship at this time would seem to make such a study possible.

In recent years, several important books and articles devoted to Winters' work have appeared. Besides his bibliography of writings by and about Winters, Grosvenor Powell has contributed a thorough commentary on the key terms and concepts in Winters' poetry and prose. His Language as Being in the Poetry and the Prose (1980) contains a detailed discussion of the philosophical background of the mature poetry, as well as a subtle treatment of Winters' lingering attachment to the Romantic assumptions underlying his early verse.¹

In Wisdom and Wilderness: The Achievement of Yvor Winters (1983), Dick Davis provides an informed and perceptive commentary on the poetry. Although he claims

¹A related interest is Powell's article "Yvor Winters: A Poet Against Grammatology" (Southern Review 17 [Autumn 1981]: 814-32), which opposes Winters' critical absolutism to the radical indeterminacy of contemporary deconstruction.

merely to have provided explications of the major poems, Davis has actually defined many of the thematic continuities in the poetry, and helped to define the coherence of the poetry and the prose. In addition, he has identified several of Winters' most substantial debts, including ones owed to Ezra Pound, Irving Babbitt and the intellectual historian H.B. Parkes.²

Most recently, in his plea In Defense of Winters (1986), Terry Comito has situated Winters' writings within the context of recent hermeneutical theory. The strength of his commentary lies not simply in his theoretical awareness but in the sensitivity with which he interprets the epistemological concerns of the poetry. As a result of Comito's work, it is possible to see that Winters' poetry belongs to the modernist movement in ways that his criticism does not always make clear.³

In addition, there are the important contributions to Winters studies made by both Kenneth Fields and John Fraser.

²A version of the third chapter of this book, on Winters' rejection of free verse in favor of traditional meters and forms, appears in Davis' article "Turning Metaphysician: Winters' Change of Direction" (Southern Review 17 [Autumn 1981]: 781-802). Together the book and article provide the most detailed and satisfying account presently available of this important stage in Winters' development.

³A version of Comito's "introductory anecdote" was previously published under the title "Winters' Brink" (Southern Review 17 [Autumn 1981]: 851-72). Like the Davis article mentioned above, it is concerned with Winters' change of direction, which Comito approaches by way of Winters' short story "The Brink of Darkness."

In his unpublished dissertation and his published articles on Winters' work, Fields has done much to relocate the early poems in their literary-historical context, tracing Winters' debts to native American Indian poetry and to other modernist poets--Mina Loy, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams in particular. Moreover, he provides valuable insights into the influence Winters' reading of modern physics had upon his early experimental poems. Fraser's interest in the shape and significance of Winters' critical career is long-standing. Consider, for instance, the title of one of his first articles, "Winters' Summa," which consists of a defense of Forms of Discovery and of the literary-historical judgements contained therein. To this appraisal, we may add the many articles comparing Winters with Leavis, each of which addresses large critical and professional issues: "Leavis, Winters and Tradition," "Leavis, Winters and Concreteness," or "Leavis and Winters: Professional Manners." Finally, there is his essay "Yvor Winters: The Perils of Mind," which treats Winters as a "culture hero" because of his commitment in his art and his life to the ideals of academic and artistic integrity.⁴

⁴For convenience's sake, I have mentioned only those books and articles devoted to Winters' writings which I have referred to most often in my efforts to understand the internal dynamics of his poetic career. But there are, of course, many others valuable commentaries on his work. In addition to Elizabeth Isaac's Introduction to the Poetry of Yvor Winters (Chicago; London; Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/University of Ohio Press, 1981), and Richard J. Sexton's The Complex of Yvor Winters' Criticism (The Hague

As a result of these and other works, we know a great deal about the formal and thematic principles underlying Winters' development as a poet. We also know a great deal about the consistency of thought to be found in the poetry and the prose. Finally, we know a great deal about the philosophical background of many of the ideas contained in his writings. Yet there are many aspects of his development that remain unclear.

Why, for instance, did Winters reject the experimental methods of his formative years when he did? And why was this rejection so sudden and so final? What was involved in his adoption of a traditional formalist poetic? To what extent did his adoption of this poetic determine his response to the social and political realities of his time? Finally, to what extent, if any, did his adherence to a formalist poetic hinder his development?

and Paris: Mouton, 1973), there are several especially valuable articles contained in a special "Yvor Winters Issue" of The Southern Review (17 [Autumn 1981]). Among them the most useful, at least for my own purposes, are the articles by Baxter, Fields, Oliver, Peterson, and Wilmer, each of which deals with a specific aspect of Winters' poetry or his poetic career. I am also indebted to an earlier article by Howard Kaye entitled "The Post-Symbolist Poetry Of Yvor Winters" (Southern Review 7 [1971]: 176-97) and to Robert Von Hallberg's essay "Yvor Winters," in the American Writers series, Supplement II part 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981) 785-816. Preferences are, of course, personal, but in my reading of the criticism devoted to Winters' work, I have turned most often to those commentators who view Winters as a poet first and a critic second, and to those commentaries which have helped me better understand the inner logic of his development as a poet.

In my response to these questions, I have drawn extensively on the work of Powell, Davis, Comito and other Winters scholars, but I have also been influenced by recent theoretical discussions of the literary career, of which, surprisingly, there are very few. The concept of the career as a structure or totality has been with us for some time. In fact, it is a critical commonplace to assume that a literary career possesses an internal coherence, which can be discerned at the level of style, form, theme, or aesthetic principle. Yet until quite recently the career as structure has received very little sustained critical attention.

A notable exception is Edward Said's rich and suggestive discussion of the concept of the literary career in Beginnings: Intention and Method (1975). Said uses Piagetian terminology to define the career as a structure, that is, a unified system of transformations which is capable of self-regulation (191). According to this definition, the literary career is governed by an internal logic which is largely the product of its own systematicity. Although the modern career conforms to no definite pattern, Said argues that it is possible to define the "technicoethical conditions . . . that make a career . . .

possible once the framework of a poetic vocation . . . is no longer available" (231-2).⁵

Said defines four sets of oppositions which may be said to structure the modern literary career. These oppositions are "not abstractions that support a scheme," he writes, "but rather practical exigencies in the form of choices between polar alternatives that an author faces during his career" (231). Although they frequently follow one another, "they are all potentially present in every career and in every phase of a career" Together they compose "the author's career into a development that, from the point of view of his production, is the process that actively creates and finally fulfils his text" (233).

⁵Said's argument rests upon a crucial distinction between the classical poetic vocation and the modern poetic career. "During the earlier European tradition," he writes, "great poets like Dante and Virgil were considered inspired by the poetic afflatus, which also shaped their poetic vocation and guaranteed special allowances for them as vatic seers" In the modern period, however, "the author's career is not something impelled into a specific course by 'outside' agencies, whether they are called inspiration, Muses, or vision." Moreover, whereas "the former required taking certain memorial steps and imitating a ritual progress, in the latter the writer [has] to create not only his art but also the very course of his writings" (227). Said's use of the term "technicoethical" suggests that for the poet technical questions are synonymous with ethical concerns. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on the point and the term must be taken at face value. In fact, to understand the relation of technical and ethical concerns in the poet's work, we need to turn from Said to Winters himself, who makes this a central theme in his criticism (see "Poetry, Morality, and Criticism" for a detailed discussion of this question).

The first of these oppositions is the opposition between career and non-career, between development and mere accumulation. "What every writer . . . militates against," Said writes, "is mere dispersion, the fear that his writing is only a bunch of scattered occasions" (234). For the writer, as for the critic, the concept of the career as a unified structure "permits one to see a sequence of intelligible development, not simply of accumulation" (235).

Equally important as the opposition between career and non-career, or development and dispersion, is the opposition between the career as it exists in the various texts of which it is constituted and the career as it might have been and still may be in the decisions and revisions that comprise the writer's craft or technique. Once a writer becomes conscious that he has embarked upon a career, he must concern himself with trying to ascertain whether he is on the right course. Continuity and consistency become paramount concerns.

Yet it is precisely when a writer becomes conscious of such concerns, and becomes aware too of certain idiomatic patterns in his work, that he must face the choice between repetition and innovation. "What starts to concern him now," Said writes, "is the conflict between fidelity to his manner, to his already matured idiom, and the desire to discover new formulations for himself" (254-5). This conflict is frequently mirrored in the audience's appraisal

of the writer's work, for just as the writer demands that his work grow or develop in new directions, so too does his reader. The greatest writers are those that seem to invent themselves anew at each stage of their development, and yet remain recognizably themselves.

The fourth and final opposition emerges once a writer senses he is nearing the end of his career. Here the opposition is between "the subject of ending . . . on the one hand, and, on the other hand, writing at or near the end" (260). Each writer responds differently to such a dilemma, of course, but certain common responses are discernible. As Said notes, for Yeats "the writer's old age provokes a sort of anatomizing spirit: in its sources and its achievements the career is reduced to a foul rag-and-bone shop" (261). Other writers return to a "recapitulatory, essential image, such as Conrad's Peyrol in The Rover or Gide's Thesée . . ." (261). Still others become explicators of their own texts, as does Eliot in Four Quartets. Finally, there are those rare writers who produce summary texts which mark not an end but a new beginning, such as Mallarmé in his Livre, or Joyce in Finnegans Wake. As Said puts it, each of these texts is a "form of perpetual writing, always at the beginning" (261).

Said's comments are useful for what they tell us about practical exigencies facing the modern writer at crucial moments in his or her development. But their generality

makes it difficult to see how they might be applied to an individual career. Moreover, such comments tell us little about the relation of technical and ethical concerns in individual writers and texts. Lawrence Lipking's The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers (1981) is more valuable for such an undertaking.

In his study of the structure of the poetic career, Lipking traces a number of poets through crucial moments in their development in an effort to determine "what problems and solutions they have in common" (ix). Despite his title, he is not interested in "the facts of poets' lives . . . but in the life that all poets share: their vocation as poets" (viii). As Lipking notes, most biographies of poets "present the development of the hero, his struggle to find a poetic identity, as if it were the product of his own will-- a unique self-making." "Yet no poet becomes himself without inheriting an idea of what it means to be a poet" (viii).

Lipking's study focuses on three particular "moments" in the life of the poet: "the moment of initiation or breakthrough, the moment of summing up, and the moment of passage, when the legacy or soul of the poet's work is transmitted to the next generation" (ix). As he notes, a major poet "may go through many stages, sometimes as often as every few years, and his career may shift direction with every passing wind, but no poet can avoid these testing moments, moments that question whether his work exists,

whether it amounts to any more than the sum of its parts, and whether it will continue to exist" (ix).

Like Said, Lipking is interested in the way the poet's sense of vocation guides his development and shapes his career. But whereas Said treats the problem of the career as an aboriginal problem for the modern writer, since he can no longer follow the same memorial steps which had guided earlier writers, Lipking discerns common patterns in a large number of modern poetic careers. Finally, Lipking's concentration on the poetic career makes his work especially valuable for anyone interested in the literary career of a poet.⁶

There is one other recent theoretical discussion of the internal dynamics of the literary career that deserves mention here. I am referring to Gary Lee Stonum's

⁶In his "Preface" to The Life of the Poet, Lipking actually singles Winters out as a poet-critic who would appear to be opposed to the study of the poetic career. As Lipking rightly notes, for Winters the history of poetry consists of poems, "not poets, not great names, not careers, not history, certainly not critical ideas, but poems--a few priceless verses winnowed from the chaff." Yet, like Said, Lipking regards a poet's concern with the creation and furtherance of his or her career as both a sign and a product of ambition. What unites many of the great poets in the Western literary tradition, he writes, is a "common creed: a faith in greatness." "Their ambition is less to write individual great verses than to become great poets by achieving great poetic careers." Although in his emphasis upon the single perfect poem, Winters may appear not to share in this ambition, he is, by no means a modest poet. In fact, his contempt for careerism may very well imply a reverse ambition. As Lipking observes, "one might argue that resistance to orthodox definitions of greatness and public careers itself constitutes a career ideal" (xii-xiii).

Faulkner's Career: An Internal Literary History (1979).

Stonum's study of Faulkner is most useful for its recognition that a literary career is not simply synonymous with a writer's life and works. In fact, as Stonum observes, it may very well possess an internal coherence all its own. To clarify the nature of this coherence, he refers to the career as a "discipline," or regimen, to which a writer submits, noting that adherence to such a discipline frequently "blurs the categories of subjectivity and personal autonomy that most of us often unthinkingly apply to an individual's actions" (18). Regarded in such terms, a literary career becomes less a course of action which a writer shapes through conscious choice and more a product of its own largely unconscious internal dynamic.

Stonum suggests a method of analysing the internal dynamics of the career in his theory of "internal literary history." In general terms, what he proposes resembles the method outlined by Geoffrey Hartman in a seminal essay in Beyond Formalism (1971). Like Hartman in "Toward Literary History," he recommends a form of literary history written from the point of view of the writer and reflecting the effect of his sense of his own historicity upon his work. In practice, Stonum's method consists of studying individual texts within the context of their various enabling factors, or the specific formal, thematic, methodological and aesthetic principles that make each text possible.

"Studying the enabling principles of one text . . . leads directly," he writes, "to a study of the way successive texts or successive moments in the career are concatenated" (28). In this way, it is possible to determine the structural relationships that exist between individual texts and individual stages in a writer's career.

The most important consequence of these discussions of the literary career is the de-centering of the author. Traditional exegetical criticism generally attributes whatever coherence it finds in a writer's career to the writer himself, and to his conscious intentions at specific moments in his career. Yet, as the work of Said, Lipking and Stonum indicates, conscious intention is only one of several factors determining the shape of a literary career. Developments in structuralist and post-structuralist theory have helped us to identify others, including the influence of language, of preexisting literary traditions, and of the writer's social and historical environment. And to these we may add at least one other, the career itself, since, as we have seen, the literary career may be regarded as a sort of self-regulating system with its own internal logic.

In the chapters that follow, I have attempted to examine Winters' poetic career in the context of these recent theoretical developments. Yet my aim has been not so much to show that Winters' poetic career conforms to some pattern of development which he shares with other modern

poets, such as have been defined by Said and Lipking; nor has it been to provide a structuralist reading of his career such as Stonum provides in his "internal literary history" of Faulkner. Instead, I have attempted to highlight the uniqueness of Winters' career, and to define as precisely as possible those internal and external factors which shaped his development.

Chapter One examines Winters' own understanding of the shape and significance of his career as it is expressed in the few, brief comments he has made on the subject. These comments are by no means definitive or "authoritative," but they do provide valuable insights into Winters' own understanding of his development. In addition, they are useful for what they tell us about the limits of this understanding. Chapters Two and Three examine the two sides of Winters' dramatic change of direction. Winters' sudden and irrevocable abandonment of free verse in the late '20s is related to internal contradictions in his adherence to a modernist poetic inherited from the American experimental poets of the period, while his adoption of traditional meters and forms is seen as the product of an intellectual conversion he experienced at this time, and which may be traced to his reading of H.B. Parkes and Irving Babbitt. Chapters Four and Five focus on the consequences of Winters' adherence to his definition of poetry as a moral discipline. In Chapter Four, I examine the ways in which his mature

poetic determined his response to the social and political realities of his time, while in Chapter Five, I consider the extent to which Winters' formalism may be said to have hindered his development as a poet.

My principal aim throughout has been to determine why Winters' poetic career assumed the shape that it did, and to define as precisely as possible what was involved in his development. Yet I have also been motivated by a desire to save Winters from himself and his disciples. Winters was a strong poet-critic who elicited strong loyalties from his admirers. In their efforts to do justice to the integrity of his "vision," many have viewed his own poetry as a vindication of his criticism and vice versa. Yet what is most striking about such an approach to his poetry is its limitations. A Wintersian reading of his poetry fails to do justice to its richness and subtlety, just as it fails to explain adequately the trajectory of his career. Moreover, it does not adequately address his complex relation to the Romantic and post-Romantic traditions and writers whom he so frequently criticizes in his prose.

Inadvertently, Winters has suffered the fate of many another poet-critic. As Donald Davie has so aptly put it, the poet in him has been immolated for the sake of the critic. In order to appreciate Winters' accomplishments as a poet, we must suppress our knowledge of the criticism, and learn to read the poetry on its own terms. This does not

mean that the poetry and the criticism are unrelated, or that they are somehow inconsistent, but that the tensions and subtleties contained in the poetry are quite different from those contained in the prose. In fact, "there are things happening in Winters' poetry," to quote Davie once more, "that were not even dreamed of in the criticism" (3).

In order to understand precisely what these "things" are, I have treated him primarily as a poet, referring to his prose only when it sheds light on his poetic theory or practice. Moreover, I have tried to read his poetry against the grain, so to speak, focusing equally on the continuities and the discontinuities between theory and practice. Finally, by addressing myself to the concerns outlined above, I have tried to provide a useful supplement to previous accounts of Winters' development, which might be of value not only to Winters scholars but to those readers who are interested in the concept of the literary career in general. My aim throughout has been to determine not only what was involved in Winters' development, but also what was excluded. In this respect, I have tried to define the "limits of judgement" as they pertain to Winters' shaping and controlling of his poetic career.

Chapter One

Writing in the Margins: Yvor Winters on the Shape and Significance of his Poetic Career

The most basic consequence of recent theoretical considerations of the literary career is the radical de-centering of the author. In post-structuralist criticism, a writer's conscious intentions are no longer afforded the privileged status they once received in much traditional exegetical criticism. Instead, conscious intention is regarded simply as one of many factors shaping a text or career, and by no means the most important. In fact, recent theorists, most notably Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, have gone so far as to suggest that the author is a mere function of the text, "a name [which] permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others" (Foucault 107).

It would seem to follow that a writer's comments on his or her work are not especially valuable to the study of that writer's literary career. Yet this is not necessarily true, since such comments need not be regarded as fully authoritative to be of use to the critic. Winters' comments on his work, for instance, contain valuable insights into

the formal and thematic principles underlying his poetry. Though brief and infrequent, they also provide useful information concerning the chronology and the sources of individual poems, as well as the conditions surrounding their composition and production. In addition, they introduce key terms and concepts for interpreting his poetry. Finally, Winters' comments on his work provide valuable insights into the limits of his understanding of the internal dynamics of his career, since, with few exceptions, these comments raise as many questions as they answer about his development.

I

Winters' earliest comments on his poetry, written in response to a review of The Proof (1930) by William Rose Benét (The Saturday Review of Literature, [6 September 1930]: 104), are interesting chiefly for what they tell us about the metrical principles underlying his experiments in free verse. Yet they also reveal his interest in the medium even after he had personally abandoned it in favor of traditional meters and forms.

Benét was one of several reviewers who were critical of The Proof, an important transitional volume containing Winters' final poems in free verse, as well as his first experiments with regular meters and forms. Although Benét had praised individual poems in the volume, his review was

on the whole more critical than it was favorable. In particular, he considered the rhythms in Winters' experiments with free verse "abrupt" and "wrenching," complaining that the lineation was arbitrary and confused. "The meaning [in these poems] is not complicated," he wrote, "but [Winters'] manner of presenting it typographically constantly curbs its natural rhythms" (104). He also felt that the poems written in traditional meters and forms suffered from obscurities which were in large part the result of Winters' need "to find rhymes and pad lines" (104).

In his response to Benét, which appeared in a letter to the editors of The Saturday Review of Literature (4 October 1930: 188), Winters argues that his poems in free verse are not arbitrary and unmetrical, as Benét had charged, but instead contain a careful metrical regularity that becomes clear once its principles are recognized. The metrical foot he is using in these poems consists, he writes, of a single primary stress, one or more secondary stresses, and a variable number of unstressed syllables. Although he concedes that the "relatively large number of syllables results in occasional ambiguities of accent," Winters argues that "such ambiguities are not without their own esthetic value," observing that "comparable ambiguities can be found in Milton or where you will." Moreover, he concludes the letter with an unequivocal endorsement of free verse,

claiming that it has done so much to enrich the modern poet's rhythmic consciousness that he cannot afford to disregard it. Referring to Pound's claim that one should master the standard meters before attempting free, he remarks that "free verse has given us so much that the poet of the future may have to go near to reversing the process" (188).

More interesting still is the "Foreword" which Winters provided for his next volume of poetry, Before Disaster (1934). Although it was written just four years after his letter to the editors of The Saturday Review of Literature, already it presents a very different view of free verse. Whereas he had previously defended his experimental poems, and free verse in general, from charges of obscurantism and arbitrariness, he now defines free verse as an inherently imperfect medium. As he writes in 1934, accentual or free verse "tends to substitute perpetual variety for exact variation; change exists for its own sake and is only imperfectly a form of perception." Accentual syllabic-verse, on the other hand, "provides a norm which accounts for the conformity or deviation of every syllable, renders it possible to perceive every detail in relationship to a perfect norm, and hence makes for the greatest precision of movement, the most sensitive shade of perception, that is, of variation" (iv).

The "Foreword" to Before Disaster also contains Winters' first statement of the major theme of his poems in traditional meters and forms. "The matter of the following verses is, in the main," he writes, "the stress to which the permanent, or ideal, elements of the human character are subjected by the powers of disintegration, by the temptations of Hell, which, though permanent in their general nature, usually take particular forms from the age" (iii). Individual poems are then categorized in relation to this theme. Some are said to be "poems of private experience . . . little conditioned by the age," while others are said to treat "specifically contemporary forms of disruption, private, social, literary, and impersonal." And others still are said to be concerned with "the dominant intellect" (iii).

Finally, Winters relates his newly-adopted formalist procedures to this theme, claiming that regular meters and forms provide the poet with the most reliable means of securing the intelligence against those forces in nature which threaten to destroy it. For Winters, poetry is form; "its constituents are thought and feeling." Any weakening of form impairs the relation of thought to feeling and blunts the intelligence, whose position is particularly precarious in an age such as his own, "an age, that is, in which the insistence of the contemporary has obscured the vision of the permanent" (iv).

Further clarification of this theme appears in a letter to the editors of The New Republic explaining the ideas underlying his use of medieval myth in the poem "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." In this letter, published in The New Republic (2 June 1937: 104), Winters explains that he had conceived the Green Knight as a kind of vegetation demon, "a demon of growth (physical growth), sense, nature in all its non-human signification," while viewing Gawain as an artist figure, one who survives the temptations of the otherness of nature "more through habitual balance than through perfect control at the height of temptation."

Winters' language here recalls the demonic metaphors of his "Foreword" to Before Disaster, and in both the letter to the editors of The New Republic and the "Foreword" the emphasis is upon the precariousness of the human intelligence in the presence of chaos, whether in nature, the world of men and politics, or the mind itself. In the letter to The New Republic, however, he defines this theme at a more general level as "the relationship of the artist toward sensibility," observing that it is "the theme of most of my finest poems for the past seven or eight years." Finally, he voices for the first time a sense of alienation from the literary establishment that will become more prominent in his later comments on his career, complaining that although an explanation of his central theme "may be easily found in my criticism . . . it is unreasonable to

expect anyone will have read either my poems or my criticism."

Winters' early comments provide useful information about the metrical principles and the thematic preoccupations underlying his poetry, but it is the publication of Poems (1940) which marks the most important stage in the development of his understanding of the shape and significance of his career. The volume is the first of three editions of the "collected poems," representing the culmination of twenty years of experimentation in both free verse and traditional meters and forms. As such, it forms the basis of all that is to come after it, since, with one notable exception, each of the successive volumes consists of Poems plus whatever recent poems Winters cared to preserve.⁷

Although Winters is not the first poet to conceive of his oeuvre in terms of a single volume--one thinks of Baudelaire, Whitman, and the Eliot of Poems 1909-1935--he is among the most selective, or, as some would say, the most restrictive, in determining the contents of his oeuvre. This is especially true of his representation of the early phase of his career. Of the more than one hundred and thirty poems which he had written between 1919 and 1928,

⁷The single exception is The Giant Weapon (1943), published by New Directions in a series entitled "Poets of the Year." This collection resembles Poems, except that it contains none of the early free verse poems. Otherwise, after 1940, the canon is stable.

only twenty seven are included in this first substantial collection of his verse, and even this number is reduced in subsequent editions of The Collected Poems.

In his notes for the volume, Winters offers several reasons for excluding so many of his early poems. Chief among them is the claim that many of the early poems are based upon what he now regards as faulty conceptual premises. "The trouble with the ideas back of the poems is an obvious one," he writes: "they offer no method for discrimination between experiences except as either for mere descriptive accuracy or for emotion merely intense or strange. . . ."

He singles out a brief poem called "The Goatherds" to indicate the limitations of the early verse. According to Winters, the poem is "merely descriptive, yet by a kind of superimposed intensity of mood it seems to claim some ulterior significance." Another poem--entitled "Nocturne"--is mentioned as an example of a poem "cohering by virtue of feeling and rhythmic structure, and very little by intelligible theme."

In his comments on the excluded early poems, Winters also introduces key terms and concepts that have proven useful for interpreting his work. He writes of the earliest of the poems in free verse, for instance, that they tend "to vacillate between an attitude . . . of solipsism and one of mystical pantheism," both of which gradually disappeared or

simply blended into a "more literal determinism." He also voices a judgement of the early poems which has been adopted by most subsequent commentators, claiming that because of their faulty conceptual premises and the limitations of the method of composition they employ, they remain inferior to his mature poems in traditional meters and forms. Finally, his comments reveal his sense of estrangement from the literary establishment in the East. In explaining why he had chosen to print his poems himself, he voices a characteristically Wintersian disdain for the Establishment. "The kind of political maneuvering which appears to be a prerequisite at present to the publication of a book," he writes, "is impossible from Los Altos, even if one possess, as I do not, the taste or the talent for it." It is for this reason that he chose not to send copies of the book to the magazines for review.

II

Winters had good reason for feeling estranged from the literary establishment. In less than ten years, he had gone from being regarded as one of the most promising poets of his generation to being one of the least talked about. Not surprisingly, this change in fortune coincided with his change of methods. After his abandonment of free verse for traditional meters and forms, his poetry received less and

less critical attention, and what attention it did receive was frequently unsympathetic, if not openly hostile. Moreover, the increasingly unfavorable critical reception of his work must be regarded as an important determining factor in Winters' development, since it certainly played a part in forming the combative stance so familiar in his criticism, and may also be seen as an influence on his poetry as well.

One need only compare one or two reviews of the early poems with those of his later work to gauge the extent of his decline in the eyes of the critics. As early as 1921, as influential a critic as Harriet Monroe had praised the "delicate beauty" of Winters' early poems in free verse. Although the effect of these poems is sometimes "too tight, too squeezed," Monroe wrote in a review of The Immobile Wind, "this may be the ardor of youth, which will yield its overemphasis in time" (Poetry 18 [1921]: 343). Moreover, when Monroe published her important anthology of the "new poetry" in 1924, a selection of Winters' early poems was included alongside poems by Pound, Eliot, Williams, Stevens, and Moore. Similarly, another reviewer wrote of Winters in 1922 that he "is one of the rare American poets who are active critically, and whose theories are not laid by during the creative process." Pearl Andelson wrote of Winters' art in The Magpie's Shadow (1922): "It is as fundamental and economical as a primitive [art], and at the same time . . . distinctly modern" (Poetry 20 [1922]: 344).

Yet one can already discern the beginnings of Winters' estrangement from the American literary establishment in the critical reception of The Proof. Besides William Rose Benét, several critics expressed dissatisfaction with the direction of Winters' career after the late '20s. The reviewer for The New York Times Book Review (14 December 1930: 22) considered the volume forced and uneven. In some poems, Percy Hutchison remarks, Winters is "clearly following some of the worst mannerisms of the late imagists," while in others "he is trying his hand at the sonnet with amateurish results." Another reviewer laments the results of Winters' "whole-hearted acceptance of several of the dogmas of humanism." In The Proof, Eda Lou Walton writes, Winters continues to address the central theme of his previous poetry, which she defines as the fundamental problem of "the mind's attempt to get at God." Yet, in her view, he has lost his passion, and his most recent poems seem mere histrionics, "a kind of re-dramatizing of an old theme which lies in the memory, but has died emotionally" (The Nation [17 December 1930]: 679-80). In fact, even the most sympathetic reviewers express some dissatisfaction with the poems in The Proof, either because of the obscurity of the experimental poems, which tends to "disintegrate into a febrile mysticism," to quote William Troy (The Bookman 72 [1930]: 190), or because of what Robert Fitzgerald refers to as "an over-reliance on generalities" in the poems written

in traditional meters and forms (The Hound and Horn 4 [1931]: 316).

Yet, though the critical reception of The Proof was generally unfavorable, the volume at least had the distinction of being reviewed. The volumes which succeeded it were all but ignored, except by a few sympathetic poets and critics like Howard Baker and J.V. Cunningham, who were later to be dismissed rather unfairly as disciples of Winters. In one of only two reviews of Before Disaster, Rolfe Humphries anticipates what would become the most frequent criticism of Winters' poetry when he claims that it "lacks something more than the impurity of contemporary color and flavor" (Poetry 45 [1935]: 290). Its deficiency relates to what Humphries refers to as the "synthetic aspect" of Winters' classicism. For Humphries, and for many critics after him, Winters' poetry is not representative of its time precisely because it is cut off from the complexities of modern life that should be its proper subject. Moreover, as Humphries implies, and later commentators state explicitly, this isolation derives in large part from Winters' strict adherence in his poetry to the critical and theoretical principles elaborated in his prose. The consistency of thought in his poetry and prose is no longer considered a virtue, as it was by Andelson and others. It is now regarded as one of the chief contributing factors in Winters' decline as a poet.

The critical reception of Poems tells a similar story. Although Winters had chosen not to send copies of the volume to the magazines for review, a few copies made their way into the hands of the critics. On the whole, the reception was less than favorable. Loyal followers like Donald Stanford, Winters' publisher Alan Swallow, and longtime friend Louise Bogan continued to praise his work, but most were unimpressed by his development. Two critics are particularly important for anticipating many of the adverse criticisms made against Winters in later years.

R.P. Blackmur considered him an able poet who had been crippled by his poetic. As he wrote in a review of Poems which appeared in The Southern Review in 1941, "there is a kind of outward parsimony in all his later work which costs him his inward riches" ("Twelve Poets," Southern Review 7 [1941]: 193). For Blackmur, this "outward parsimony" is the result of Winters' belief that the object of poetic meter and form is to shape and control experience. While this belief may be valid, Blackmur writes, Winters' practice "makes heresy of the principle, making the mere role of meter superior to or exclusive of a vehicle for experience." According to Blackmur, "the characteristic sign of a good poetics is not only that it can absorb any experience but that it must constantly absorb experience to the point of giving in to it." Winters' poetic enables him "to deal only

with matters that can be translated into terms of a logical system--like that of meter or humanism" (193).

Conrad Aiken, writing in The New Republic (21 April 1941: 559), shares many of Blackmur's reservations concerning Winters' poetry. According to Aiken, Winters' conception of classicism "produces a sort of negative purity," which he identifies as a "mild decorousness." More important is his claim that Winters' mature poetics "cannot understand or accept exuberance, either in image or in word." As a result, it "dares not try for intensity or simplicity, which it considers a little too vulgar and easy." Aiken's criticism of Winters' verse derives from his rejection of Winters' conception of poetry. In particular, he questions the need of poetry to lead to intelligence, or to what Winters refers to simply as "wisdom." For Aiken, Winters' successful poems are successful because they reveal an inherently "poetic" meaning and not because they "render up some little surd of a concept."

Of course, not all of the commentaries on Winters' mature poems were unfavorable. In fact, by the time he published the second edition of The Collected Poems in 1952, more than one critic considered him the country's "great unacknowledged contemporary poet." Donald Justice refers to him as "a master obscured by history" (Western Review 18 [1952]: 168). Allen Tate offers his praise for Winters' achievement in an article in The New Republic in 1953.

"Among American poets who appeared soon after the first war," he writes, "he is . . . the master." He has been neglected, as Tate notes, because he has "conducted a poetic revolution all his own that owes little or nothing to the earlier revolution of Pound and Eliot. . . ." According to Tate, several of Winters' poems deserve to be placed "with the best American poetry of the century." In 1960, Robert Lowell also wrote favorably of Winters' poetry. In a review of a subsequent edition of The Collected Poems (1960), he refers to Winters as a "writer of great passion." "Dim-wits have called him a conservative," he remarks, "[but] he is the kind of conservative who was so original and so radical that . . . neither the avant-garde nor the vulgar had an eye for him" (Poetry 98 [1961]: 40-3)."

Yet for each favorable review are two more which criticize Winters' poetry. In general, his detractors have lamented the influence his critical theories have had upon his practise as a poet. Most have claimed that his strict adherence to the formalistic theories elaborated in his prose have robbed his poetry of its "inner riches." Most too have claimed that Winters' formalism cut him off from the complexities of the contemporary world. For many readers, he is, to quote James Dickey from a review of The Collected Poems (1960), "the best example our time has to offer of the poet who writes by the rules, knows just what he wants to do when he begins a poem, and considers himself

compelled to stick to his propositions in everything he sets down" (Sewanee Review 70 [1962]: 496-99). As a result, he has become, in the words of Gabriel Pearson, an "extreme version, almost a parody of, Arnoldian rigor mortis" ("The Defeat of Yvor Winters" The Review 8 [1964]: 3-12).

As even this brief survey indicates, the history of the critical reception of Winters' poetry is largely a history of his gradual estrangement from the American literary establishment. What makes the critical reception of his work most interesting, however, is the fact that it so flatly contradicted Winters' own perception of his development. At precisely the same time that his detractors were mourning his perceived demise--or perhaps gloating would be a better word--Winters was of the opinion that he was finally coming into his own. His awareness of his marginalization by the critical establishment surely played a part in the formation of that reverse ambition which Lipking mentions, namely, his "self consuming devotion to craft" (xii). Like Melville and Dickinson, he eschewed the conventional career of his time not so much out of choice but out of necessity. In point of fact, such a career was denied him.

III

Winters' response to his critics was slow in coming but finally appeared in the mid-1960s. In the three years before his death, he published two extended commentaries on his poetry which were clearly intended to answer his detractors and to explain why his career had assumed the shape that it did. These commentaries are interesting for the portrait they provide of Winters during his youth, and for the information they offer concerning the chronology and the sources of individual poems. But they are most interesting for the blindspots, or aporia, which they reveal in Winters' understanding of his development, blindspots which are crucial in any attempt to define the internal dynamics of his literary career.

The best-known of these commentaries, the introduction to The Early Poems of Yvor Winters (1966), contains a fascinating autobiographical account of the conditions surrounding the early experimental poems. We learn, for instance, of the years of isolation Winters spent in the American Far West, first in New Mexico, where he was sent to convalesce after being diagnosed with tuberculosis, and later in Colorado and Idaho, where he studied and then taught Romance languages and literatures. We learn too of his immersion during these years in the American modernist movement. As Winters writes, he began his career as a

disciple of Pound, Williams, Stevens and Moore. During this period, he read widely in Poetry, Others, The Little Review, and whatever books and magazines Harriet Monroe or Marianne Moore were able to send him from Chicago and New York. As he writes in the introduction to the Early Poems, during this formative period of his career "these magazines and a few books were my chief sources of education . . ." (12).

Such comments go a long way toward re-situating the early poems within their original context, enabling us to see them as the product of his study of the American experimental poetry of the 1920s, and of his extreme isolation during these years. But they offer little else that can help us understand the poems, or their place within Winters' oeuvre. For instance, the introduction to The Early Poems adds very little to our understanding of why Winters abandoned the methods he had used in composing them, or why he waited more than forty years to re-publish his early experimental work. Of his change of methods, he simply says that it occurred for practical reasons and not because of "any sudden religious or intellectual conversion":

It was becoming increasingly obvious to me [during the late 1920s] that the poets whom I most admired were Baudelaire and Valéry, and Hardy, Bridges, and Stevens in a few poems each, and that I could never hope to approach the quality of their work by the method which I was using. I changed my method, explored the new method, and gradually came to understand the theoretical reasons for the change which I had made as a practical necessity (15).

As for his re-publication of these poems some thirty years after he had first allowed them to go out of print, Winters remarks that "some one would do this in any event, and probably some one who would sweep all of my uncollected work into a single volume, with no indication of what I considered my best work and as I was writing and publishing it" (11). By publishing the poems himself, he clearly intended to provide an "authorized edition" of his early experimental poems.

Yet Winters' introduction to his Early Poems leaves unanswered several important questions about his development. It says nothing, for instance, about the factors contributing to his change of methods in the late '20s. Nor does it address the complex relationship that exists between the early experimental poems and the mature poems in traditional meters and forms. Finally, it does little to refute the claim, so frequently made, that the mature poems are the product of prescriptive formulae. To such a charge, he simply says that "I wrote as anyone writes, with what intelligence I could muster at the time, improving my intelligence as I went along" (15).

If Winters' introduction to his Early Poems seems unsatisfactory as a commentary on his poetry, and on his career in general, this is even more true of his other extended commentary on his work from this period, an article which appeared in Twentieth Century Literature in the spring

of 1965. Like his first direct comment on his poetry--his letter to the editors of The Saturday Review of Literature--"By Way of Clarification" was written in response to a review of his verse, this time by a former student of Winters at Stanford, a young American writer by the name of Alan Stephens. At issue in the dispute between Winters and Stephens is the nature of the coherence to be found in The Collected Poems. Also at issue here is the relation of theory and practice in the poet-critic's work. Finally, there is at issue in this debate the larger question of the authority an author has over his or her own work. Since neither piece is well-known, and since the questions they raise are central to a study of the internal dynamics of Winters' career, I would like to conclude this chapter by looking at each in some detail.⁸

Although it has been overlooked by Winters scholars, Alan Stephens' review of The Collected Poems, which appeared in Twentieth Century Literature in the fall of 1963, is among the most comprehensive and perceptive of the early commentaries on Winters' career. Stephens is the first critic, for instance, to try to do justice to the range and vitality of Winters' poetry. He is also the first critic to

⁸Inexplicably, "By Way of Clarification" is not even included in Francis Murphy's edition of The Uncollected Essays and Reviews (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1973). The omission of this article, and Winters' essay "On the Possibility of a Co-operative History of American Literature" (American Literature 12 [1940]: 297-305) are among the most serious oversights in the volume.

try to read Winters' poetry on its own terms, and not simply as it exemplifies his critical and theoretical principles. Moreover, though others before him had seen a coherence in The Collected Poems, he actually attempts to define its principles. Finally, Stephens writes perceptively on the thematic continuities in Winters' poetry long before most critics even recognized their existence.

For Stephens, the Collected Poems contains a coherence which becomes clear once we recognize its principles. The early experimental poems included in the volume issue from the poet's preoccupation with the immersion of consciousness in sensation in order to extend the boundaries of the mind. Many are concerned exclusively with the present, and with the accurate rendering of minute natural phenomena. "The scene of these poems," he writes, "is mainly the 'pale mountains' of the Southwest, and the protagonist is a consciousness that is solitary, that refrains from believing and reflecting, that is confined in the moment and sustained only by the given" (127).

Gradually, however, the minimalism of the early poems gives way to a more inclusive realism, as the protagonist is forced to "take into account more than the moment, [and] becomes able to stand apart from the immediate, to observe himself, and others as well, located in the seasons that eventually span his sojourn." In the last poems from this period, Stephens writes, "time and general ideas come into

view" (128). In the poem "Quod Tegit Omnia," for instance, "the active intelligence emerges from hibernation," while in another poem, "The Rows of Cold Trees," which Stephens regards as Winters' valediction to free verse, "the idea appears to be that from the primitive experience of the preceding poems [the poet] will elaborate his own tradition . . ." (129).

According to Stephens, Winters emerged from his early preoccupation with the immersion of consciousness in sensation only to proceed to its direct opposite, a preoccupation with the Idea in its essential or absolute form. The group of sonnets with which the later work opens, he suggests, may be read as Winters' critique of the hazards of pure reason. In these poems, Stephens writes, "the analytical intelligence attempts to close directly on Nature, as did the almost pre-human consciousness of the earliest poems" (129). In both cases, the result is failure: Nature remains unknowable, while the human intelligence is all but destroyed. As Winters writes in "The Moralists": "No man can hold existence in the head."

Stephens also discovers important thematic continuities in Winters' poetry. Even after the change of methods in the late 1920s, he argues, Winters continues to explore many of the same themes and experiences which had preoccupied him in the early poems. In fact, many of his finest mature poems in traditional meters and forms recall the early

preoccupation with the immersion of consciousness in sensation. Among the most notable are "The Slow Pacific Swell," "On a View of Pasadena from the Hills," and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," which, according to Stephens, contains Winters' single most successful treatment of this theme. "The protagonist of this piece," to quote Stephens, "deals on a heroic scale with the original concern of Winters' poetry: human encounters with pristine sensation which menaces and enriches" (135).

Besides defining the principles underlying the coherence of The Collected Poems, and identifying the thematic continuities in Winters' verse, Stephens also offers several trenchant criticisms of his former teacher's work. Chief among them is the criticism he makes concerning the influence that Winters' critical theories have had upon his practice as a poet. Like Blackmur, Aikens, and others, he considers this influence to be damaging. But his criticism is more penetrating than that of any of the previous critics. Stephens is particularly concerned with the notion that the end of poetry is wisdom, acquired not in order to live better but for its own sake, "even though [Winters] clearly sees his program is fatal." "Whatever one thinks of this notion," he writes, "it brings on a psychological danger: . . . 'once a man has perfected a technique for complaint, he is more at home with sorrow than without it . . .'" According to Stephens, in some poems

"one senses that Winters takes his tragic stance with too much self-satisfaction" (136). Moreover, he finds evidence for this in Winters' diction, which in its range "is very narrow and, at its severest, makes the work rigid."

In addition to his criticism of the effect of theory upon practice in Winters' work, Stephens also discusses the hazards of his use of purely sensuous language in order to express abstract ideas. As Winters himself has written, if used effectively, "the purely metaphysical language and the language of sensory perception [should] reflect upon each other, inform each other, so that we have the impression of a more or less continuous texture" (quoted in Stephens 137). Yet, as Stephens writes, "if the metaphysical portion is unclear or incomplete, the lines will . . . remain merely portentously cryptic, and with a cultish look about them" (137). Finally, he questions Winters' use of conventional poetic language and syntax. Although he admits that it is unfair to isolate specific passages from their contexts, he concludes that "in reacting against some of the experimental excesses of the time, Winters now and then assumes a kind of monumental numbness" (138).

Winters' response to Stephens' review of The Collected Poems consists largely of an angry rebuke of his former student for his misreading of his poetry. The article contains valuable information concerning the chronology and the sources of several of his early experimental poems.

Moreover, as one of the last, and by far the most detailed commentaries which he ever provided on his own poetry, "By Way of Clarification" may be regarded as Winters' "authoritative" or "definitive" statement on his development. Yet what makes this document most interesting is the fact that, despite its title, it actually tells us very little about Winters' development. In fact, the essay raises more questions than it answers.

Chief among these is the question of Winters' tone. Throughout "By Way of Clarification," Winters addresses Stephens as a teacher scolding an errant pupil. The tone is appropriate in at least one sense, since Stephens had studied with Winters at Stanford. In fact, according to Winters, this is precisely the reason he chose to reply to Stephens' review of his Collected Poems and not to any of the others that had appeared in recent years. As Winters writes: "Some years ago Stephens studied under me at Stanford for a year, and I saw a good deal of him, and many people know this; such people may have the impression that he received his interpretations of many of my poems from me" (130). Winters' article is clearly intended to dispel such an impression.

Yet to fully understand the hostility of his response to Stephens, we must see that it belongs to a rhetoric of authority adopted, unconsciously perhaps, to undermine the validity of his former student's article. Thus Winters

details the many faults in Stephens' scholarship, ranging from his ignorance of the chronology of several of the early poems, and his failure to define key terms in his argument, to the misguided assumption that in giving us a list of words and figures most commonly encountered in The Collected Poems he has said something meaningful about Winters' style or diction. "At Stanford," Winters writes, "we should penalize an undergraduate for these or similar blunders" (133).

His criticism of Stephens' article rests upon his rejection of two assumptions running throughout the piece: "first, that from the beginning of my career I knew everything that I know at present, but merely made arbitrary choices with regard to what I would or would not use . . . ; and second, that the poems are absolutely in chronological order." The first of these assumptions he dismisses out of hand, claiming that it would be "foolish" to regard any career in this manner. To the second, he devotes considerably more attention, pointing out that the poems in his Collected Poems are seldom in exact chronological order. "The order is sometimes accidental," he writes, "and sometimes due to considerations which have now slipped my failing memory" (130).

In addition, he rejects Stephens' interpretation of individual poems, such as "The Rows of Cold Trees," which Stephens had regarded as one of his last poems in free verse

and a valediction to the form. As Winters points out, the poem first appeared in a little magazine entitled 1924, which was published, as its title would indicate, in 1924. It was written, he observes, "at a time when I was doing my most radical experimenting in [free verse]; it was not a valediction to the method, as Stephens says--far from it" (130).

He also rejects Stephens' interpretation of the poem "Quod Tegit Omnia" as a "prelude to my reformation." According to Winters, the poem was written after "The Rows of Cold Trees," and contains "no hint of the subject which Stephens finds there." Similarly, he questions Stephens' juxtaposition of two particular poems, "Alone" and "Song of the Trees," as well as the suggestion that the latter poem concerns "a metaphysical plight." "'The Song of the Trees' is a dramatic poem," Winters writes; "the speaker is each tree in a grove." The title comes from a Chippewa poem which he first read in translation in his youth. Moreover, this was his last poem in free verse, and not "The Rows of Cold Trees," as Stephens had claimed. Yet it was by no means a valediction--"for when I abandoned the form I merely abandoned it abruptly," Winters writes, "because I found it unsatisfactory; [the poem] deals with no metaphysical plight."

In fact, he claims, Stephens might have more profitably compared the poem "Alone" with another of the early poems, a

piece called "The Lie," since both deal with "a kind of solipsistic mysticism." "This solipsism," Winters remarks, "was not arrived at by philosophical method: it struck me as a kind of revelation in my early childhood, and stayed with me for some years; I had to think my way out of it" (132).

In addition to correcting Stephens' mistakes regarding the chronology of individual poems, Winters devotes considerable space to minor errors and inconsistencies in his interpretation of his work. Thus he faults Stephens for mistaking the setting of the poem "The Slow Pacific Swell," and for failing to define the meaning of the term "cultish" as he uses it in his criticism of "A Spring Serpent." Similarly, he chastises Stephens for failing to make any use of the list of words he has assembled from The Collected Poems. Such a list might be used to determine a poet's dominant theme, Winters writes, "[but] Stephens does nothing with his list." "He merely offers it with grim satisfaction" (134).

Yet what is most interesting about such comments is the fact that quite often they are either wrongheaded or curiously beside the point. For instance, it is clear that Stephens has included the list of words which he has drawn from The Collected Poems for a purpose, namely, to indicate the effect that Winters' mature poetic has had upon his practice. The words are highlighted to confirm the claim that Winters does at times seem to take too much self-

satisfaction in his tragic stance. In fact, Stephens makes this point directly when he says of Winters' "stoical" vocabulary that its "vice is merely to assert rather than to substantiate those qualities and modalities of the world which suit Winters' elegiac 'equipment'" (137).

Winters' response to Stephens' reading of "The Slow Pacific Swell" is equally problematic. According to Stephens, the poem is one of Winters' finest, not only because of its superlative treatment of his central theme--the relation of the human and the natural worlds--but because of Winters' brilliant use of the heroic couplet, and his entirely successful handling of a "post-symbolist" imagery. As Stephens writes, "the subject [of the poem] is never stated directly." "Instead it develops amongst the details, implicitly taking on weight and outline from the steady accumulation of analogies and inferences which they prompt while remaining intact at the surface" (132). Yet Winters' response to Stephens' high praise of the poem is simply to point out that he has mistaken its setting. It is not set at sunrise, as Stephens claims, but at sunset, since "I am virtually sure that the ocean could not be seen at sunrise from my hilltop (132).

Though Winters is adept at pointing out the deficiencies in Stephens' scholarship, and the minor errors and the inconsistencies in his comments of individual poems, it is interesting to note that he does not respond to

Stephens' major criticisms of his work. For instance, Winters says nothing about the influence his critical theories have had upon his development as a poet. Nor does he comment upon the thematic continuities which Stephens discerns in his verse. Finally, Winters remains silent upon the charge that his poems occasionally seem "too much at home with sorrow." As a result, "By Way of Clarification" seems unsatisfactory as a commentary on Winters' poetry, and unequal in insight to the article which had prompted it.

Although Winters' comments on his poetry help us to understand the formal and thematic principles underlying his experiments in free verse and traditional meters and forms, and provide valuable insight into the central theme of his mature poetry, they are by no means definitive. They tell us very little, for instance, about the various factors that contributed to his sudden rejection of free verse in favor of traditional meters and forms. Nor do they help us to understand the thematic continuities that are present in his poetry long after his change of methods. Finally, they provide little that is useful for our understanding of the influence his critical theories had upon his practise as a poet. To address these issues, and to understand why Winters' career assumed the shape that it did, we must move beyond his own account of his development, and answer the questions that Winters himself was either unwilling or unable to answer.

Chapter Two

Winters' Visionary Poetic: The Early Poems

Among the many points of disagreement between Winters and Stephens, perhaps the most fundamental is their disagreement over the relative importance of Winters' early experimental poems in his development. As we have seen, Winters would have his readers believe that these poems are relatively unimportant. Though they are as good as any of the experimental poems of this century, he writes, they are inferior to his mature work. His estimation of their value is most evident in his exclusion of all but a small number from his Collected Poems. Stephens, on the other hand, regards the early poems as central, claiming that they introduce in embryonic form the themes which will preoccupy Winters throughout his poetic career. Moreover, his discovery of important thematic continuities between the early poems and the mature verse lends considerable weight to his argument. In fact, as subsequent commentators have demonstrated, it is possible to discern in the early experimental poems traces of Winters' central theme.

Yet the practice of reading a writer's early work for the light it sheds on what comes after it does have its limitations. As Winters himself noted, in connection with

the Stephens review, if misapplied it gives rise to at least one false impression, namely, that "from the beginning of my career," to quote Winters, "I knew everything that I know at present, but merely made arbitrary choices with regard to what I would or would not use." Winters rightly concludes that "this assumption would be foolish in dealing with anyone" (130). In addition, the practice of reading a writer's work exclusively in the context of his or her mature work suggests, to quote Stonum, that a writer's career inevitably develops as "a linear development or a gradual evolution of its own latent tendencies" (25). Yet this is not always the case. Winters' development, for instance, is neither linear nor gradual. In fact, his mature poetry does not evolve from his early experimental poetry so much as from his rejection of its formal, thematic and aesthetic principles. Finally, by reading a writer's early writings too exclusively in the context of his mature work, we run the risk of divorcing the poems from their original social and historical contexts.

To understand the importance of the early poems in Winters' development then, we must suspend our capacity for hindsight, to borrow a phrase from Stonum, and try to read the poems on their own terms and within their original contexts. Moreover, we must consider why this phase of Winters' development took the shape that it did, and why Winters felt it necessary to change directions when he did.

As we have seen, Winters regarded his abandonment of the modernist or experimental methods of his youth in largely formal and practical terms. But most critics have recognized that more was involved in his change of direction than a simple change of methods. Dick Davis, for instance, argues that this development was the result of a psychological and spiritual crisis which Winters experienced during the late 1920s; and, as Davis demonstrates, there is considerable evidence in both the poetry and the prose from this period to support such a theory.⁹ But there is another contributing factor which played a substantial part in Winters' development during this period which has received very little sustained critical attention, namely, the problematic and at times contradictory nature of Winters' early engagement with modernism. In fact, it is possible to see Winters' sudden rejection of free verse in favor of traditional meters and forms as the result of irresolvable contradictions in his adherence to an essentialist poetic which he had inherited from his modernist predecessors.

⁹Davis' argument is most succinctly stated in his essay "Turning Metaphysician: Winters' Change of Direction," Southern Review 17 (Autumn 1981): 781-802. For a similar biographical-psychological approach to Winters' change of direction, see Terry Comito on "Winters' 'Brink,'" Southern Review 17 (Autumn 1981): 851-72. Each writer considers Winters' sudden abandonment of his early experimental methods as the result of a spiritual or psychological crisis which Winters suffered during the late '20s.

I

As Lawrence Lipking has observed, "no poet becomes himself without inheriting an idea of what it means to be a poet" (viii); and Winters is no exception. When he began his poetic career in the early 1920s, his ambition was to become a "modern" poet in the sense that the word modern was understood at the time. His masters, by his own account, were the major modernist or experimental poets of the previous generation--Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Stevens--and his admiration for their work is evident throughout his early criticism.¹⁰

Given his admiration for these poets, it should come as no surprise to find that several of his own early experimental poems contain echoes, allusions, and even deliberate borrowings from their work. His earliest poems in free verse, for instance, recall certain of Pound's poems

¹⁰Although he was best known in his later years for his criticism of these poets, throughout his early reviews he frequently refers to Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Stevens as the finest poets of their generation, claiming that together they comprise "a tradition of culture and clean workmanship" to which the poets of his own generation may aspire. He refers to Pound on several occasions as a "genuinely great poet," and describes Stevens as "the greatest of living and American poets." Similarly high praise is lavished on Williams and Crane in the early reviews. Moreover, even after he had abandoned his own ambition to become a member of that tradition, Winters continued to praise the accomplishments of the American modernist poets. In fact, as late as 1937, almost ten years after his own change of direction, he continued to describe Williams, Pound, and Stevens as "masters of free verse" (IDR 124).

in their use of rather long and obvious rhythms. Similarly, his use of quick, nervous meters in his subsequent experiments in free verse clearly derive from his study of Williams' metrics, as does his "imagism"; and his preoccupation with the themes of death and re-birth in many of his final experimental poems, especially those contained in the Fire Sequence, clearly echoes Eliot's treatment of these themes in The Waste Land. Yet such debts seem minor when compared to the influence of an entire tradition.

In fact, Winters' early poems belong to what we might call the visionary tradition of modernism. His earliest and most explicit formulation of his own visionary poetic appears in a lengthy theoretical article on the mechanics of the poetic image. "The Testament of a Stone," which first appeared in Secession in the spring of 1924, consists of a painstakingly methodical analysis of the different types of poetic image and anti-image available to the contemporary poet. An image is defined as a "fusion of sense-perceptions" that produces "aesthetic emotion" (UER 199), an anti-image as an image that appeals simultaneously to the senses and the intellect. The article testifies to Winters' immersion in imagism during these years and to his desire to adapt imagist theory to his own practical needs. It also contains several rhetorical moments which allow us to glimpse Winters' general conception of poetry during this period of his career.

In the "Foreword" to the "Testament," Winters defines a poem as "a state of perfection at which a poet has arrived by whatever means." According to this definition, a poem is "a stasis in a world of flux and indecision, a permanent gateway to waking oblivion, which is the only infinity and the only rest" (UER 195). Elsewhere in the same article he identifies this moment of stasis with the fusion of the poet's consciousness with the object of his contemplation. In language reminiscent of Schopenhauer and high Romantic doctrine, he writes that "the poet, in creating, must lose himself in his object" (198).

Winters' earliest poems issue from his adherence to this poetic. The protagonist of these poems is, as Alan Stephens observes, the solitary consciousness of the poet as perceived amidst the desert landscape of the Southwest (127). Yet it is important to note that this landscape is not evoked for its own sake but as a symbol of what lies beyond it. The poet's gaze is directed toward those forms of reality that can be perceived through nature. Like Hart Crane, the young Winters observes a fundamental distinction between mere impressionism and "absolute poetry." "The impressionist creates only with the eye and for the readiest surface of consciousness," Crane writes in his statement of "General Aims and Theories." An absolute poetry, on the other hand, uses the "real" world as "a springboard . . . [to apprehend] a certain spiritual illumination, shining

with a morality essentialized from experience. . . ." "It is as though a poem gave the reader as he left it a single, new word," Crane concludes, "never before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate, but self-evident as an active principle in the reader's consciousness henceforward" (Weber 220-1).

For Crane and Winters alike, the desire for the absolute generally takes the form of a passive longing for an unattainable beauty. The truth that each seeks seems always to appear and disappear just beyond his reach. Often it recalls Keats' "memory of music fled"--it is all the more haunting because of its ephemerality. There is also a vaguely Keatsian languor evident in many of these poems. The source of this languor can be discerned in Crane's definition of a poem as a "single new word, never before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate. . . ." That is to say, the elegiac tone which is so typical of the early poems of Crane and Winters derives from a belated awareness of the ineffableness of the beauty each seeks. This sense of belatedness is evident in Crane's "Pastorale," which begins with the observation:

No more violets,
 And the year
 Broken into smoky panels.
 What woods remember now
 Her calls, her enthusiasms.

Similarly, Winters' first volume of poems, The Immobile Wind (1921), opens with "Two Songs of Advent" commemorating the arrival of spring:

I

On the desert, between pale mountains, our cries--
Far whispers creeping through an ancient shell.

II

Coyote, on delicate mocking feet,
Hovers down the canyon, among the mountains,
His voice running wild in the wind's valleys.

Listen! listen! for I enter now your thought.

The first of many poems by Winters on this theme, they are more melancholy than celebratory since the advent they describe only hovers on the edge of consciousness, declaring itself and then vanishing.

Winters' earliest poems are motivated by a desire to express the inexpressible, to give form to what is perceived only by the mind's eye. Many of them are extremely slight, their themes as tenuous as the delicate almost unnoticeable natural phenomena they describe. What distinguishes them from the merely descriptive nature poetry of the period is their "rapt intensity," to borrow a phrase from Dick Davis. The title poem from The Immobile Wind is representative of Winters' poems in the visionary mode:

Blue waves within the stone
Turn like deft wrists interweaving.

Emotion, undulant, alone.
 Curled wings flow beyond perceiving.

Swift points of sight,
 mystic and amorous little hands,
 The wind has drunk
 as water swallows sifting sands.

The wings of a butterfly
 Feel of the wind
 Tentatively, as men die
 In thought, that have not sinned.

The speaker in this poem appears to be examining layers of blue-colored quartz within a stone. The layers of quartz are likened to "blue waves" that turn like "deft wrists interweaving," an image which in turn is likened to the image of "curled wings [that] flow beyond perceiving." The poem is held together by what Crane would call a "logic of metaphor." The images are selected less for their logical or literal significance than for their associational meanings. Common to each of the images in "The Immobile Wind" is the idea of motion. Yet the heart of the poem lies in the third line--"Emotion, undulant, alone"--since what Winters is trying to convey here is the fluctuation of a specific emotion as it registers on the mind's nerve patterns. The "rapt intensity" with which he gazes on this quartz-layered stone is indicative of his effort to "lose himself in his object."

Other poems from this period attest to the intensity of Winters' desire to write an "absolute" poetry of the kind described by Hart Crane. "One Ran Before" evokes the perfect silence at the heart of the visionary experience:

I could tell
 Of silence where
 One ran before
 Himself and fell
 Into silence
 Yet more fair.

And this were more
 A thing unseen
 Than falling screen
 Could make of air.

As Kenneth Fields has noted, the silence evoked in this poem resembles the silence that one encounters in French Symbolist poetry of the nineteenth century. The poem evokes not so much "the absence of sound, as the presence of all sound, just as white [is] not the absence of color, but the presence of all color" ("Forms of the Mind" 954).

The most charming of the visionary poems from this period is the poem "To Be Sung By A Small Boy Who Herds Goats." Although it resembles "One Ran Before" in its fascination with the immersion of consciousness in sensation, it is slightly more complex. The speaker in the poem is the goatherd of the title, who celebrates the simple animal pleasures of his vocation:

Sweeter than rough hair
 On earth there is none:
 Rough as the wind
 And brown as the sun!

I toss high my short arms,
 Brown as the sun!
 I creep over the mountains
 And never am done!

Sharp-hoofed, hard-eyed,
 Trample on the sun!
 Sharp ears, stiff as wind,
 Point the way to run!

Who on the brown earth
 Knows himself one?
 Life is in lichens
 That sleep as they run.

"The poem coheres," to quote Fields, "by virtue of simple association of details, roughness, brownness and motion being the chief qualities" ("Forms of the Mind" 945). The purpose of these associations is to evoke the interpenetration of human and non-human in this quintessentially pastoral scene. Earth, wind and sun are identified with the goat, while in the third stanza the goatherd assumes the animal's identity. In the fourth stanza, however, another voice enters the poem, that of the poet, who regards this pantheistic moment from the outside, so to speak. With this new voice, the tone of the poem alters slightly, from one of celebration to one of nostalgic longing.

"Jose's Country" also belongs to the visionary phase of Winters' career. The poem evokes the remoteness of a summer afternoon as seen through the "haze of pondered vision":

A pale horse,
 Mane of flowery dust,
 Runs too far for a sound
 To cross the river.

Afternoon,
 Swept by far hooves
 That gleam
 Like slow fruit
 Falling
 In the haze
 Of pondered vision.

It is nothing.
 Afternoon
 Beyond a child's thought,
 Where a falling stone
 Would raise pale earth,
 A fern ascending.

The most notable feature of the poem is its almost hypnotic intensity, which derives in part, to quote Fields once again, "from the separation of the visible . . . from the audible" (The Rhetoric of Artifice 236). The effect of this separation is to increase both the silence and the distance described in this desert scene. But this intensity also derives from the poet's impassioned search for an ulterior meaning in the physical landscape he describes. In "Jose's Country" that search is rewarded in the very lovely final image of a "fern ascending" the "pale earth."

To this list of Winters' early visionary poems, we can add the extremely brief, imagistic poems from his second volume of verse, The Magpie's Shadow (1922). Modelled on Native American Indian poems which Winters had read in translation, they consist of simple sense perceptions organized into six-syllable units. The natural cycle of the seasons gives the volume its structure.

Like Crane, Williams, Marsden Hartley, and many of his contemporaries, Winters admired Native American Indian culture for retaining what modern American culture had lost, an indigenous relationship with the land and a ritual language to express that relationship. As he wrote in "The Indian in English" in 1928, Native American poetry has a

unique "spiritual value" which resides in its expression of a "sense of unity of both race and individual with the physical . . . universe, which gives all phenomena, personal or objective, an immediacy to the perceiver and a vastness of emotional implication, which our culture, with its causes, explanations, and mystic dualisms has lost" (UER 42). The poems in The Magpie's Shadow are motivated by Winters' desire to recover that sense of unity for himself, and to endow the physical world with the immediacy and the vastness of emotional implication which he had discovered in Native American poetry.

Yet despite such ambitions, the power of these poems comes from their economy and their clarity. In "Awakening," the speaker expresses in a single image of almost totemic intensity his sudden consciousness of the natural world's pristine beauty:

New snow, O pine of dawn!

"The Aspen's Song" describes the tree's consciousness of its own fragile being:

The summer holds me here.

As Fields puts it, "the image of leaves trembling on the tree, as if to take off, catches precisely the transitoriness of summer" ("Forms of the Mind" 951).

Finally, "God of Roads" evokes the breadth of a summer vista through the fluid motion of the peregrine falcon's flight:

I, peregrine of noon.

Here Winters creates an image combining stasis and motion; the swiftness of the falcon's flight is measured against the fixity of noon. Although these poems are even more slight than those we have looked at from The Immobile Wind, they attest to Winters' continuing adherence to a visionary poetic whose object is the immersion of consciousness in nature. As Terry Comito puts it, "such poems are not static representations of the world but . . . acts of becoming one with it" (52).

Yet the fullest expression of this visionary poetic appears in "Quod Tegit Omnia," from The Bare Hills (1927). The poem, which is generally considered one of Winters' finest experiments in free verse, provides the clearest statement of the aesthetic assumptions underlying his early work:

Earth darkens and is beaded
with a sweat of bushes and
the bear comes forth;
the mind, stored with
magnificence, proceeds into
the mystery of Time, now
certain of its choice of
passion but uncertain of the
passion's end.

When
Plato temporizes on the nature
of the plumage of the soul the
wind hums in the feathers as
across a cord impeccable in
tautness but of no mind:

Time,
 the sine-pondere, most
 imperturbable of elements,
 assumes its own proportions
 silently, of its own properties--
 an excellence at which one
 sighs.

Adventurer in
 living fact, the poet
 mounts into the spring,
 upon his tongue the taste of
 air becoming body: is
 embedded in this crystalline
 precipitate of Time.

As Fields notes, Winters' title refers to Ovid's The Metamorphoses, and to the sky "which touches everything" ("Forms of the Mind" 960). Like Ovid--and Ovidian modernists like Pound, Williams, and Crane--he is concerned with change, in particular, the moment of transformation: from winter to spring, from unconsciousness to wakefulness, from chaos to form. The first lines of the poem dramatize the awakening of the poet's consciousness from what Winters elsewhere refers to as a "dreamless, earthen sleep." The image of the bear emerging from hibernation suggests the tentative, halting movement of the mind's groping toward reality--a movement reflected in the halting rhythm of the lines--and its entanglement in the natural world from which it emerges. Winters' conception of the inextricability of mind and matter accounts for the difficulty one encounters in trying to disentangle the vehicle and the tenor in this metaphor.

In the middle section of the poem, Plato is treated as a representative of philosophy, which is associated here with empty abstraction. At this particular moment in his career, Winters shares the modernist mistrust of abstraction. In fact, in "The Testament of a Stone," he defines the philosopher as a poet who has "lost his sense of the infinite nature of his world and organizes it into a knowable and applicable principle . . ." (UER 197). His pun on Plato's "temporizing" on the "nature of the plumage of the soul" derives from this view of philosophy. Plato's definition of the soul, like his philosophy in general, may be "impeccable in tautness," but it is "of no mind." That is to say, it remains unthinkable and therefore irrelevant.

In contrast to philosophy, poetry offers one a means of knowing oneself in the world. The poet is described as an "adventurer in living fact," and his immersion of consciousness in nature as a quasi-religious moment of communion. This is particularly clear in the imagery of transubstantiation used in the last lines of the poem. As he mounts into the spring, the poet is bodied forth in the world, incarnated, so to speak, and thus made real to himself as a part of the world he perceives. The result is an apotheosis in which he is absorbed into time, that "most / Imperturbable of elements." It is significant that the metaphor used to describe this apotheosis is essentially static and temporal: the poet is "embedded in this

crystalline / precipitate of time." Like Pound's "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," or Eliot's "still point of the turning world," Winters' "crystalline precipitate" represents a privileged moment of perception which is simultaneously in and out of time.

II

The poems gathered together in The Bare Hills (1927) signal an important development in Winters' early visionary poetry. The simple ballad-like meters and forms of the early poems give way to a variety of experiments with accentual meter. Whereas the early poems are written in a kind of free verse which is "slow in movement, with a heavily accented line which is usually end-stopped," those which begin to appear in the mid-1920s employ a more complex variety of free verse which is "generally rapid, usually with shorter lines which run over frequently, the rhythmic unit being the stanza or the whole poem . . ." (Fields The Rhetoric of Artifice 226). Other differences are discernible as well. Abstractions begin to appear alongside the purely sensuous imagery that had dominated the early poems. The minimalism of The Immobile Wind and The Magpie's Shadow is replaced by a more discursive style. Moreover, this style permits personal references of a sort inconsistent with the impersonality of the early minimalism.

Finally, the rhetoric of the poems becomes more forced and violent.

Yet the single most important difference between the poems in The Bare Hills and those from the two previous volumes resides in the gradual shift in Winters' attitude toward the visionary experience at the heart of his experiments in free verse. Although he continues to regard the immersion of consciousness in nature as the proper goal of poetry, he no longer perceives the moment of expanded consciousness resulting from this immersion in wholly positive terms. His ambivalence toward the visionary experience is evident in a few of the very early poems, such as "Alone":

I, one who never speaks,
Listened days in summer trees,
Each day a rustling leaf!
Then, in time, my unbelief
Grew like my running:
My own eyes did not exist!
When I struck I never missed!
Noon, felt and far away,
My brain is a thousand bees.

Here the Emersonian vision of plenitude is perceived as a vision of vacancy. The moment of merging between self and non-self is regarded not as a spiritual awakening but as a form of "unbelief." The discovery appears to be related to the poet's perception that the object of his desire is knowable not as a presence but as a tantalizing absence. The visionary poet is defined as "one who never speaks," since as Crane observed, the "single new word" he is trying

to express is "impossible to actually enunciate." The phenomenal world is made to appear less real as it shimmers on the edge of perceptible knowledge. Increasingly, the poems from the mid- and late 1920s treat the visionary experience with skepticism and fear.

One possible explanation of this apprehension is to suggest, as one recent critic has, that even at this stage of his career Winters had intuitively perceived the inherent limitations of his early visionary poetic. According to Grosvenor Powell, Winters had no patience with the naive pantheistic romanticism represented by Emerson, Whitman, and Crane. Implicit in Emersonian romanticism are a number of questionable assumptions, including the assumption that "God and nature are one, that both are good, that the fulfilment of human nature is a conscious participation in this universal goodness, and that one's own selfhood must be broken down because it stands in the way of one's participation in total being" (Language as Being 85).

Yet Winters' view of nature, which owed more to A.N. Whitehead and modern physics than it did to Emerson or nineteenth-century transcendentalism, prevented him from assenting to such assumptions unambiguously. As Kenneth Fields observed several years ago, "The physical universe that Winters is confronting in isolation, especially in the later of his experimental poems, is very close to the universe of atomic physics of the 1920s. . . ." It is a

universe marked, on the one hand, "by a relativity of time and space which renders relationships arbitrary," and, on the other, by "the interchangeability of energy and matter in a kind of Heraclitean flux, in which solid matter is divisible into atoms of constant motion" (The Rhetoric of Artifice 236).

The implications of such a view of nature for a poet subscribing to a visionary poetic should be clear. To fuse one's consciousness with the natural world as it is conceived by modern physics is to assume the properties of that world, or to take on its identity. To become one with nature is to adopt "a mind of chaos," an idea which appealed to Winters even less than it did to Stevens.

Of course, Winters' interest during these years in modern physics was not entirely unique. It was shared by several of his contemporaries, including Hart Crane, Allen Tate, and Archibald MacLeish. Nor was his response to Einstein's relativistic vision of the natural world all that unusual. Several of his contemporaries express a similar unease at the thought that the solidity of the material world is more an illusion of limited sense perception than an absolute truth. Yet Winters' recoil from the metaphysical abyss opened up by this notion was more extreme than most.

To understand why this was so, however, we must attend to a curious resemblance between the vision of the natural

world represented by modern physics and one of the most basic symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease afflicting Winters throughout the 1920s. Tuberculosis is, as Susan Sontag has noted, an oxymoronic disease: "white pallor and red flush, hyperactivity alternating with languidness" (11). The disease attacks one organ, the lungs, and manifests itself through a single tell-tale symptom, coughing. To those suffering from it, tuberculosis is often perceived as a kind of "disintegration, febrilization, [or] dematerialization" (13). In Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, the central character, Paul Morel, experiences what Lawrence, himself afflicted with the disease, describes as "a ghastly, sickly feeling of dissolution, when all the cells in the body seemed to be breaking down . . ." (176). Similar moments of dissolution occur in Keats' poetry, in Kafka's prose, and in several of Winters' early poems. The same metaphors of dissolution can be discerned in the literature of modern physics. In fact, one of the most basic consequences of Einstein's redefinition of the relationship between energy and matter involves a perceived dissolution of matter into a constant flux of atomic particles. As Fields and others have observed, the perception of matter as flux frequently dissolves the subject / object distinctions separating the perceiver and the perceived. As one prominent physicist writes: "In the act of observing microscopic processes it [is] no longer possible to draw any

clear distinction between the subject . . . and the object. . . ." (Ernest Junck, quoted in Fields The Rhetoric of Artifice 237).

Whatever the cause, by the late 1920s, Winters had arrived at a thematic impasse. He had intuitively recognized that the desire to write a "pure" or "absolute" poetry could never be fulfilled, since the condition such a poetry aspires to is perfect silence. This perception is implicit in his definition of the "absolute" poet as "One who never speaks." Moreover, this thematic impasse is accompanied by an irresolvable conflict in his adherence to his early visionary poetic. Although he continues to regard the proper goal of poetry as the dissolution of consciousness in the particulars of sensuous experience, he eventually comes to perceive this dissolution of the self as a threat to the poet's identity.

Winters' response to this impasse is revealing. Rather than renounce his early absolutist desire, or his conception of poetry as a means of self-immolation, he devotes himself even more forcefully to his visionary poetic. Throughout the experimental poems of the late 1920s, he seems intent on exploring the inherent irrationality of the visionary experience. Consider, for example, "Song of the Trees," from The Proof (1930):

Belief is blind! Bees scream!
Gongs! Thronged with light!

And I take
 into light, hold light,
 in light I live, I,
 pooled and broken here,
 to watch, to wake above you.

Sun,
 no seeming, but savage
 simplicity, breaks running
 for an aeon, stops, shuddering, here.

Winters has remarked of this poem that it derives from certain conventions in Native American Indian poetry, and that it might be most profitably compared with his earlier poem "The Aspen's Song." But a more familiar model can be found in William Carlos Williams' poem "The Trees," which begins on a similarly ecstatic note:

The trees--being trees
 thrash and scream
 guffaw and curse--
 wholly abandoned
 damning the race of men--

Christ, the bastards
 haven't even sense enough
 to stay out in the rain--

Wha ha ha ha
 Whee clacka tacka tacka
 tacka tacka
 wha ha ha ha ha
 ha ha ha

Both Williams and Winters set out to evoke the vital energy contained in nature, and to explore its relation to human consciousness. Both use the trope of prosopopoeia to summon this energy. Yet the similarities end there. Williams' poem is the more conventional of the two. Satiric in intention, it expresses a child-like preference for the simple vegetal consciousness of the trees over humankind's

basic stupidity: "Christ, the bastards / haven't even sense enough / to stay out in the rain." Winters, on the other hand, is intent on actually identifying with the non-human, non-conscious life force present in nature.

Although the poem recalls his earlier "Aspen's Song," the tremulous moment of pure being he envisions there is replaced by a much more violent awareness of the inhuman character of the natural world. The identification of the poet with nature is perceived as a fragmentation of the self into a myriad of atomic particles: "in light I live, I, / pooled and broken here" The last lines of the poem express an atavistic desire like the one expressed by Stevens in the penultimate stanza of "Sunday Morning." Like Stevens, Winters longs to experience the "savage simplicity" of the sun "not as a God, but as a God might be." Yet once again it is the differences between Winters and his modernist predecessor that are most instructive. In Stevens, this desire takes the form of a genteel "faunist" primitivism, whereas in Winters the experience retains something of its unruly and anarchical character.

The full extent of this thematic impasse is evident in The Bare Hills. Ostensibly an exploration of the modernist themes of death and renewal, the volume records Winters' growing apprehensiveness about not only the visionary merging of consciousness and nature but several other "forms of unreason."

The volume opens with a sequence of poems describing the death of a miner by the name of Jesus Leal. Although only two poems in the sequence entitled "Upper River Country: Rio Grande" actually refer to Leal directly, the others may be regarded as psychic repercussions, or shock waves, emanating from the central fact of the man's death. The miner's name is symbolic; his death is perceived as a return to God:

Jesús Leal
 Who aimed at solitude,
 The only mean,
 Was borne by men.

Wet air,
 The air of stone.

He sank to God.

Unlike his namesake, however, Jesús Leal is not resurrected. Death is final, and God merely another form of solitude. Moreover, in death, Leal becomes indistinguishable from the brutal landscape which took his life.

Winters' attitude toward spring is equally severe. In each of the four poems from the sequence which describe its approach, the season is portrayed in terms of its ambiguity. Despite spring's promise of warmth, the winter's cold remains "Rooted deep in the land." As in The Waste Land, which also opens with a burial of the dead, the false promise of spring prompts uncertainty and frustrated desire.

"The Resurrection" evokes the loneliness of Leal's widow as she persists in the daily chores that define her existence:

Leal was dead.
And still his wife
Carried in pinelogs
Split and yellow like a man's hair--
Wet earth, shadow of the winter,
Motionless beside the door.

The title refers to the renewal of nature all around the woman. As Winters writes in the first stanza: "Spring penetrated / Slowly / To the doorstep. . . ." Yet this is a renewal that goes unnoticed, obscured as it is by the "shadow of winter," which lies "Motionless beside the door." The image of the "pinelogs split and yellow like a man's hair" expresses the woman's frustrated longing and her despair as she attempts to endure life in her husband's absence.

"Dark Spring" also concerns the ambiguity of spring's promise of renewal but here the focus is more personal. The poem elaborates an image of the poet presented in The Magpie's Shadow in the brief poem called "No Being": "I, bent. Thin nights receding." In "Dark Spring," self-knowledge is rooted in an awareness of death. As the speaker tells us in the first stanza, this morbid preoccupation is a family trait: "My mother / Foresaw deaths / And walked among / Chrysanthemums. . . ." Although the speaker attempts to "disown" his inheritance in "nights of study," he cannot overlook the persistence of death in this

season of rebirth. The clearest indication of the sterility of this vision of abortive spring appears in the last lines of the poem:

The rats run on the roof,
 These words come hard--
 Sadder than cockcrow
 In a dreamless, earthen sleep.
 The Christ, eternal
 In the scented cold; my love,
 Her hand on the sill
 White, as if out of earth;
 And spring, the sleep of the dead.

One other spring poem from the sequence deserves attention. "The Crystal Sun" describes the long-awaited arrival of spring in language reminiscent of the early poems. Yet the emphasis here falls upon the ambiguity of the ecstatic moment of union between nature and consciousness:

Lean spring came in,
 A living tide of green,
 Where I, a child,
 Barefooted on the clear sand,
 Saw the sun fall
 Straight and sharp in air--

As in several of the poems from the early period, this moment is accompanied by what Davis refers to as "an uncharacteristically emotive scream," which signals the protagonist's sudden withdrawal from the abyss of an ever-expansive self: "I screamed in sunrise / As the mare spun / Knee-high / In yellow flowers." In "The Crystal Sun," this note of panic is related to the poet's perception of the implications of becoming one with nature:

"moments saved from sleep," moments of hallucinatory intensity during which the world of nature appears to have been invested with a sort of supernatural terror. In both "Moonrise" and "Alba for Hecate," this terror is explicitly identified with the moon's unearthly presence:

Upon the heavy
lip of earth
the dog

 at
moments is
possessed and screams:

The rising moon draws
up his blood and hair.

As one recent critic has remarked, the moon appears frequently in these poems, usually "with the suggestion of dark and uncontrollable aspects of life, fecund but terrifying and not subject to the conscious will" (Davis 25). Later in his career, Winters will use moonlight as a symbol of the imagination's power to dissolve reality. At this particular moment, however, it serves as a signal of the presence of an unidentified and potentially malevolent power at the periphery of consciousness. Throughout the poems in this sequence, the speaker's presence can be felt in his willed wakefulness, which serves as his means of protecting himself from the "slow monsters of the brain" ("Exodus") that haunt him during such moments of terror. The exact nature of this terror remains obscure, but it is hinted at in specific images, such as the "wrinkled tree" that lies "bare along the roof," which recalls the speaker's

mind in an almost Poe-like manner to the "death and re-birth of an abstract inertia, / creaking still against the years" ("The Vigil").

The third sequence in the volume concerns another kind of possession, the possession of the protagonist by sexual desire. The sequence consists of five love poems, four of which are set at night. As Davis has remarked, in Winters' verse from this period, darkness "tends to suggest a loss of spiritual control" (27). Yet throughout these poems it is the protagonist's own sexual passion, and not any external force, which poses a threat to his identity. "March Dusk" expresses this threat most clearly:

Still I plunge over
 rocky mud with
 only one thought--
 of a naked girl
 beneath black eaves
 that thunder
 in the rain
 like risen wings.
 The dogs are barking
 horribly; and now and
 then a gust of
 cold rain hovers
 in the air and
 breaks, and drenches
 shoulders, hair, and
 legs. Above, the
 red cliffs darkening
 and filling all
 the sky. And under
 foot the spring
 goes cold and
 breathes a lace of
 icy foam, shakes
 through the earth.

The urgency of the desire is conveyed by the poem's halting nervous meter, by its use of rapid run-over lines, and by

the terseness of its style. Moreover, as Davis writes, "the force of the [speaker's] passion is conveyed not only by the evocation of awesome darkness . . . but the traditional and universal prop of violent weather" (27). Despite the Lawrentian rhetoric of the poem, however, there is nothing empowering about the experience it describes. On the contrary, in this and other poems from the sequence, sexual desire threatens to obliterate the identity of the speaker, in much the same way that the fear of demonic possession does in "Moonrise" and "Alba for Hecate." In fact, "March Dusk" contains many of the same tell-tale signs of possession encountered in those poems, the howling dogs, the terrible darkness, and the turgid spring thaw.

The most interesting poem in this sequence, however, is the poem called "Under Rain," which depicts the protagonist's efforts to resist the dark mastery of sexual passion. The poem begins with a description of a house about to be swept away in a violent storm:

The wind is
 pushing like a
 great hand
 on the steep roof
 and the house
 sags pressing
 water from the turf.

The poem anticipates the sonnet "Phasellus Ille." In both poems, the image of the storm-battered house serves as a metaphor for the precariousness of the conscious mind when confronted by irrational forces beyond its control. Yet

there are important differences between the two poems. In "Phasellus Ille," the emphasis is upon the mind's ability to resist these forces, and to weather the storm. In "Under Rain," the protagonist seems close to being extinguished under the weight of sexual passion:

Your deep thighs,
heavy with white,
wade toward me--
and the mind thins in a
wave that
floods the edge of Time.

The experience is rendered ambivalently. Any threat to the mind is generally perceived in negative terms in Winters' verse, but here it is difficult to interpret the significance of the image of the mind thinning to a "wave that / floods the edge of Time," unless we regard it as an image of orgasm. Whatever the case, the emotion is violent and obscure and much of its obscurity seems to derive from Winters' own ambiguous understanding of the visionary moment of self-immolation.

III

The limits of the impasse which Winters had encountered in his early poems become especially clear in his Fire Sequence (1927). Most critics agree that the sequence represents a turning point in Winters' development, an important attempt to extend the range of language and subject matter in the experimental poems. Most critics also

agree that his failure to shape a volume around these poems was central to his abandonment of his experimental methods. After its initial publication in The American Caravan in 1927, Winters allowed the sequence to remain out of print until 1966, when he published his "authorized edition" of The Early Poems.

Winters' Fire Sequence is frequently discussed in connection with The Bridge by Hart Crane, the emphasis falling upon the similarities between the two poems.¹¹ Winters and Crane maintained a lively and at times heated exchange while they wrote these poems, offering one another encouragement and criticism. Therefore it should come as no surprise to discover parallels, affinities and even echoes in The Bridge and Winters' Fire Sequence.

In structure, for instance, each poem remains "less a single work," to quote Terry Comito, "than a constantly shifting collection of fragments . . ." (93). The poems also share certain thematic preoccupations. As Robert Von Hallberg has remarked, both attempt to "collapse distinctions between continental . . . personal . . . and social . . . history, [so that] the story of one is the story of them all" (791). Von Hallberg notes several more specific resemblances as well: "Winters' attention to 'the shrieking / steel amid a wilderness of spring' registers an

¹¹For details of the relationship between the two poems, see Comito, 92-5; Davis, 32-3; Parkinson, 56-64; and Von Hallberg, 791-2.

antipathy to the history of industrialism similar to that of Crane in his image of 'the iron-dealt cleavage' between the American past and present; Winters' focus on 'the Slav' and Crane's sense of the Genoese washerwoman indicate both poets' understanding that American history is largely a story of immigration and racism; and both of them (Crane in "Cutty Shark" and Winters in "Bill") tried to bring into verse the drunken idioms of the individual who takes on his shoulders the failure of collective goals" (792).

These and other similarities attest to the connection between Fire Sequence and The Bridge. But there are important differences which must also be mentioned. Although it may be true that both poems were intended to counter "the lax pessimism of The Waste Land," to quote Crane, it must be admitted that Winters and Crane responded to this challenge differently and with varying degrees of success.

As Allan Trachtenberg has noted, in writing The Bridge Crane sought to forge "a mystical synthesis of America" (143). As in the earlier "absolute" poems, such as "The Marriage of Faustus and Helen," his aim was to articulate the ideal reality that he conceived of as existing beyond the sensible world. The bridge was to serve as a symbol of reality and as a passageway leading toward it. To quote Trachtenberg once more, the bridge in Crane's poem is "not simply a magical object, like the grail in The Waste Land,"

or a mere "external thing." Instead, the bridge represents "an inner process, an act of consciousness," which was meant to "transcend the contingencies of time and space" (146).

Crane's faith in the bridge as a symbol of America's spiritual regeneration was equalled only by his belief in the purity of the continent's pre-historic past. As he wrote at the time he was composing the poem, Pocahontas was "the mythological nature-symbol chosen to represent the 'body' of the continent" (Weber 248), and several of the best-known poems from the sequence were intended as exploration of this body. One of the most important climaxes in the sequence occurs in "The Dance," where Crane describes the union of the modern poetic consciousness of the protagonist with the native Indian and his world:

Spears and assemblies: black drums thrusting on--
O yelling battlements,-- I, too, was liege
To rainbows currying each pulsant bone:
Surpassed the circumstance, danced out the seige!

"Here," Crane wrote to his publisher in 1927, "one is on the pure mythical and smoky soil at last!" (Weber 251).¹²

¹²In his letter to Otto Kahn, Crane is actually quoting Winters from his poem "The Streets," which reads in part: "I am on the / mythical and smoky at last"(ll. 27-28). The word "pure" is Crane's addition. His fondness for the line is evident in the fact that he also quotes it to Winters himself in a letter dated November 28, 1926. As he writes to Winters, the line is one of "the 'gleaming' facts that hold my enthusiasm in your work." "Such felicities, and one's exact reasons for so liking them, are hard to explain clearly . . . [but in such lines]," he continues, "your 'wave-length' deepens, the structure of thought and emotion is amplified"(Parkinson. Hart Crane and Yvor Winters: Their Literary Correspondence. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 24.

In his Fire Sequence, Winters also struggles to arrive at this "mythical and smoky soil" and to explore its relation to human consciousness. Yet his efforts offer strikingly different results. Terry Comito has defined Fire Sequence as Winters' most ambitious attempt "to confront the 'fierythrobbing' indeterminacy underlying every form of our experience of the world" (92). As we have seen, this preoccupation appears to have grown out of Winters' reading of modern physics, and out of his experience of the symptoms of tuberculosis. The central metaphor in Fire Sequence is coal: "form compacted from energy and resolved again, 'atom after atom,' back into energy" (Comito 92). In its dissolvability, this substance is symbolic not only of matter, which Winters conceives of as a kind of Heraclitean flux, but of the mind as well, which is capable of being dispersed into the myriad particles of sensory experience. The structure of the sequence is cyclical, beginning with a poem describing the formation of coal "below the pressure of the years," and ending with another in which death is represented as a return to the "bent heart of the seething rock" where the coal of the first poem had its origins.

Each of the first three poems is concerned with the release of energy. In "Coal: Beginning and End," the formation of coal is used as a metaphor for the dispersal of energy into the remote regions of the earth:

Below the pressure
of the years
what is this
bring it warmth
the writhing heat
without a rothold
yet drives
downward
atom after atom
bounds away
they go

a milky way of spermy slow
explosions over night

Despite its promise of warmth and rebirth, coal remains for Winters a symbol of "writhing heat / without a rothold." Rather than celebrate the potency latent in the mineral, the poem actually concerns the inaccessibility of this form of energy for human needs.

"Tragic Love" explores another kind of force, that of nature during spring. The poem opens with the death of a young prostitute during winter. Winters locates this death within the context of the natural cycle of death and rebirth. Spring is described as a return of God:

The God
was gone, but he
came back amid
great splendor
and great heat
and leaves like shells
broke from the
earth and rang in
the thin air
about her black thighs
where no God had been
peering for this
stiff beauty under
cold invisible and
visible--periphery
of air and
globe of winter.

Yet this rebirth is regarded with bitter irony. As in so many of the poems on this subject, spring's promise of renewal proves to be inadequate for human needs. The young prostitute is not reborn; the "slow hairlike flame" that springs up between her legs merely serves to emphasize the indignity of her death.

"To The Crucified" and "O Sun!" concern two very different kinds of force. The first invokes Christ as an emblem of resurrection. The figure of Christ appears frequently in the poems from this period. As Davis has observed, "there is no sense of transcendence or a specifically religious meaning given to the concept." Instead, Christ "is a much more directly experiential concept, suggesting a vivid force in nature" (21). In the poem "To The Crucified," however, Christ is treated more abstractly, as an image of the loneliness and the agony of spiritual rebirth:

Alone you fire on
wood cling to the
surface twine about
the cross

it is broad day
the fire is
small and hard and
far away you
are too small

by night you
shrink and gather
and lick into black
I read my paper
by your glare

three nights in hell
 you flame of solid gold
 rolled over all the surface
 lifted atom
 after atom

and burst through all Space

but left this fine
 'ncredible and slowly
 rushing wake of sound.

The poem describes a spiritual crisis. The speaker appears to be meditating on the play of firelight on a Crucifix, searching both the flame and the religious artefact for some sign of rebirth. Yet the search goes unrewarded. The fire remains "small and hard" and, like Christ, "far away."

The poem "O Sun!" invokes another kind of force, that of the sun, which is described as a primitive deity infusing nature with power. Once again, Winters' rhetoric recalls the pantheism of the early Stevens, but again his tone is more violent. In a language recalling the Dionysian rhetoric of Crane, the speaker implores the sun to "strike / through my body / now I walk alone / to try the depth of earth." Yet rather than celebrate the metamorphosis of self in a moment of pantheistic ecstasy, Winters turns unexpectedly to revile the superman who emerges from the "bent power" of modern technology:

red carrots tremble
 in a rigid shoal, and
 man leaps out
 creator of bent Power
 blackthrobbing blasphemies

The rhetoric of Fire Sequence becomes increasingly violent as Winters explores and rejects various forms of force in nature. Several of the poems return to themes which had been treated previously in The Bare Hills.

"November" uses the image of lovers in a house threatened by a violent storm to express the precariousness of identity when confronted by forces beyond the control of the rational intellect or the conscious will:

the house
the shaken wood
hardrooted in the
cold waits I am strong

Here the storm is replaced by another natural phenomenon which is equally threatening, the contraction of the earth's surface during the bitter cold. Yet the effect is the same. The image emphasizes the vulnerability of consciousness to the vagaries of intense sensory experience. Significantly, the speaker in this poem does not shrink from the threat posed by this experience, but remains strong, resisting the violent forces present in nature. The poem concludes with an image of metamorphosis, as the poet's lover is returned to the dark earth, where she assumes the properties of coal:

your grave body
growing in the heart of
wood while the black
season beats the timbers
with its heavy cries

Winters' Fire Sequence ends where it began, with a poem describing the formation of coal "below the pressure / of the years." In "The Deep: A Service for All the Dead," the

geological process is identified explicitly with the mind and its efforts to extract meaning from sensory experience. As in so many poems from this period, however, the encounter proves fruitless. The effort of the mind to "plow through corrugated rock" produces a "wake that lasts a thousand years." As for the mind itself, it vanishes "in concentration":

a thought worn small with use, a formula,
a motion, then a stasis, and then nothing.
And in the bent heart of the seething rock
slow crystals shiver, the fine cry of Time.

It is tempting because of the persistence of these preoccupations and obsessions to suggest that Winters was already in possession of his major theme at this time. At least one critic has gone so far as to claim that the experimental poems initiate Winters' lifelong dismantling of the Emersonian myth of transcendence (see Comito 98). Yet it would be a mistake to assume that Winters was consciously engaged in such a project, at least at this stage of his career. In fact, Winters' early poems are as violent and as obscure as they are precisely because he did not fully comprehend the nature of the thematic impasse confronting him. Although he continued to believe that the function of poetry was to merge the self and the non-self in a privileged moment of perception, his experimental poems in free verse indicate that his experience of this moment was increasingly problematic. Rather than abandon his early visionary poetic, however, he adhered to it more forcefully

and more desperately, committing himself to an ideology of force, which, if taken to its logical extremes, would result in the destruction of consciousness. Winters' adherence to this poetic had taught him, to borrow a line from Eliot, that human kind / Cannot bear very much reality ("Burnt Norton," ll.42-3). It would take a dramatic revision of his conception of poetry before he could unlearn this lesson from his youth.

Chapter Three

Poetry as Moral Discipline

Considered in the context of the formal and thematic impasse which he had encountered in his final experimental poems, Winters' rejection of free verse in favor of traditional meters and forms may appear to have been inevitable. In fact, it may appear that he had no choice but to abandon the experimental methods he had been exploring throughout the 1920s and begin again using new methods. But an inevitability of this sort is more a convenience of criticism than an actual fact. Or, to use a term which Edward Said uses to describe a new beginning, it may be a "necessary fiction" which a writer constructs to navigate a particularly difficult passage in his career.¹³

However we describe it, Winters' change of direction was not simply an inevitability. In fact, as late as 1928, he still believed that his future as a poet lay in the direction of the radical experimental poems he had been writing at the time. As he wrote in a letter dated Feb. 22, 1928: "It is hard to say just exactly whither one is bound, but as nearly as I can make out, the more condensed and

¹³See Said's discussion of "The New Beginning as Construct" (56-78).

violent poems will be my center--The Barnyard, The Grosbeaks, The Streets, The Rows of Cold Trees, November, Orange Tree, Vacant Lot, and the like." He wrote in the same letter of eventually trying to produce a book from such poems.¹⁴

There were several factors that contributed to Winters' eventual abandonment of this ambition, and of free verse in general, but three are crucial to any understanding of his change of direction. These are: his enrolment at Stanford in the fall of 1927, where he came under the tutelage of William Dinsmore Briggs, a noted Renaissance scholar who was then the head of Stanford's English department; his reading of the English intellectual historian H.B. Parkes, who greatly influenced Winters' understanding of nineteenth-century American literature; and finally, his reading of Irving Babbitt, whose humanistic philosophy, with its strong anti-modernist bias and its emphasis upon "moral discipline," corresponded so closely to Winters' own thinking at this time. Together these influences effected an "intellectual conversion" in Winters which had profound consequences on his poetic theory and practice.

¹⁴Yvor Winters, letter to Pearl Andelson, Feb. 22, 1928, Yvor Winters-Janet Lewis Papers, Stanford University Library, Palo Alto, California. Some of the poems which Winters mentions in this letter had already been published in book form by this time, and a few others were eventually included in The Proof (1930), but it is significant that the Fire Sequence, a collection for which Winters had such high hopes, was not published in book form until near the end of his life, when he re-published it in his Early Poems (1966).

I

Among the many factors that contributed to Winters' rejection of free verse in favor of traditional meters and forms, perhaps the most basic was his enrolment as a graduate student at Stanford University in the fall of 1927. It was at Stanford, for instance, that he first undertook an historical study of English and American poetry. As Winters himself has observed, before entering Stanford he had little knowledge of English or American literature before the modern period. It was at Stanford too that he made the acquaintance of William Dinsmore Briggs. As Dick Davis has noted, Briggs was to influence Winters' development in at least three ways (56-7). He introduced Winters to the plain stylists of the English Renaissance--Googe, Gascoigne, Greville and Jonson in particular--an encounter which would have a profound impact on Winters' own poetic style. He also encouraged him to read philosophy, especially Aristotle and Aquinas, both of whom would play a large role in Winters' subsequent criticism. Finally, Briggs recommended that Winters study nineteenth-century American literature, "where," as Davis writes, "Winters later believed that he found the conceptions out of which the poetry of his own generation had grown" (57).¹⁵

¹⁵Winters' indebtedness to Briggs is expressed most fully in the three poems he wrote to him, which I discuss in Chapter 5.

Although it was Briggs who introduced him to the study of nineteenth-century American literature, it was the intellectual historian H.B. Parkes who was to have the most profound influence on Winters' understanding of this literature. Parkes was an English-born historian who had emigrated to the United States in the 1920s. In a series of articles published in various conservative journals during the 1930s, he examined Puritan theology and its influence upon subsequent American thought. His method was to use "the philosophy of the Catholic Church as the standard by which to judge other varieties of Christianity" (The Pragmatic Test 3).

According to Parkes, American Puritanism had "deviated" from the philosophy of the Catholic Church by rejecting its rational forms of worship and belief in favor of what he, and Winters after him, would refer to as emotional voluntarism. Whereas traditional Catholicism regarded the Church as the principal instrument for interpreting God's will to man, Puritanism trusted only in the individual conscience. The essence of the Puritan religion, Parkes argued, "was a belief in direct communication between God and the individual soul; intermediaries and analogies were therefore unnecessary . . ." ("The Puritan Heresy" 172). Since God spoke directly to the Puritans, Christ became unnecessary as a mediator between the divine and the human. His chief importance lay instead in His bearing of man's

sins. As Parkes argued, "the emphasis shifted from the Incarnation to the Atonement" (176). Moreover, the Puritans' belief that grace was not given but earned had the effect of "unduly magnifying man's ability to save himself . . . ; conversion was merely a choice to obey a certain code of rules . . . ; religion . . . was reduced to a mere morality" (174). Finally, the Puritans rejected the traditional notion that man could know God through reason and claimed instead that divinity was experienced intuitively.

As such beliefs took root in American soil, Parkes argued, they were modified so that eventually impulse and emotion, and not reason or will, were regarded as divine. The "Puritan heresy" culminated, in Parkes' view, in the philosophy of Emerson, whose influence extended as far as the pragmatists of the modern period. For Parkes, Emerson's philosophy consisted of a few simple ideas. Chief among them was the belief that God manifested Himself as a moral law, and that the natural world was an emanation from Him. Equally influential was the belief that God could be found in nature, and within man, who was a part of nature. To know God, according to Emerson's argument, man must simply surrender his intellect and his will to the primacy of his religious sentiments, which, in his view, were purely intuitive. Finally, there was the belief that the man who

obeyed his religious impulses had no need of an institution to show him God.

Emerson's influence upon the cultural life of nineteenth-century America was, in Parkes' view, disastrous. Not only did it give too much encouragement to "the worst tendencies of the times, to anarchical individualism, unchecked pursuit of wealth, and contempt for public spirit" (600), it also contributed substantially to the further erosion of the influence of the Church in New England. Under Emerson, each man became his own priest. Worse still, each man became his own God. The rational structures of belief that had developed over hundreds of years in Christian Europe were thus destroyed in favor of a form of romantic individualism.

Winters referred to Parkes' interpretation of Puritanism and the Puritan legacy in subsequent American thought on more than one occasion. As Comito has noted, this interpretation was no doubt attractive to him not only because of the content but the form of its argument (210). Parkes' method of evaluating "abstract ideas in terms of their consequences on human behavior" (The Pragmatic Test 4) resembled Winters' own method of evaluating poems by considering the practical implications of the ideas contained in them. Moreover, in Parkes' analysis of the Puritan legacy in nineteenth-century American thought, he found a genealogy of the anti-rationalist assumptions that

in his view vitiated the poetry and the prose of his own generation.

Yet the single most important external influence upon Winters at this particular moment in his career was neither William Dinsmore Briggs nor H.B. Parkes but instead Irving Babbitt, whose New Humanist philosophy answered to many of Winters' own concerns about the direction of modern literature.¹⁶ Babbitt was the chief spokesman for a conservative cultural movement that had developed in the United States during the early part of the twentieth century. This movement was based on a rejection of several of the most prominent trends in modern American thought, including philosophical pragmatism, scientific and moral relativism, materialism, and the twin influences of romanticism and naturalism upon literature and the arts.¹⁷

¹⁶For a different perspective on Winters' relation to Babbitt see Angus Keith Ferguson McKean, "Yvor Winters and the Neo-Humanists," University of Kansas City Review 22 (1955): 131-3; "Introduction," On Modern Poets, by Yvor Winters (New York: Meridian Books, 1959) 7-10; and "Yvor Winters," The Moral Measure of Literature (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1961) 98-125. In each of these articles, McKean concedes that there are similarities between Winters' critical position and Babbitt's, but focusses on the differences. The same is true of Comito, 213-6. But by far the most detailed and valuable discussion of Winters' relation to Babbitt appears in Davis, 151-60.

¹⁷For a thorough discussion of Irving Babbitt and the New Humanists see J. David Hoeveler, Jr., The New Humanism: A Critique of Modern America 1900-1940 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977). More general discussions include: Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writers in the Post-War Decade (New York: The Free Press, 1962) 165-71; Ronald Lora, The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot, Rev. ed. (Chicago: Henry Regnery,

The proponents of the movement--Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, Stuart Pratt Sherman, Norman Foerster, to name the most prominent--were themselves cultural traditionalists, classicists by training and temperament, and conservative in their political views. They referred to themselves as "New Humanists" because they regarded their philosophy as a modern re-statement of classical humanism.

The New Humanist critique of modern American culture was simple but far-reaching. In Babbitt's view, modern naturalist philosophers like Dewey, James and Pierce had become so obsessed with the modernity of the modern world, they lost sight of what is "normal and central in human experience." Like Parkes, he lamented the fact that the ethical values and standards that had sustained Western culture for close to two thousand years had been replaced by a thoroughgoing relativism in almost all realms of modern thought. As a result, Babbitt argued, modern society had no clear conception of itself, and modern man had come to identify his happiness almost exclusively with the indulgence of his desires.

Again like Parkes, Babbitt traced the predicament of modern American society to the past. In his view, however, it was not Emerson but Rousseau who was most responsible for the decline of modern culture. According to Babbitt's

1960): 473-520; and Rene Wellek, "The New Humanists," American Criticism 1900-1950 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986): 17-35.

argument in Rousseau and Romanticism (1919), Rousseau, and the Romantic movement which he inspired, contributed to the moral and intellectual confusion facing modern American culture by rejecting traditional forms of thought and belief in favor of what Babbitt referred to as a "cult of individuality." As late as the eighteenth century, artists had remained committed to these forms, he argued. Even Voltaire, the least classical of the classicists in Babbitt's view, defined genius as the "'judicious imitation' of right models" (34). Rousseau overturned this view of art when he associated true genius with the refusal to imitate. For Rousseau, true genius comes not from the imitation of traditional models, but from original invention or from "original genius." The result of the Romantic emphasis upon originality was a wholesale rejection of traditionalism in favor of an avant-garde art increasingly given over to solipsism, sensationalism and experimentation for its own sake.

Babbitt also charged Rousseauist Romanticism with overturning the traditional dualistic conception of human nature which had dominated Western culture since the time of the ancient Greeks. Babbitt and the New Humanists were committed to the classical view that the human self consisted of two parts, a higher and a lower self, which were in constant struggle. The lower self they associated with sexual desire, the physical appetites and emotion. The

higher self was seen as the seat of reason, judgement and the "ethical imagination." Babbitt referred to this higher self as an "inner check," which he defined as an intuitive power superior to and therefore able to guide and control the other faculties. In his view, Rousseau had destroyed this conception of human nature when he suggested that man's moral center was to be found not in his intellect or his will but in emotion and physical sensation. According to Rousseau, the dualism that characterized modern man's conception of himself was not a product of nature but an effect of culture. Romanticism therefore advocated a return to nature so that man might recover his original innocence.

Babbitt saw this traditional dualistic conception of human nature further endangered by the influence of modern naturalistic philosophy, by which he meant the pragmatists. In his view, modern philosophy was responsible for overstating the influence of environment upon the individual. As Babbitt wrote in "Humanism: An Essay at Definition" (1930): "The reason for the radical clash between the humanist and the purely naturalistic philosopher is that the humanist requires a center to which he may refer the manifold of experience; and this the phenomenal world cannot provide" (32). In his view, James and his followers had erred in assuming that human consciousness was merely the product of the continuous flow of sensory data. Such a view violated the humanists' faith in a constant element in

human nature which was above the flux of phenomenal experience.

Winters' relation to Babbitt and the New Humanists is complicated. His few references to them are unfavorable. In the essay "Poetry, Morality, and Criticism," for instance, he describes the ethical code of the New Humanists as "wisdom in a vacuum," claiming that so long as its first principles retain "the status of pure abstractions," Babbitt, More and their followers will have little to offer literary criticism. "The arbitrary and mechanical application of these principles," he writes, "whether the experience be literary or non-literary, does not constitute a discipline but rather a pedantic habit" (332). And in The Anatomy of Nonsense (1943), he refers to Babbitt's "inner check" as little more than an "habitual way of feeling about certain acts," claiming therefore that it ought to be defined for what it is, "a late expression of the voluntaristic belief that morality is arbitrary and incomprehensible" (387). Finally, in The Function of Criticism (1956), he writes that the limitations of Babbitt's humanism made it necessary for writers of his own generation to turn from Babbitt to Pound for literary guidance (11-2).

Yet there is an interesting irony in this last reference, and in Winters' criticism of Babbitt in general, since, in actual fact, he did not turn to Pound from

Babbitt, as he was to suggest late in his career, but from Pound to Babbitt. In fact, it was Babbitt's humanism, and not Pound's modernism, that was to have the most profound and lasting influence on Winters' development as a poet and a critic.

Winters' intellectual debt to Babbitt has been well-documented. As Dick Davis has demonstrated, it was Babbitt's Rousseau and Romanticism which "codified [his] feelings about Romanticism"; and it was the same book which gave him "the vocabulary and the intellectual framework" to develop his own critique of romantic and post-romantic literature (152). Moreover, we can hear echoes of Babbitt throughout Winters' mature prose, in his insistently moral tone, in his unembarrassed dogmatism, and even in the arch literalism with which he deflates the vatic claims of Romantic poets. In fact, Winters himself once referred to his mature poetic as "the poetic equivalent of the humanistic attitude defended by Mr. Babbitt" (UER 266).

Yet Winters' indebtedness to Babbitt extends beyond his views on romanticism, since he also shares in many of Babbitt's humanistic assumptions. Like Babbitt, he believes in the existence of "norms of feeling" which express what is central and lasting in human experience. Thus he regards the subject of the poems in Before Disaster to be the "stress to which the permanent, or ideal, elements of the human character are subjected by the powers of

disintegration, by the temptations of Hell, which, though permanent in nature, usually take particular forms from the age (Before Disaster iii). He also shares in Babbitt's dualism. This is implicit in Winters' characteristic division of experience into the rational and the emotional, or intellectual and sensuous, in both his poetry and prose, but it is stated explicitly in his "Notes on Contemporary Criticism," where Winters concedes that his mature critical position is predicated upon "the concept of a dualistic universe" (UER 218). Moreover, he shares in the New Humanists' mistrust of any form of relativism which threatens to devalue reason or will in order to elevate emotion or sensation. Finally, like Babbitt, Winters believes that the most reliable safeguard against relativism lay in the cultivation of the "critical temper," which for Babbitt and Winters alike is the "outcome of education and . . . strenuous discipline" (UER 266).

II

Among the consequences of the intellectual conversion which Winters experienced during the late '20s and early '30s was a dramatic change in his understanding of poetry. As we have seen, when he began his career in the early 1920s, Winters conceived of poetry in almost exclusively aesthetic terms. "A poem is a state of perfection arrived

at by whatever means by the poet," he wrote in "The Testament of a Stone" in 1924. "It is a stasis in a world of flux and indecision . . . and can be judged not in relation to any time or place . . . but to itself alone . . . [and thus] has no responsibility except to itself and to its own perfection" (UER 195). By the late 1920s, however, Winters' radical aestheticism had been replaced by a more conservative concern with the morality of poetry. In "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit" (1929), for instance, a poem is defined as "an experience and a moral evaluation," and more emphatically, as the "final moral assertion of the artist" (UER 227). And in "Poetry, Morality, and Criticism" (1930), he goes so far as to claim that the function of poetry is to enable the poet to "arrive at a moral attitude toward . . . experience," since, as he writes, "the act of creation is nothing more or less than an act of evaluating and shaping (or controlling) a given experience" (Grattan 309).

As a result of this reversal, Winters' conception of technique is also altered. In "The Testament," technique is defined as the "medium of fusion" between the poet's consciousness and the object of his contemplation. It is the means by which he "loses himself in his object." In the mature poet, he wrote in 1924, "the ratio of what the poet sees or feels to what he gets down is in direct proportion to the perfection of his technique" (UER 195). By the late

1920s, however, Winters has substantially revised his definition of this key term. In "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit," technique is said to be "not only a means of recording perception, but . . . actually a means to discovery, a projection, a refinement, an intensification, of the spirit" Technique so understood, Winters concludes, "not only has a place in the moral system, but is the ultimate development of the moral system" (UER 245).

But the most significant feature of this dramatic reversal in Winters' understanding of poetry concerns his definition of poetry as a "moral discipline" and a "spiritual exercise." According to this definition, poetic meter and form are actually instrumental in enabling a poet to "perfect a moral attitude toward that range of experience of which he is aware" (Grattan 309). As Winters writes in "Poetry, Morality, and Criticism," "the very exigencies of the medium as [the poet] employs it in the act of perception should force him to the discovery of values which he would never have found without the convening of all the conditions of that particular act . . ." (301). In so doing, he continues, poetry should offer a "means of enriching one's awareness of human experience . . . and of inducing certain more or less constant habits of feeling. . . ." Finally, according to Winters' definition of poetry as a "form of

discovery," a poem should "increase the intelligence and strengthen the moral temper . . ." (317).

Although Winters' definition of poetry as a moral discipline may be traced to his reading of the New Humanists, his definition of the term "discipline" differs significantly from Babbitt's. In Babbitt, the term frequently functions as little more than the sign of a conservative reaction against the dangers of "emotional expansiveness," or the surrender of the will and the intellect to the demands of emotion and impulse. Moreover, Babbitt is characteristically vague in his definition of the "special discipline" of the "law for man," referring only to what he calls an "inner check" or "higher will" which controls and guides the lesser faculties. Winters, on the other hand, is careful to relate this concept to the rigorous formal demands of poetry. For Winters, poetry is a "moral discipline" because its formal properties compel the poet to the discovery of moral values which he would not have discovered otherwise. The exigencies of poetic meter and form enable him to "perfect a moral attitude toward a given range of experience."

Yet the clearest indication of precisely what Winters means when he refers to poetry as a moral discipline appears in his use of the term "discipline" in connection with key terms and concepts from theological discourse. In his "Notes on Contemporary Criticism" (1929), for instance, he

uses explicitly theological language to distinguish between emotion and reason. The basis of Evil is in emotion," he writes, "Good rests with the power of selection . . ." (UER 221). Moreover, when he defined the subject matter of the poems gathered together in Before Disaster, he referred explicitly to the "powers of disintegration" confronting the mind as contemporary embodiments of a permanent Evil, or, to use Winters' words, "Temptations of Hell."

Winters' use of theological terms derives, as more than one critic has observed, from his reading of Aquinas during the late 1920s and early '30s. As Powell says, Winters' mature position is grounded in a Thomistic conception of being, and in Aquinas' definition of Evil as a privation of being.¹⁸ Even Winters himself eventually came to define his philosophical stance as that of a non-Christian Thomistic absolutist. Yet it is important to recognize that this debt to Aquinas is more than an intellectual debt. That is to say, Winters does not simply borrow key terms and concepts to clarify his own philosophical position. Instead, he adopts the structures of feeling and belief associated with the scholastic terminology.

This last fact helps to explain the presence in his writings from this period of a set of religious terms that frequently appears alongside the scholastic terminology

¹⁸For a full discussion of this aspect of Winters' thought, see Powell, 53-5.

borrowed from Aquinas. The terms I have in mind are not really terms at all but value-laden words like "dignity," "wisdom," "self-control" and "renunciation." Although consistent in tone with Winters' humanism, and with his emphasis upon morality, several of these words carry overtly religious connotations which strike a rather strange note when read in the context of Winters' usual tone, which is cool, formal and analytical. Their presence becomes even more remarkable when we note that they frequently appear at the high point of his articulation, when he is revealing the basis of his argument or of a particular judgement. Finally, such words often appear in close proximity to other key terms in Winters' discourse, most notably alongside terms like "discipline," "exercise" and "technique," providing a valuable insight into the implications of Winters' use of the latter terms.¹⁹

One or two examples may help clarify the point. In the "Foreword" to "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human

¹⁹My discussion of the function of these terms in Winters' discourse closely follows the example of Minae Mizumura in her analysis of a strikingly similar set of terms in Paul de Man's writings. That the same terms should appear in Winters' criticism and in de Man's, and that these terms should function similarly, is, of course, curious, given the obvious differences between their respective critical positions. But it is not altogether unexplainable, since both developed their mature positions only after they had renounced earlier views of literature, Winters the aestheticism of his youth, and de Man, as Mizumura shows, the essentialism he had absorbed through his immersion in post-war existentialism. For a fuller discussion of de Man's career, see Minae Mizumura, "Renunciation," Yale French Studies 69 (1985): 81-97.

Spirit," Winters speaks of the "terrific discipline" of Baudelaire. "It is not what is said that weighs so heavily," he writes, "but what one feels behind the line, in all that is omitted: a lifetime of monstrous discipline, from which is born the power of absolute wisdom. . . ." In the same passage, he praises the poet who, "through a dynamic and unified grasp of life, lives fully and to the point of being able to renounce life with dignity . . ." (UER 226). In "Poetry, Morality, and Criticism," he locates Hardy's strength in his recognition of the "tragic necessity of putting by the claims of the world without the abandonment of self-control . . ." (313). Finally, in another section of "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit," Winters claims that the artist's role is to so organize experience into a unified and dynamic whole that the work of art may stand as the "final proof" that the artist, "as a self-directed integer, is morally superior to the facts of life" (227).

These and other comments from roughly the same period provide a slightly different view of Winters' mature poetic from the one we are accustomed to. For instance, we can see that for Winters poetry is not only a "moral discipline," but one whose proper end is "wisdom," which can be attained only by "renouncing life with dignity," or by "putting by the claims of the world without the abandonment of self-control." In this light, his formalism takes on a new

meaning. It becomes clear that accentual-syllabic verse is superior in principle to free verse not only because of its greater precision--which enables a poet to exercise a greater degree of control over his subject--but ultimately because this precision enables the poet to exercise a greater degree of self-control. We can also see that for Winters, traditional meters and forms, in providing the poet with a means of perfecting a moral attitude toward a given experience, actually enables him to shape or control that experience. According to Winters' mature poetic, poetic meter and form actually function to discipline experience, to subdue and contain it within prescribed limits. Finally, it becomes clear that Winters' adoption of traditional meters and forms is motivated not only by the formal concerns identified by Winters himself in his few, brief comments on this stage of his career, but equally by an intellectual conversion that occurred at this particular moment in his career. This last point helps to explain the fact that throughout his mature prose both the terms and the concepts he uses, and the structures of feeling and belief to which they refer, frequently derive their emotional force from their close connection with a New Humanist ideology with overtly religious overtones.

III

So far I have discussed Winters' change of direction largely in terms of the intellectual conversion which he experienced during the late '20s and early '30s primarily, and I have focused primarily on the effect it had upon his understanding of poetry. But, of course, this intellectual conversion had an equally profound effect upon his practise as a poet. In fact, the same structures of feeling and belief which inform his poetic theory also inform his verse. Thus the poems during this period adhere not only to a formalist poetic but to the poetic of renunciation articulated in his critical prose. Yet they frequently do so in diverse and interesting ways, indicating that Winters' development was anything but linear or straightforward. In fact, the poems from the early 1930s reveal his continuing attachment to the visionary poetic of his youth even after he had abandoned the modernist methods which in his mind were bound up with this poetic.

This is especially so in Winters' first poems in traditional meters and forms, a group of Petrarchan sonnets which were gathered together in The Proof (1930). The poems are united not only by their common form but by a common theme. Each is concerned with "the mind's attempt to apprehend reality [in its essence]" (Davis 78). This is, of course, the theme of much of Winters' experimental poetry.

But in the sonnets the regularity of meter and form provides Winters with a relatively stable framework within which to explore this theme. As Comito writes, "the significance of Winters' use of traditional forms is their articulation of stable frameworks, metrical and syntactic, in which what is merely present, just 'there' in its writhing immediacy, can be measured, evaluated, put in the context of the mind's ongoing concerns" (115)

Winters' choice of the sonnet as the form with which to conduct these experiments is significant, since not only is the sonnet among the most traditional of forms in English poetry, it is also one of the most rational in its structure. As Paul Fussell's discussion of the form in Poetic Meter and Form indicates, the traditional sonnet is as logical as it is elegant. A problem is stated in the first quatrain of the poem, developed in the second by means of some intrinsic complication, and then finally solved in the sestet. This pattern of problem-solving makes it particularly well-suited to abstraction, the dominant feature of many of Winters' sonnets. Yet the main challenge the form poses for the poet resides in the imbalance that exists between octave and sestet. As Fussell points out, the poet who hopes to master the Italian sonnet form must develop an instinct for exploiting its asymmetrical design (115).

Yet what is most striking about Winters' sonnets is how often they strain against the traditional design. The subject is rarely contained in the octave but instead spills over into the sestet. Moreover, the poems rarely provide solutions to the problems they raise. In fact, they seem to address themselves to insoluble problems. Finally, many of the sonnets suffer from the same sort of rhetorical excesses which had characterized Winters' final experimental poems. Still, these poems are valuable for the insight they provide into the difficulties Winters encountered trying to think his way out of the "madness of [his] youth."

In "The Realization," for instance, Winters attempts to exorcise his early obsession with death by demystifying the subject:

Death. Nothing is simpler. One is dead.
 The set face now will fade out; the bare fact,
 Related movement, regular, intact,
 Is reabsorbed, the clay is on the bed.
 The soul is mortal, nothing: the dim head
 On the dim pillow, less. But thought clings flat
 To this, since it can never follow that
 Where no precision of the mind is bred.

Yet, as in earlier poems on the same theme, in particular those gathered together in section two of The Bare Hills, he is overwhelmed by the incomprehensibility of the concept. The sonnet's sestet records the speaker's failure to rationalize or conceptualize death:

Nothing to think of between you and All!
 Screaming processions of infinite
 Logic are grinding down receding cold!

O fool! Madness again! Turn not, for it
Lurks in each paintless cranny, and you sprawl
Blurring a definition. Quick! you are old.

In another of the sonnets from this period which was not included in The Collected Poems (1960), and which is simply titled "Sonnet," the speaker attempts to translate this materialism into a kind of anti-religion:

The fact that offers neither cause nor gain
Nor a reflection of the mind is God--
Table or chair or spinning shrill tripod,
Prie-Dieu to jazz, will suck you like a drain,
Suck you to shrieking. Real, the writhing grain
Means nothing, makes you nothing, and the room
Laid bare is God, the thinning saline Doom,
Intrinsic cringing of the shadowy brain.

Once again the effort to comprehend the incomprehensible results in failure and the speaker withdraws from the metaphysical abyss implied by his own vision.

Equally important for what they tell us about Winters' early effort to think his way out of the "madness of [his] youth" are "The Moralists" and "The Invaders," a pair of sonnets which may be read as Winters' "critique of pure reason." The poems concern the efforts of the purely analytical intelligence to seize reality directly. In this respect, as Stephens has noted, they bear a certain affinity to the early experimental poems, in which the poetic intelligence had tried to know nature in its essence. "The Moralists" describes the efforts of moral philosophers to "extend the mind beyond the act . . . ," or to formulate a philosophy beyond mere action. Although Winters may appear to identify with this goal, he is openly critical of the

moralists' "thin / And unpoetic dicta," and their belief that the human passion for knowledge of the world can be formulated in mere abstraction. In his view, "No man can hold existence in the head."

"The Invaders" extends this criticism to modern physical scientists, whose view of the physical world as a chaos of atomic particles has, in Winters' view, "laid us bare" and robbed us of "our heritage of earth and air." At the center of the poem is an extended simile which likens the "naked passion of the human mind" to a "locomotive [plunging] through / Distance that has no meaning and no bound. . . ." Baldly paraphrased, modern science is like a train which is out of control. But the metaphor functions on several other levels as well. As Davis notes, "the sound of the engine's all-pervading roar is compared to the equally all-pervading 'sub-atomic' roar of the matter of modern physics . . ." (82). More important still is its evocation of the metaphysical terror occasioned by the contemplation of this alien and inhospitable world.

Yet the two most interesting sonnets from this group are "Apollo and Daphne" and "The Fable." Both are written in a form of allegory that Winters was to use regularly throughout his mature poems, and both explore the relationship between nature and consciousness that had so preoccupied him in his youth. "Apollo and Daphne" concerns the mind's attempt to apprehend reality in its essence,

while in "The Fable" the emphasis falls upon the mind's efforts to withstand immersion in pure sensation. In Winters' re-telling of the Greek myth, Apollo, god of light and poetry, represents poetic genius, while Daphne is a symbol of the natural world with which she is bound up. The story of Apollo's attempted rape of Daphne is treated as a parable of the poet's attempt to seize meaning from the encounter of mind and matter. "The Fable," on the other hand, dramatizes Winters' preoccupation with the struggle between the dominant intellect and those forces in nature which threaten to destroy it. The sea is used here and in other poems from the early 1930s as a symbol of nature in all of its non-human signification. That is to say, it represents the elemental flux of the physical world. The rock stands for the isolated human consciousness.

Given the nature of Winters' humanism, one would expect his allegiances to be quite clear. That is to say, one would expect the poems to endorse the powers of the intellect or poetic genius over the disruptive power of nature. But this is not the case. In fact, in both poems his sympathies appear to lie with nature. Daphne's evasion of Apollo's grasp prompts one of the most lyrical passages in The Proof: "with rending flesh / She fled all ways into the grasses' mesh / And burned more quickly than the sunlight could." And in "The Fable," the near-destruction of the mind by the brutal power of the sea produces a rare

quiet music which is "Massive with peace." Both poems indicate a lingering attachment to the visionary moment of pure being when the mind merges with nature and dissolves into nothing.

The sonnets in The Proof are transitional poems, looking back to the early experimental poems just as much as they look forward to the mature verse. Poetic meter and form are used for the first time in these poems as means of evaluating experience, of shaping and controlling it, or containing it within prescribed limits. But what makes these poems most interesting is not the moral control they evince, to borrow a phrase from Winters, but rather the ambiguities and the internal contradictions they reveal.

In fact, Winters' poetic breakthrough did not actually occur until 1931, when he completed The Journey. The volume, which consists of eight poems in heroic couplets, is the first to contain successfully the early obsession with the immersion of consciousness in nature, and the first to employ the post-symbolist method that would become the mainstay of so many of his finest poems. The method consists of using the language of sensory experience to treat abstract metaphysical themes. According to Winters, when the method is employed successfully, the abstract and the concrete "should interpenetrate and comment on one another, forming a more or less continuous texture" (quoted

in Stephens 137).²⁰ As Alan Stephens first noted, in poems using the post-symbolist method the theme is never stated explicitly; instead it emerges gradually through the accumulation of physical details (132).

Winters' use of the couplet in these poems is strategic. Because it is the most regular form in English, it provides him with the greatest degree of control over his subject, while at the same time permitting him the freedom of regular variation. As he writes in Primitivism and Decadence (1937), the poet writing in heroic couplets "may move in any direction whatever, and his movement will be almost automatically graduated by the metronomic undercurrent of regularity." In addition, the couplet possesses a flexibility which enables the poet employing it "to pass easily from description, to lyricism, to didacticism, to satire, and so on, or even to combine several of these qualities at a single stroke" (141-2).

Winters' use of narrative as the principal rhetorical mode in several of these poems is also significant, since the narrative mode allows him to contextualize his early obsession with the interpenetration of mind and matter. In

²⁰ The relation of abstract and concrete language in poetry was a subject which occupied Winters throughout his career, but his lengthiest and most detailed discussion of the topic appears in the chapter on "The Post-Symbolist Method" in Forms of Discovery 251-98. The role of this method in his own poetry has been discussed by several critics, including Comito, 132-52; Davis, 97-8; Howard Kaye, "The Post-Symbolist Poetry of Yvor Winters," Southern Review 7 (Winter 1971): 176-97; and Powell, passim.

the early visionary poems, he evokes a particular state of mind largely through the description of extremely delicate natural effects and phenomena. In the poems in The Journey, the use of narrative enables him to treat those same states of mind objectively and dispassionately. In this way, he is able to consign them to the past and to regard them as youthful preoccupations, the product of naivete on the one hand, and faulty conceptual premises on the other.

The title poem in The Journey describes the poet's journey west, through the "bare / Wastes of Wyoming," to the frontierland that had been the setting of so many of his early poems. On one level, it is a purely descriptive poem. On another, however, it is the record of a spiritual journey, the speaker "turning in despair, / Changing and turning, till the fall of night." Throughout the poem, Winters evokes the squalor and the violence of the American West:

The sprawling streets, the icy station bench,
The Round-up pennants, the latrinal stench. . . .
At night the turbulence of drink and mud,
Blue glare of gas, the dances dripping blood

The scene is familiar from the early poems, in particular Winters' Fire Sequence. In "The Journey," however, the violence is contained within the regularity of the couplet form and rarely spills over to effect the poem's rhetoric.

A similar control is evident in the crucial encounter between self and nature which the poem recounts. What is

most striking here is the calmness with which Winters describes this encounter:

Once when the train paused in an empty place,
I met the unmoved landscape face to face;
Smoothing abysses that no stream could slake,
Deep in its black gulch crept the heavy Snake,
The sound diffused, and so intently firm,
It seemed the silence, having change nor term.

There is none of the violence or the hysteria that accompanies such encounters in the early poems. Instead, the poem records the speaker's detached perception of the impersonality of the physical world. The name of the river is fortuitous, since it illustrates perfectly that convergence of the literal and the figurative, the concrete and the abstract, that characterizes the post-symbolist method. The name also contains demonic connotations which are relevant here, since, in Winters' view, the landscape symbolizes a kind of privation that can best be described as a form of evil.

"On a View of Pasadena from the Hills" is even more openly autobiographical. The poem describes Winters' return to his family's home near Eagle Rock, California. Set at dawn, it presents a view of the hills and valleys surrounding the house:

No light appears, though dark has mostly gone,
Sunk from the cold and monstrous stone. The hills
Lie naked but not light. The darkness spills
Down the remoter gulleys; pooled, will stay
Too low to melt, not yet alive with day.

In the lines that follow, the emphasis falls upon the changes that have taken place in this familiar scene. The

palm trees that once lined the country roads have disappeared. Deep rust has "fastened on the wheels" of the abandoned carriages. The small round towers adorning the stately homes have become "the hiving place of bees." And cement roads now "mark the hills, wide, bending free / Of cliff and headland."

In one of the most beautiful passages in the poem, the speaker recalls a time when he used to walk these hills:

. . . so dense the underbrush,
That where I pushed my way the giant hush
Was changed to soft explosion as the sage
Broke down to powdered ash, the sift of age,
And fell along my path, a shadowy rift.

In their rapt attention to detail and their sensuousness, such lines attest to the speaker's deep knowledge and love of this landscape. Yet they are also informed by his knowledge that it is no longer his to enjoy:

This is my father's house, no homestead here
That I shall live in, but a shining sphere
Of glass and glassy moments, frail surprise,
My father's phantasy of Paradise;
Which melts upon his death, which he attained
With loss of heart for every step he gained.

"On a View of Pasadena from the Hills" is, among other things, an elegy, written to commemorate the death of the poet's father. But it also attests to the death of a specific vision of nature. In form and content, the poem resembles Wordsworth's "Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." Each poem presents a solitary speaker surveying a familiar natural scene which he is viewing for the first time after a long absence. Each moves almost

imperceptibly from description to introspection and back to description again.²¹ Finally, each poem focuses on the speaker's attempts to come to terms with some crucial change in a familiar landscape, which is mirrored by a profound personal change. But there is an important difference between Wordsworth's poem and Winters'. "Tintern Abbey" describes an "Abundant recompense" which the speaker gains after the loss of his childhood vision of nature. For the speaker in Winters' poem, however, there is no "abundant recompense." Instead, "On A View Of Pasadena From The Hills" presents a stoical resignation to the passing of a way of life, crowded out on one side by suburbanization, and on the other by the sea.

It is also possible to read "The Marriage" within the context of Winters' central thematic preoccupation at this time, namely, the relation of the self to nature. The poem is an epithalamion, celebrating Winters' marriage to the poet-novelist Janet Lewis. Winters himself has suggested that the poem was at least partly inspired by his reading of Portuguese and Provencal love poems, but its debt to the English metaphysical poets is even more obvious.

²¹ For a discussion of the formal and thematic features of Wordsworth's poem and the tradition of descriptive poetry to which it belongs see M.H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in Harold Bloom, ed., Romanticism and Consciousness (New York: Norton, 1970) 201-29.

The poem revolves around the traditional Christian conception of marriage as the union of spirit and flesh. Yet, as Gordon Harvey has observed, Winters reverses the emphasis of this traditional conception to celebrate "Flesh living in the spirit." Although the marriage retains its sacramental significance, it is also given a secular meaning. The lovers' passion for one another is based upon a shared passion for the world:

We fed our minds on every mortal thing:
 The lacy fronds of carrots in the spring,
 Their flesh sweet on the tongue, the salty wine
 From bitter grapes, which gathered through the
 vine
 The mineral drouth of autumn concentrate,
 Wild spring in dream escaping, the debate
 Of flesh and spirit on those vernal nights,
 Its resolution in naive delights,
 The young kids bleating softly in the rain--
 All this to pass, never to return again.

And it is the mortal beauty of this world, and of the flesh, which the lovers seem to cherish most. In the last lines, the speaker turns his attention from present satisfactions, the "naive delights" of the young marriage, to the future, to old age and death:

When flesh shall fall away, and, falling, stand
 Wrinkling with shadow over face and hand,
 Still I shall meet you on the verge of dust
 And know you as a faithful vestige must.
 And in commemoration of our lust,
 May our heirs seal us in a single urn,
 A single spirit never to return.

"The Marriage" is a poem about incarnation, about the union of spirit and flesh in sexual passion, but it is also about the "possibility of a truce in the strife that ranges

through so much of Winters' early verse" (Comito 139). In this respect, it may be read as a variation on Winters' central theme. Although the poem addresses itself quite literally to the love between husband and wife, it involves no large stretch of the imagination to see the woman's body as a trope for the world's body as well. In the poem's union of spirit and flesh, Winters accomplishes a rare rapprochement between nature and consciousness. By treating this theme within the context of the traditional conception of marriage as a sacrament he is able to contain and subdue the diverse and often contradicting energies which were usually present in his treatment of it.

Yet the poems which adhere most closely to the poetic of renunciation which Winters articulated in his prose during the late '20s and early '30s are "The Slow Pacific Swell" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." The first belongs to the group of poems in heroic couplets gathered together in The Journey, the second first appeared in The New Republic in 1937. Together they provide the clearest indication of what was involved in Winters' definition of poetry as a "moral discipline."

Like the poem "On a View of Pasadena from the Hills," "The Slow Pacific Swell" belongs to the tradition of the Greater Romantic lyric, a tradition which includes Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", and Shelley's "Mont Blanc." Like these poems, "The

"Slow Pacific Swell" presents a quintessentially Romantic situation--a solitary speaker seen in a natural setting--and a central Romantic dilemma--"how to bring the human and the natural into relation" (Stephens 132). Yet this is where the similarity between "The Slow Pacific Swell" and the earlier Romantic odes would appear to end, since Winters' poem consists of a sustained critique of the Romantic tradition to which it belongs, in particular, of the view of nature typified by that tradition.

"The Slow Pacific Swell" rests upon a distinction between two contradictory views of the natural world. The first view, which is presented in the first lines of the poem, may be described as a Romantic view; nature, represented here by the sea, is described as a benign presence, tranquil and inviting:

Far out of sight forever stands the sea,
 Bounding the land with pale tranquillity.
 When a small child, I watched it from a hill
 At thirty miles or more. The vision still
 Lies in the eye, soft blue and far away.

The dominant impression in such lines is one of calmness and beauty, an impression which is enhanced through Winters' description of the stillness of the scene:

The wind above the hill-top has the sound
 Of distant water in unbroken sky;
 Dark and precise the little steamers ply--
 Firm in direction they seem not to stir.

Yet the last lines of the stanza indicate that this view of the sea is inaccurate, the product of distance on the one hand and childhood naivete on the other.

The speaker's description of his near-drowning off Cape Flattery is intended to lay bare this illusion. Here the sea is represented in its full destructive force:

Once when I rounded Flattery, the sea
Hove its loose weight like sand to tangle me
Upon the washing deck, to crush the hull;
Subsiding, dragged flesh at the bone: . . .

Although his correspondence indicates that it was his father who was actually washed overboard while sailing off the coast of Oregon, Winters claims the experience for himself, using it for its allegorical and metaphorical significance.²² The incident represents the self's immersion in nature. As in the early poems, the encounter of mind and matter results in the destruction of identity, described here in terms of the dissolution of self:

The skull
Felt the retreating wash of dreaming hair.
Half drenched in dissolution, I lay bare.

Yet, unlike the early experimental poems in free verse, the emphasis falls not upon dissolution but recovery: "I came / Back slowly, slowly knew myself the same." The encounter confirms the otherness of nature, and the impossibility of becoming one with it. The description of the whales evokes the awesome beauty of nature when viewed from a distance: "the long sweep of the jaw, / The blunt head plunging clean above the wave." Finally, it confirms the "absolute

²²Yvor Winters, letter to Allen Tate, November 6, 1926, Allen Tate Papers. Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey.

cleavage" that exists between self and nature and that Winters refers to in his prose from this period.²³

The last stanza presents the speaker's stoical resignation to a less vital but more stable habitation on land. Recollected in tranquillity, the sea is "but a sound," alluring but inhuman and unmeaningful. The discovery of the uninhabitability of nature takes the form of a tragic loss. The land may be sure under foot, but it is "numb" and cannot compare with the sea. Yet, for Winters, this loss is necessary if the mind is to survive the temptations of nature's alien beauty. The sea continues to hover on the edge of consciousness, "stir[ring] on the sand, / Sleeping to sink away, withdrawing land . . . ," but by this stage in his career, Winters has come to see that its power is unthinkable and unformulable. In the last line of the poem, it is described as it "gathers seaward, ebbing out of mind."

²³The term "absolute cleavage" comes from Winters' essay "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgement" and refers to the gulf between "the living and the dead" or "between successive states of being" (IDR 294). But the essay which bears the closest relation to this poem is Winters' "Herman Melville and the Problem of Moral Navigation." In fact, Winters' description of the symbolism of Moby Dick contains an excellent description of the symbolism of "The Slow Pacific Swell": "The sea is the realm of the half-known, at once of perception and of peril; it is governed by tremendous, destructive, and unpredictable forces, the storms, calms, currents, tides, depths, and distances, amid which one can preserve oneself only by virtue of the greatest skill, and then but precariously and from moment to moment. Of all the creatures in the sea, the whale is the greatest, the most intelligent, and the most dangerous" (IDR 212-3).

The poems written in heroic couplets are the first to contain successfully the diverse energies that continually threatened to disrupt the earlier visionary poems. But in many respects the quintessential Winters poem from the 1830s is "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." The poem, widely regarded as one of Winters' finest, is an allegorical narrative which "deals on a heroic scale with the original concern of Winters' poetry: human encounters with pristine sensation which menaces and enriches" (Stephens 135). Like "On A View of Pasadena from the Hills" and "The Slow Pacific Swell," it attempts to demystify this Romantic theme by confronting the Romantic tradition directly. The poem which stands behind "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," however, is not "Tintern Abbey" or "Mont Blanc," but Keats' allegorical narrative, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" tells the story of a knight-at arms who is undone through his love for a beautiful woman. The first three stanzas describe the knight as "haggard" and "woe-begone," and place him within a denuded autumnal setting: "The sedge has withered from the lake, / And no birds sing" (Bloom and Trilling 535).²⁴ In the stanzas that follow the mysterious lady of the title is described:

²⁴All quotations of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" are taken from Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, eds., Romantic Poetry and Prose (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 535-6.

Full beautiful--a faery's child,
 Her hair was long, her foot was light,
 And her eyes were wild.

Through her love, the world is restored to its springtime abundance, as the woman brings the knight "relish sweet," "honey wild," and "manna dew." Yet once they kiss, the hero falls into a deep sleep and experiences a strange and macabre dream vision:

I saw pale kings and princes too,
 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
 They cried--'La Belle Dame Sans Merci
 Hath thee in thrall!'

In the last stanza, the knight awakens to discover that he has been transported to a "cold hill," where he is surrounded by the same dead landscape which had been described in the first stanzas.

Like "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," "Sir Gawain and the Green" is written in ballad form; and like the Romantic poem, it employs medieval legend as a vehicle for treating the relation between the human and the natural worlds. Moreover, in their general movement, the poems are very similar, each describing an encounter with nature which nearly costs the protagonist his life. Yet if there is a difference between the two poems it is in the deliberateness with which they treat this encounter. Keats' recognition of the impossibility of bringing together the human and the natural appears almost accidental. The poem seems to be only vaguely aware of its allegorical meaning. Winters is

much more deliberate in his handling of the encounter between man and nature.

In Winters' treatment of the medieval legend, Gawain is treated as an artist figure, and the Green Knight as a "vegetation demon, a demon of growth (physical), sense, nature in all its non-human signification . . ." (New Republic [2 June 1937]: 104). The knight's wife is used to represent the seductive appeal of the natural world. It is significant that the lady's beauty should be described as "lithe, unholy, pure," since, as Powell has noted, in Winters' vocabulary the word "pure" almost always signifies one or another form of privation or evil. Moreover, the poem associates her with nature's slow, inhuman growth:

His lady, like a forest vine,
Grew in my arms; the growth was sweet;
And yet what thoughtless force was mine!

Gawain's response to the woman's beauty points to the principal difference between Winters' poem and Keats'. In "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," the knight-at-arms succumbs to the beautiful woman's charms. That is to say, he gives in to the seductive appeal of nature. In Winters' poem, the emphasis falls upon the hero's ability to withstand temptation:

By practice and conviction formed,
With ancient stubbornness ingrained,
Although her body clung and swarmed,
My own identity remained.

As Winters wrote in his commentary on the poem, Gawain survives the experience "more through habitual balance than

through perfect control at the height of temptation." His accomplishment may be regarded as a version of the poet's own. Like the poet, he has been able to "put by the claims of the world, without the abandonment of self-control" (Grattan 313) In fact, the poem may be said to enact the poetic of renunciation which Winters articulated in his critical prose during the late '20s and early '30s.

In this respect, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" resembles not only "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" but "The Slow Pacific Swell." Like the poem in heroic couplets, it describes an encounter with nature which very nearly destroys the protagonist, and like the previous poem, it places the emphasis upon the recovery of the self and the withdrawal from the source of temptation. Yet whereas in "The Slow Pacific Swell," the sea is used as a symbol of nature in all of its destructive force, in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," it is the knight's wife who is used to represent the seductive appeal of the natural world.

The poem closes with Gawain's description of his return to the world of men and ordinary experience:

I left the green bark and the shade,
Where growth was rapid, thick, and still;
I found a road that men had made
And rested on a drying hill.

As in "The Slow Pacific Swell," this return to safer ground is regarded equivocally. Though it preserves the speaker from destruction, it is nevertheless perceived as a loss, since he is now isolated from a crucial source of vitality.

The image of the "drying hill" recalls the image of the "numb land" in "The Slow Pacific Swell." Both serve to remind us of the cost of renunciation.

As we have seen, Winters' change of direction in the late '20s and early '30s involved more than a simple change of methods. In fact, it was part of an intellectual conversion which he experienced during these years, and which can be traced to the influence of several factors, chief among them his reading of Babbitt and the New Humanists. The most immediate consequence of this conversion was the dramatic reversal which occurred in his understanding of poetry. His early radical aestheticism was replaced by a more conservative concern with the morality of poetry, a concern which culminated in his definition of poetry as a "moral discipline." According to Winters' mature poetic, the proper end of this discipline is "wisdom," which can be attained only by "renouncing life with dignity."

Yet the consequences of Winters' intellectual conversion during the late '20s and early '30s are also evident in his poetry from this period. Several of the poems from the early 1930s attest to Winters' preoccupation with renunciation. In these poems, however, it is not life that he wishes to renounce but his own youthful yearning for a visionary merging of self and nature in a privileged moment of perception. In many of these poems, Winters'

formalism translates into an effort to subdue and contain this yearning within the prescribed limits of regular meters and forms. Finally, however, the poems indicate the difficulty of disciplining so powerful a yearning. Even as Winters attempts to demystify the visionary moment that had been the object of his early experimental poems, he remains firmly within its grip.

By saying that even after his change of direction Winters remained within the grip of his early visionary poetic, I do not mean to suggest that his mature poems fail to confirm his revised conception of poetry as a moral discipline. On the contrary, it is precisely the unresolved tension between his conscious desire to demystify this visionary poetic and its continued presence in his poetry that accounts for the strength of his finest work from this important transitional period. Moreover, this tension testifies to the internal logic of his poetic career.

The conception of poetry as a moral discipline which he developed during the late '20s and early '30s clearly derives from his reading of *Babbitt* at this time; it is also clearly the product of his own conscious experimentation with traditional meters and forms; but the continued thrust of romantic themes and problems indicates that, in spite of his conscious intentions, his poetry remained rooted in those same thematic and epistemological problems which he had first encountered in his early experimental poems. In

this connection, it is significant that even when dealing with subjects as obviously relational as those treated in "The Marriage" and "On A View Of Pasadena From The Hills" the romantic problem of the integrity of the self in or over against nature should loom so large.

Given the intensity (even obsessiveness) of this very personal concern, one might well wonder whether Winters was even capable of changing directions in the way that he intended when he changed methods. Moreover, looking ahead to the social and political poems which he began to write in the 1930s, one might well wonder what sort of possibilities existed in the area of social and political commentary for a poetic vocation so steeped in the ardors of the visionary.

Chapter Four

On the Ideology of Winters' Change of Direction:

The Social and Political Poems

As is well-known, the 1930s was the decade in which writers became consciously involved in politics. In England and the United States, artists and intellectuals were compelled by social and political pressures to take up large public themes.²⁵ Winters was no exception. In fact, during the '30s and '40s he wrote a large number of poems which addressed themselves, directly and indirectly, to social and political themes. Given his lingering attachment to the visionary poetic of his early years, however, one might well wonder what sort of political engagement he was capable of. Moreover, given the affinity between his mature poetic

²⁵Although there are several anthologies and critical studies of the social and political poetry written in England during the 1930s, the social and political poetry written in the United States during the same period has received scant critical attention. A notable exception, however, is Cary Nelson's Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). A special issue of Poetry, edited by Horace Gregory and devoted to the social poetry of the period, is also of interest ("Social Poets Number" Poetry 49 [May 1936]). Finally, for a valuable first-hand account of the social and political pressures facing American writers and intellectuals during the 1930s, see Irving Howe, "The Thirties in Retrospect," in Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson, eds. Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s (Montgomery: University of Alabama Press, 1982) 14-28.

and the New Humanist philosophy of Irving Babbitt, one might well wonder about the nature of his politics. The New Humanists were after all not only cultural but political conservatives.²⁶ It would seem to follow that in endorsing Babbitt's view of human nature, he must also have endorsed his views on politics.

In fact, as early as 1949, at least one critic had drawn such a conclusion. In an article which appeared in The American Scholar in the winter of 1949, Robert Gorham Davis mentioned Winters as one of several prominent literary critics whose reactionary conservatism had placed him at odds with the liberal democratic tradition in America. Davis was concerned primarily with the genealogy of this critical conservatism, which he traced to the nineteenth-century critical wars in France, and to the writers most responsible for interpreting these wars for a twentieth-century English-speaking audience, namely, Babbitt, Hulme, and Eliot. Moreover, his main targets were the New Critics, who, whatever their differences, Davis argued, share in a profoundly anti-modernist bias, and in the conviction that the best safeguard against the moral and philosophical relativism of the modern age is a belief in the sustaining power of tradition. Yet he referred to Winters specifically, describing both him and Allen Tate as

²⁶For a detailed discussion of the politics of the New Humanism see J. David Hoeveler, Jr., The New Humanism, 125-51.

"reactionary critics," noting that their criticism appeared regularly during the '30s in the pro-fascist American Review.

Winters' response to the Davis article appeared in an angry letter of protest which was published in The American Scholar in the spring of 1950. In this letter, he rejected Davis' use of the word "reactionary" to describe either Allen Tate or himself. Though he conceded that he himself had used the word to describe his critical position, he pointed out that "I was referring to myself as reactionary against the confused construction of modern poetry (as represented by Pound and Eliot) and against the ideas supporting that confusion" As for Tate, he claimed that "his use [of the term] was more general than mine and . . . included the notion of reaction against certain contemporary social and philosophical ideas in favor of older ones" (228).

He also rejected Davis' claim that his or Tate's appearance in the American Review during the '30s made either of them pro-fascist. Though two or three of the journal's editors "were unquestionably pro-fascist," he admitted, many of its contributors were not. "Tate and his Agrarian friends . . . were fantasists but certainly not fascists." Moreover, according to Winters, they had published criticism in this journal for the simple reason that the American Review was "the best critical review of

literature in the country for about two or three years" (228).

Finally, Winters rejected the notion that his critical principles made him a political conservative, reactionary or otherwise. In fact, he described himself as an "old fashioned American," a registered Democrat who voted for FDR four times, while supporting several traditionally liberal organizations, such as the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the California Federation for Civic Unity (The American Scholar 19 [1950]: 227-30).

Winters' response to Robert Gorham Davis' article on "The New Criticism and the Democratic Tradition" contains his most explicit statement of his political views. But certain comments in his criticism are also useful in this connection. In his essay "Robert Frost, Or The Spiritual Drifter As Poet," for instance, Winters criticizes Frost for expressing in several of his poems "a doctrine of political drifting which corresponds to the doctrine of personal drifting" evident throughout his work (FC 169). In his view, this doctrine amounts to little more than a sort of naive Romantic individualism which, if taken to its logical conclusion, "could lead only to the withdrawal from public affairs of the citizen not concerned primarily with personal aggrandizement, and to the surrender of the nation to the unscrupulous go-getter, who, though he may not be a drifter, is not governed by admirable aims." "It is an obscurantist

doctrine," he writes, which implies that "this realm of human activity, like others, cannot be dealt with rationally and is better if not understood" (169).

From such comments, it is possible to make certain inferences about Winters' own political views. We can infer, for instance, that he does not share in Frost's desire to withdraw from public affairs. We can infer too that he does not regard politics as an essentially irrational activity. But to determine the ideology of his mature poetic, it is best to look to the social and political poems which Winters wrote during the '30s and '40s.²⁷

A study of these poems reveals that his adherence to the formalist poetic formulated in his critical prose did determine his response to the social and political realities of his time, but that it did so in more subtle ways than one might first expect. In fact, the social and political poems which Winters wrote during the '30s and '40s indicate that his traditionalism did not make him a political conservative any more than Pound's modernism made him a radical. Instead, his poetry belongs to the liberal democratic

²⁷Certain of Winters' historical and occasional poems might also be discussed here but because I discuss these poems in Chapter Five, I have focused exclusively on the poems from this period which address themselves directly to social and political themes. The one exception to this practice is the poems involving the case of David Lamson, which I discuss at the end of this chapter.

tradition which Davis regards as being threatened by his prose.

I

Winters' earliest poem to address a social or political theme directly is his poem "A Post-Card to the Social Muse," which was first published in The New Republic in February, 1933. The poem was written in response to a debate carried on in the pages of The New Republic during the winter of 1932-33. The debate had been prompted by Archibald MacLeish's "Invocation to the Social Muse," which was first published in The New Republic in October, 1932. Although mannered in style and only vaguely consistent in its argument, MacLeish's poem provided a focal point for opposing views on the relationship between poetry and politics.

According to MacLeish, the poet's business is with poetry and not with political fashions. "There is nothing worse for our trade," he wrote, "than to be in style." Advocating artistic freedom over political responsibility, he claims that the poet's sole obligation is to himself and his craft. The poem also contains a pointed criticism of the proletariat aesthetic:

Besides, Tovarishch, how to embrace an army?
 How to take to one's chamber a million souls?
 How to conceive in the name of a column of marchers?

But its most controversial statement concerns the question of the poet's political allegiances. In MacLeish's view, the true poet cannot afford such allegiances, but instead must remain neutral if he is to survive:

We are
Whores, Fraulein: poets, Fraulein, are persons of
Known vocation following troops: they must sleep
with
Stragglers from either prince and of both views.
The rules permit them to further the business of
neither.

In addition to Winters, several poets and critics wrote to The New Republic in response to MacLeish's cynical view of the social responsibility of poetry. Rolfe Humphries criticized MacLeish's poem for its vagueness and inconsistency (New Republic Feb. 1933). Allen Tate, in his "Aeneas at New York," denied the claim that poets are whores and camp-followers. "The young man at Salamis," he asked, "Was he a whore?" According to Tate, "The poet is he who fights on the passionate / Side and whoever loses he wins . . ." (New Republic Feb. 1933). The most violent attack, however, came from the Communist poet and critic Mike Gold, who accused MacLeish of being a fascist. According to Gold, "White collar fascists out of Harvard and Wall Street have less spiritual claim on America than the share-croppers, miners, sailors and gaudy dancers" (New Republic July 1933).²⁸

²⁸The particulars of this debate are elaborated in greater detail in Daniel Aaron's Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism (New York: Harcourt,

Winters' poem is a response not so much to MacLeish's "Invocation to the Social Muse," but to the controversy which it prompted. "A Post-Card to the Social Muse" consists of a satirical commentary on the unfortunate consequences of confusing poetry and propaganda:

Madam, since you choose
To call yourself a Muse,
I will not be too nice
To give advice.

Passion is hard of speech,
Wisdom exact of reach;
Poets have studied verse;
And wit is terse.

Change or repose is wrought
By steady arm and thought:
The fine indignant sprawl
Confuses all.

Do not engage with those
Of small verse and less prose;
'Twere better far to play
At bouts-rimés.

In Winters' view, poetry is synonymous with precision in thought and feeling; its object is wisdom, which is "exact of reach." Moreover, change--personal or political, Winters makes no distinction here--is the product of careful thought and deliberate action. To MacLeish, and to the poets and critics who had attacked his "Invocation," he responds that "The fine indignant sprawl / Confuses all." In short, bad poetry is bad poetry, whatever political doctrine it serves, since it illuminates nothing. Thus he

concludes by advising the "social muse" not to "engage with those / Of small verse and less prose."

It is possible, of course, to read "A Post-Card to the Social Muse" as an indirect endorsement of the separation of aesthetics and politics recommended by MacLeish. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the terms that Winters uses to define poetry--terms like "hard," "exact," and "terse"--echo the Imagist aesthetic which he had subscribed to in his youth. Yet it is equally important to note that Winters does not reject the marriage of poetry and politics on ideological grounds, but because it has produced so much bad poetry. In fact, several of Winters' poems from the early '30s attest to his desire to use verse as a means of political commentary.

In one poem from this period, for instance, Winters praises the late Democratic Senator Thomas J. Walsh for his service to "that mathematic thing, the State." Walsh, a senator from Montana who was best known for the part he played in uncovering a massive oil lease scandal in the 1920s, is held up as a model of political conduct.²⁹ Winters describes him as a "man whose purpose and remorseless sight / Pursued corruption for its evil ways."

²⁹For a discussion of the role Walsh played in uncovering the "Teapot Dome" scandal see Geoffrey Perrett, America in the Twenties (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) 179-86.

In the last lines of the poem, he envisions the reward which Walsh and others like him receive for their integrity:

How sleep the great, the gentle, and the wise!
 Agèd and calm, they couch the wrinkled head.
 Done with the wisdom that mankind devise,
 Humbly they render back the volume read--
 Dwellers amid a peace that few surmise,
 Masters of quiet among all the dead.

In another poem from the same period, he considers the difficulties involved in such an accomplishment. "The Prince" describes the hazards facing the scrupulous politician, who must rise to power "through shallow trickery. . . ." As difficult as it is to attain political power, it is even more difficult to exercise it judiciously. In fact, in Winters' view, the greatest challenge facing the honest politician is the challenge to bend a crooked system to straight purposes, "deceiv[ing] corruption unto good, / By indirection strengthen[ing] love with hate." The true politician, he writes, is one who must:

Betray the witless unto wisdom, trick
 Disaster to good luck, escape the gaze
 Of all the pure at heart, each lunatic
 Of innocence, who draws you to his daze:

And this frail balance to immortalize,
 Stare publicly from death through marble eyes.

Such poems attest to Winters' concern with the fate of honesty in "a low dishonest decade," to borrow Auden's famous characterization of the '30s. Despite their apparent idealism, they are grounded in a realistic awareness of the hazards facing principled men in unprincipled times. Yet both "On the Death of Senator Thomas J. Walsh" and "The

Prince" attest to the triumph of integrity over corruption. In fact, both poems are optimistic about the possibility of right conduct in the political sphere. As opposed to Frost's "political drifting," Winters holds out hope that a reasoned course of action can be found to navigate the moral minefield of contemporary politics.

The sonnet "Phasellus Ille" also belongs to this period of Winters' development and deserves to be read in its social and historical context. The poem, whose title means "this little ship," is an adaptation of an R.P. Blackmur poem by the same name. Like Blackmur, Winters uses the metaphor of a ship tossed on high seas to evoke the precariousness of reason in a world dominated by various "forms of unreason," to borrow a phrase from Blackmur's prose. Yet Winters' "Phasellus Ille" is more complicated than Blackmur's, since Blackmur's metaphor is used by Winters as a simile to elaborate his own conceit. Thus the poem begins with a description in the octave of a storm-battered house--"The dry wood strains, the small house stands its ground: / Jointed and tough, its sides shed off the storm"-- which is likened in the sestet to a ship on high seas--"Hold sure the course! the small house, like a boat, / Rides firm, intact, awaits the final blow."

Though the tenor of this metaphor is never explicitly stated, it is not difficult to see the storm referred to in the poem as "the gathering storm in Europe" during the early

'30s. Nor is it difficult to see the beleaguered house as a metaphor for the isolated human consciousness as it "awaits the final blow." Regarded in this way, "Phasellus Ille" becomes an allegory dramatizing the struggle between the "dominant intellect" and those "contemporary forms of disruption" which threaten its "survival and aggrandizement," to quote Winters himself from his "Foreword" to Before Disaster, where the poem first appeared.³⁰

The affinities between this poem and both "The Prince" and Winters' elegy "On the Death of Senator Thomas J. Walsh" should be clear. Each of these poems is concerned with the survival of threatened values or virtues in times of social and political stress. Each asserts the need for balance in such times. Yet it should be noted that "Phasellus Ille" is considerably less optimistic than either "The Prince" or the poem "On the Death of Senator Thomas J. Walsh." In fact, the last lines of the poem reveal an unsettling awareness of

³⁰The metaphor Winters uses here is by no means original but there is one use of it that seems especially relevant. In a widely circulated open letter of the period, the supporters of the Communist candidates in the presidential election of 1932 wrote: "The United States under capitalism is like a house that is rotting away; the roof leaks, the sills and rafters are crumbling. The Democrats want to paint it pink. The Republicans don't want to paint it; instead they want to raise the rent" "Culture and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Intellectual Workers of America" New York: League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford (1932): 6. Winters' poem has rather interesting resonances when read in the context of this pamphlet. His use of this particular metaphor shows how far he is from the radical left.

the threat posed to reason by the chaos beneath the surface of contemporary social life:

Beneath, the current of impartial chance,
Disaster that strikes briefly and by rote,
The hazards of insane inheritance,
Lave our smooth hull with what we little know.

Poems like "The Prince," "On the Death of Senator Thomas J. Walsh," and "Phasellus Ille" attest to Winters' concern with the hazards of the ethical life in a time marked by expedience and deception. But the most interesting of his early social and political poems are the ones that address themselves to the increasing violence in Europe during the 1930s.

Although events in Europe are rarely referred to directly in these poems, it is not difficult to determine the source of his apprehensions. Throughout the early '30s, there were several incidents which threatened to destroy the uneasy peace established by the Treaty of Versailles. In the spring of 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria; and in January of 1933, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, and immediately began to formulate his policy of lebensraum, or territorial expansion. At the same time but to the south, Mussolini entertained his own imperial ambitions, which he announced regularly during international radio broadcasts. Finally, though the Spanish Civil War did not officially begin until 1936, as early as 1934, there were large Franco-

led demonstrations involving Spanish miners and laborers which resulted in thousands of deaths.³¹

Winters was one of many American writers and intellectuals who was concerned about such developments. One thinks of Hemingway, Dos Passos, MacLeish, Edna St. Vincent Millay and R.P. Blackmur as others who shared this concern. Yet, as Robert Von Hallberg has noted, the responsibilities of artists and intellectuals in "comprehending and representing the historical events leading to war and the cultural effects of those events proved a more difficult matter for Winters than for many of his contemporaries" (800). This was so because of the nature of his understanding of these events. In his mind, they were not isolated social and political events, but signs of a general evil, which though "permanent in . . . nature, usually take[s] particular forms from the age" (BD iii). This fact helps to explain the urgency with which Winters brooded over the increasing violence in Europe during the early 1930s.

In several of the poems from this period, it is the sight or the sound of an airplane overhead that draws Winters' attention to the inherent violence of the times. In the poem "By the Road to the Air-Base," for instance, the

³¹For my understanding of the social and political history of this period I am indebted to Hugh Brogan, Longman History of the U.S.A. (New York: Longman Books, 1985); and Robert A. Divine, The Reluctant Belligerent: The American Entry Into World War II 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1979).

speaker's contemplation of the fields around his home is interrupted by the arrival of military planes from a nearby air-base:

The calloused grass lies hard
Against the cracking plain:
Life is a grayish stain;
The salt-marsh hems my yard.

Dry dikes rise hill on hill:
In sloughs of tidal slime
Shell-fish deposit lime,
Wild sea-fowl creep at will.

The highway, like a beach,
Turns whiter, shadowy, dry:
Loud, pale against the sky,
The bombing planes hold speech.

Yet fruit grows on the trees;
Here scholars pause to speak;
Through gardens bare and Greek,
I hear my neighbor's bees.

In style and subject, the poem recalls Williams' "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital." Both are descriptive landscape poems, and both rely heavily upon precise imagistic details to evoke a strong dominant impression. But whereas the Williams poem is celebratory in tone, describing the arrival of spring--an event which for Williams is almost always associated with the awakening of consciousness--Winters' poem is more sombre and reserved.

Set in late summer, the landscape it describes is dry and lifeless. The first three stanzas abound with images of aridity and bareness: "Dry dikes rise hill on hill." "The highway, like a beach, / Turns whiter, shadowy, dry." The short, declarative sentences used throughout are indicative

of the speaker's emotional state, which is revealed most clearly in the line "Life is a grayish stain." The arrival of the "bombing planes" introduces a note of foreboding into the poem. "Loud, pale against the sky," they are said to "hold speech," by which Winters may mean that "their noise prevents speech," as Robert Von Hallberg writes, or that they "carry speech," and "can be read as a form of statement (presumably about the American willingness to curb militarily the growth of fascism [in Europe])" (800).

Whatever the meaning of the phrase, the speaker's awareness of the bombers taking off on military manoeuvres from the air-field near his home prompts him to turn from his contemplation of the barren landscape to his gardens "bare and Greek," where "fruit still grows on trees," and "scholars" are at leisure to "pause to speak." The poem would appear to contrast the Greek gardens with the barren landscape, since, as Terry Comito points out, "the poet's garden is a human landscape, where words ripen along with fruit" (189), while the landscape outside the garden's borders is uncultivated and raw. Yet the contrast is more apparent than real, since neither the human nor the natural landscape are untouched by the speaker's awareness of the ominous "speech" contained in the bomber planes' loud drone.

The title poem of Before Disaster develops the theme which is adumbrated in "By the Road to the Air-Base." First published in The New Republic in September, 1933, the poem

is concerned with the precariousness of the historical moment facing Winters and his contemporaries. The metaphor which he uses to evoke this precariousness is that of evening traffic on a congested highway. The cars are conceived abstractly as "Drifting weight in triple rows, / Fixed relation and repose." Throughout the first verse paragraph, Winters emphasizes the great skill required to navigate the automobiles around the turns, and the potential for disaster implicit in such a scene:

This one edges out and by,
 Inch by inch with steady eye.
 But should error be increased,
 Mass and moment are released;
 Matter loosens, flooding blind,
 Levels drivers to its kind.

In the second verse paragraph, Winters equates this scene with the situation facing the international community. The image of the gridlocked commuters is used as a metaphor for the "ranks of nations" descending the road to disaster. The same sense of precariousness which pervades his description of the congested traffic scene may be read into his conception of world affairs. Like the suburban commuters on the highway, the poem suggests, these "ranks of nations" cannot afford to err in the course they have taken.

The most conspicuous feature of the poem is, of course, its meter, an oddly truncated iambic tetrameter in which the unaccented syllable of the first foot in each line is omitted. Winters experimented with this meter in several poems, but rarely is it used more effectively than in

"Before Disaster," where its obtrusive regularity serves to emphasize the central theme, the need for order in a world marked by violence and disorder.

Yet it is interesting to note that despite the emphasis upon caution and control, "Before Disaster" concludes pessimistically. As Winters writes in the last lines of the poem:

Fool and scoundrel guide the State.
Peace is whore to Greed and Hate.
Nowhere may I turn to flee:
Action is security.
Treading change with savage heel,
We must live or die by steel.

Judging from such lines, it would appear that Winters was all but resigned to the inevitability of disaster by this time. But it is important to note that he is not interested in prophecy. Nor does he take any pleasure in the thought of America's "baptism of fire," to borrow a phrase from Irving Howe.³² Instead, he devotes his attention to the

³²The phrase appears in Howe's essay "The Thirties in Retrospect" in Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson, eds. Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s (University of Alabama Press, 1982) 14-28. Other useful first-hand accounts of the political and ethical difficulties facing artists and intellectuals during the period include Granville Hicks, "Writers in the Thirties" in Rita James Simon, ed. As We Saw The Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade (University of Illinois Press, 1967) 76-104; Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Two Memories: Reflections on Writers and Writing in the Thirties" in Morton J. Frisch and Martin Diamond, eds. The Thirties: A Reconsideration in the Light of the American Political Tradition (Northern Illinois University Press, 1968) 44-67.

difficulties of charting a course through an increasingly hazardous moral landscape.

II

Winters was to remain preoccupied with "contemporary forms of disruption," social, political, and otherwise, throughout the 1930s, but by the end of the decade he had begun to conceive of them differently. In his early social poems, as we have seen, he treated the political upheavals of the period as contemporary manifestations of a more general evil, emphasizing the danger they posed for the rational intellect. In the social poems written in the late 1930s and early '40s, the moral implications of the modern "will to technique" become his chief concern.³³ Increasingly, the poems from this period address themselves to the ethical implications of man's desire to master nature by technological means. In several of the finest of these

³³The term "will to technique" I take from George Grant's Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1969). Although it is beyond the scope of my discussion here, it is possible, I think, to demonstrate certain affinities between Winters' understanding of technology and Grant's. Both conceive the relation of technology and consciousness in Christian humanist terms, and both regard the identification of self and machine as a loss or privation of being. Grant's treatment of the subject is implicit in most of the essays in Technology and Empire and especially the book's conclusion, while Winters' treatment of the topic is most evident in the social poems from the late '30s and early '40s.

poems, Winters treats the hubris of this will to technique, or desired mastery of nature, as it manifests itself in the machinery of modern warfare.

To understand the nature of this development, one need only compare "An October Nocturne" with "By the Road to the Air-Base." Identical in meter and form, the poems may be read as counterparts to one another, the later poem picking up where the earlier one left off. In each a solitary speaker contemplates a familiar landscape made strange by the foreboding presence of a military aircraft above. In each poem as well, the aircraft serves as a reminder of the world of violence and destruction that exists beyond the realm of the speaker's personal experience. Yet "An October Nocturne," which was written and published just four years after "By the Road to the Air-Base," reveals a measurable development in Winters' understanding of precisely what message is contained in the bomber's "speech." Whereas in "By the Road to the Air-Base," Winters seems able to do little more than evoke the sense of foreboding caused by the plane's presence, in "An October Nocturne" he seems intent on understanding the war plane as a symbol of the modern age.

First published in Poetry in 1938, "An October Nocturne" represents Winters' earliest effort to understand what Yeats would call the "terrible beauty of war":

The night was faint and sheer;
 Immobile road and dune.
 Then, for a moment, clear,
 A plane moved past the moon.

O spirit cool and frail,
 Hung in the lunar fire!
 Spun wire and brittle veil!
 And trembling slowly higher!

Pure in each proven line!
 The balance and the aim
 Half empty, half divine!
 I saw how true you came.

Dissevered from your cause,
 Your function was your goal.
 Oblivious of my laws,
 You made your calm patrol.

Beneath the title of the poem is the date "October 31st, 1936," which locates it in a specific social and historical context. As Winters appears to have recognized, the year 1936 marked a watershed in the years separating the two world wars. In March of 1936, in blatant violation of the Versailles Treaty, Hitler's troops had entered the demilitarized zone in the Rhineland. Two months later, after the fall of Addis Ababa, Italy annexed Ethiopia, summarily withdrawing from the League of Nations. Finally, in July of the same year, in what seemed in hindsight to many a kind of dress rehearsal for the Second World War, civil war broke out in Spain. "An October Nocturne" represents Winters' considered response to such events.

It is significant that "An October Nocturne" should be set at night, and "By the Road to the Air-Base" at noon, since, as one recent commentator has pointed out, "these two

extremes--the clarity of noon and the vague, elusive brilliance of moonlight--take on symbolic connotations in [Winters' mature poetry] . . ." (Davis 117). As is often the case in the "moonlit" poems, "An October Nocturne" has an almost hallucinatory quality, which recalls the rapt intensity of the early "visionary" poems. It is interesting to note as well that while the plane appeals primarily to the auditory imagination in "By the Road to the Air-Base, its faint drone merging in the final line of the poem with the hum of bees, in "An October Nocturne," the appeal is visual, as the speaker is transfixed by a vision of the plane "trembling slowly higher" in a "lunar fire."

The speaker's response to this spectacle is complex, mixing fear and wonder. Although he admires the "purity" of the plane's "proven lines," as well as its "balance" and its "aim," he cannot dissociate its "function" from its "goal," which is destructive. His aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of its flight does not prevent Winters from seeing the airplane for what it is, namely, a small part of the vast machinery of war, and as such an instrument of death.

Two other poems from this period indicate the nature of Winters' response to the growing violence overseas. The first is "An Elegy," written, as the subtitle indicates, "for the U.S.N. Dirigible, Macon," which was destroyed in an accidental downing off the coast of California on February 12, 1935. In a front-page obituary in The New York Times,

the Macon was described as "the pride of the navy's air-forces." In Winters' poem, it serves as a tangible symbol of the human desire to master nature by the manufacture of "strong ingenious things." Like the poem "By the Road to the Air-Base," "An Elegy" is set at noon, and describes the poet's vision of the air-craft's spectacular rise and fall:

The noon is beautiful: the perfect wheel
Now glides on perfect surface with a sound
Earth has not heard before; the polished ground
Trembles and whispers under rushing steel.

The polished ground, and prehistoric air!
Metal now plummets upward and there sways,
A loosened pendulum for summer days,
Fixing the eyeball in a limpid stare.

There was one symbol in especial, one
Great form of thoughtless beauty that arose
Above the mountains, to foretell the close
Of this deception, at meridian.

Steel-gray the shadow, than a storm more vast!
Its crowding engines, rapid, disciplined,
Shook the great valley like a rising wind.
This image, now, is conjured from the past.

Wind in the wind! O form more light than cloud!
Storm amid storms! And by the storms dispersed!
The brain-drawn metal rose until accursed
By its extension and the sky was loud!

Who will believe this thing in time to come?
I was a witness. I beheld the age
That seized the planet's heritage
Of steel and oil, the mind's viaticum:

Crowded the world with strong ingenious things,
Used the provision it could not replace,
To leave but Cretan myths, a sandy trace
Through the last stone age, for pastoral kings.

As in "An October Nocturne," the poet is first struck by the beauty of the aircraft, whose "perfect wheel / Now glides on perfect surface with a sound / Earth has not heard

before." Yet he is careful to point out that it is a "thoughtless beauty," the beauty of form wholly abstracted from content. Instead of being mesmerized by the purity of this spectacle, he sees the dirigible as an expression of the empty desire to rival nature. Thus, in defiance of the law of gravity, the air-craft "plummets upward." Winters' mistrust of this Icarian ambition is evident in the note of tragic foreboding contained in the image. The Macon's spectacular ascent is pictured as a prelude to an even more spectacular fall. Its aimlessness is underscored by the comparison of the dirigible with a "loosened pendulum."

Yet for Winters it is the Macon's rise to fame and not its fall that signals that the time is truly out of joint. The dirigible is conceived here as the symbol of an age in which the pursuit of technological mastery over nature threatens to rob the planet of its "heritage of steel and oil." Without these valuable resources, according to Winters' prophecy, the world will return to a final "stone age," and the only traces of our sophisticated technocratic culture will be the "Cretan myths" that speak of our demise. But Winters' poem goes beyond this topical warning about the hazards of systematically abusing our natural resources. As one recent commentator has observed, Winters' reference to the "planet's heritage of steel and oil" as the "mind's viaticum" suggests that "steel and oil have, to our peril, become modern sacraments" (Shankman 982). Thus his "Elegy"

on the U.S.N. Macon is not only about the cultural losses that occur as a result of our desire to transgress the laws of nature, but also the spiritual losses we suffer as we come closer to fulfilling this will to technique.

Winters' most explicit identification of this will to technique with the machinery of modern warfare appears in his ode "To A Military Rifle." First published in The Giant Weapon in 1943, the poem concerns the new M-1 rifle, which the U.S. army had recently adopted. As in several of the poems from this period, Winters regards this symbol of the new military technology with a mixture of admiration and despair. The rifle is described as an instrument of precision and even of beauty:

Blunt emblem, you have won:
With carven stock unbroke,
With core of steel, with crash
Of mass, and fading smoke;
Your fire leaves little ash;
Your balance on the arm
Points whither you intend;
Your bolt is smooth with charm.

The rifle is an emblem of its time, but as John Baxter has written, "the description of it here is not static, for it clearly suggests the rifle in action, with the enjambment of the third and fourth lines above, in particular, underscoring the firing of the bullet" (840). For all its "charm" then, the poet realizes that it is not a work of art, but an instrument of destruction. By refusing to separate its "function" from its "goal," Winters also

refuses to romanticize this symbol of the age. "I cannot write your praise," he says, "When young men go to die."

The date 1942, which appears beneath the title, indicates that Winters is addressing conditions in the United States after the invasion of Pearl Harbour, and after the country's direct entry into the Second World War. It would be too much to say that the poem is a protest poem, or that Winters objects to American involvement in the war. Although he cannot praise the rifle, it is clear that he cannot simply reject the military action it represents. Instead the speaker in the poem seems resigned to the necessity of such action. But Winters is clearly concerned about the consequences of his country's participation in the war; and he perceives these consequences in personal and ethical terms: "The private life is small; / And individual men / Are not counted at all." Winters conceives himself as "One who alter[s] nothing," yet he clearly sees that as a poet and an intellectual he has a responsibility to counter the rifle with his words, "and say / The difficult and true, / True shape of death and power."

In addition to Winters' ode "To A Military Rifle," there are several other poems from the mid-forties which attest to his desire to understand the war. Both "An Epitaph for the American Dead" and "Night of Battle" concern the impersonality of war and the loss of selfhood and identity which it frequently occasions. As in the ode "To A Military

Rifle," the emphasis is upon the insignificance of the individual will in times of large-scale crisis. As Winters writes in "Night of Battle":

Impersonal the aim
Where giant movements tend;
Each man appears the same;
Friend vanishes from friend.

"Defense of Empire" speaks of the devaluation of language in such times, of "the phrase that cheapens thought," "dissociating [it] from sense."

But the most moving poem from this period is the more personal "Moonlight Alert," which describes a moonlit hallucination in which the speaker, awoken by the scream of air-raid sirens, imagines he sees young airmen dying in battle:

The sirens, rising, woke me; and the night
Lay cold and windless; and the moon was bright,
Moonlight from sky to earth, untaught, unclaimed,
An icy nightmare of the brute unnamed.
This was hallucination. Scarlet flower
And yellow fruit hung colorless. That hour
No scent lay on the air. The siren scream
Took on the fixity of shallow dream.
In the dread sweetness I could see the fall,
Like petals sifting from a quiet wall,
Of yellow soldiers through indifferent air,
Falling to die in solitude. With care
I held this vision, thinking of young men
Whom I had known and should not see again,
Fixed in reality, as I in thought.
And I stood waiting, and encountered naught.

This vision, expressing the terrible helplessness of one who is "fixed in thought" and unable to influence action, encapsulizes Winters' predicament during the war, and the predicament of the many Americans at home who were concerned

about events overseas but unable to do anything to affect them. Though Winters did not see military action himself--he was already middle-aged by the time the United States entered the war directly--his poems record a powerful moral vision of what the war meant to the concerned observer.³⁴

III

There is one other group of social and political poems which must be considered if we are to understand the influence which Winters' mature poetic had upon his practise as a poet. Though these poems do not address the war, or the events in Europe leading up to it, nevertheless they are best understood in the context of the social and political themes with which Winters was concerned throughout the '30s and '40s. In fact, they are among the most important of Winters' public poems, providing valuable insights into his social and political attitudes during the late '30s and early '40s. I am referring to the group of poems which Winters wrote and published in 1940-1 concerning the David Lamson case.

³⁴Although he was over forty when the U.S. formally entered the war, Winters did try to enlist, and when he was rejected, he volunteered to serve as the director of Civilian Defense in Los Altos, California. As he writes in the essay "The Poet and the University: A Reply"(1949), "before the battle of Midway, at any rate, C.D. was a serious matter on the coast, and for good reason" (UER 306).

Lamson was an employee of Stanford University Press who was unjustly accused of murder after his wife's body was discovered in the bathtub of their home. Though he was convicted of the crime and sentenced to death, after two unsuccessful appeals, the case was dismissed because of a mistrial and Lamson was released.

Winters regarded the entire case as a travesty of justice. In a pamphlet which he co-authored with a colleague in the Stanford English Department, he argued that the charge against Lamson had been based upon the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence and that the prosecution of the case was both incompetent and immoral. In fact, according to Winters and co-author Frances Theresa Russell in The Case of David Lamson, Allene Lamson's death was accidental, the result of a fall in which she struck her head and subsequently bled to death. David Lamson, they claimed, was an innocent man who had been unjustly accused and convicted.³⁵

³⁵In addition to this pamphlet, Winters also wrote about the case in a brief article entitled "More Santa Clara Justice" (New Republic [10 October 1934]: 239-41). Although it does not appear in The Uncollected Essays and Reviews, it is among his most useful prose pieces, providing a brief but valuable outline of the case and a clear indication of his personal interest in Lamson's fate. As Winters writes, "Lamson is far more pathetic than are most of the victims of the economic and of racial prejudice . . . [for] he has no class or group for his partisans. He is merely a gentle and amiable man who appears to be innocent of the crime for which he has been sentenced to death."

As is clear in both the poems and prose on the subject, Winters' personal interest in the case grew out of his sympathy and admiration for Lamson and his defense counsel, a lawyer by the name of Edwin V. McKenzie, and out of his indignation at the way in which certain members of Stanford's academic community behaved during the court trial. He was particularly alarmed at the way in which carelessly gathered pieces of "evidence" were given a lurid and incriminating significance by the prosecution and certain of its witnesses.

Throughout the pamphlet and in each of the three poems concerning the case, Winters expresses outrage and despair that intelligent and ostensibly civilized men and women could allow their understanding of events to be clouded by prejudice and scandal. Their learning, which should have enabled them to view the details of the case dispassionately, instead "Left their feelings, brutal, wild, / By in consequence beguiled," as Winters writes in the poem "To David Lamson." In a poem written to Lamson's sister, he refers to the trial as "Outrage and anarchy in formal mien":

The villainy of pride in scholarship,
 The villainy of cold impartial hate,
 The brutal quiet of the lying lip,
 The brutal power, judicial and sedate

If the behavior of the academic community confirmed his fear that untutored emotion is reason's worst enemy, the behaviour of Lamson and his lawyer Edwin McKenzie confirmed his belief that integrity is able to triumph over

corruption. In Winters' view, the two men personified moral greatness. In the poem "To Edwin V. McKenzie," Lamson's lawyer is described as "the great man of tradition, one / To point out justice when the wrong is done." He represents the triumph of moral precept over "the outrage and anarchy" evident in the Lamson trial. Moreover, his moral greatness places him in the company of the other heroes of Winters' "great tradition"--Odysseus, Socrates, Jesus. In fact, it is no coincidence that the poem to McKenzie appears directly alongside Winters' "Socrates" in The Collected Poems, since both are concerned with the triumph of reasoned conviction over unreasoned adversity. Like Socrates, McKenzie has "raised the Timeless up against the times. . . ." Like Socrates too, his victory is gained through his use of reason and through his conviction of the justness of his cause.

Winters' description of Lamson indicates that he regarded him in similar terms. Yet whereas McKenzie is admired for his strength and skill, Lamson is admired for the quiet dignity he showed throughout the court proceedings. In the last lines of the poem "To David Lamson," Winters describes his "quiet friend" as he awaits his sentence in the county jail:

Working at the evening's end,
Far beyond the tongues that rail,
Hidden in the county jail,
Who, unchanged amid disease,
Wrote with power and spoke with ease,
Who, though human thought decayed,

Yet the dissolution stayed,
Gracious in that evil shade.

The "disease" referred to here is the disease of unreason which had, in Winters' mind, afflicted the Stanford academic community. Lamson is praised for his ability to withstand its influence, to remain "unchanged" while all around him "human thought decayed." The affinities between Lamson and Socrates should be clear. Yet Winters' treatment of the scene also recalls Christ's ordeal. Like Socrates and Christ, Lamson is a victim of circumstance, an innocent man accused and convicted by a corrupt society. Like Socrates and Christ, his behaviour under these circumstances reveals a rare and virtuous grace.

Although the poems on the Lamson case are written within the context of a specific court trial, the concerns they raise transcend their immediate context so that, as Dick Davis writes, the "trial and its personages become paradigms of the hazards of the ethical life" (136-7). In this respect, they resemble the social and political poems which Winters had written in the early 1930s, poems like "The Prince," "Phasellus Ille," and the elegy "On The Death Of Senator Thomas J. Walsh." Yet the Lamson poems also bear certain affinities with the poems on the Second World War. In fact, as is the case in those poems, to quote Davis again, "the particular circumstances of this trial must have confirmed in Winters views that he had already developed (on the solitary nature of moral integrity, on the evils of mass

emotion, on the necessity for absolutes as the only force that can withstand this emotion, and, not last, on the reality and power of evil)" (137).

As is evident in the Lamson poems, and in his social and political poems in general, Winters' conception of poetry as a moral discipline did determine his response to the social and political realities of his time, but not in the way one might expect. These poems are conservative insofar as they are concerned with the preservation of reason in a time marked by violence and unreason. But they do not endorse any of the political conservatisms of the period. Instead they illuminate precisely what Said means when he refers to the "technicoethical conditions that make a career possible" (231-2). In Winters' mature poetry, technical and ethical concerns are synonymous. As we have had occasion to observe elsewhere, it is the poet's technique which enables him to "perfect a moral attitude toward a given range of experience" (Grattan 309). In his social and political poems from the '30s and '40s, this attitude would appear to consist of a stoical resignation to the inevitability of disaster. Yet there can be no doubt that for Winters such an attitude was necessary if he was to survive this period and continue to write poetry. In fact, given Winters' tragic view of experience, one suspects that such an attitude was necessary if he was to have a poetic career at all.

Chapter Five

The Fate of Reason

A study of the social and political poems which Winters wrote during the '30s and '40s dispels the notion that his adoption of a formalist poetic committed him to a conservative political position. But there is a larger issue implicit in Winters' adoption of this poetic, namely, the extent to which this poetic hindered his development as a poet. As we observed in Chapter One, as early as 1940, critics complained that Winters' adherence to critical and theoretical principles expressed in his prose somehow robbed his poetry of its "inward riches." This was the view of R.P. Blackmur, for instance, and of Conrad Aiken, and it has been shared by many of Winters' subsequent critics.

In his review of Winters' Poems (1940), Blackmur claims that "the characteristic sign of a good poetics is not only that it can observe any experience but that it must constantly absorb experience to the point of giving in to it." Winters' poetic, he writes, enables him "to deal only with matters that can be translated into terms of a logical system--like that of meter or humanism" ["Twelve Poets," Southern Review 7 (1941): 193]. Conrad Aiken makes the same point in his review of Winters' Poems. According to Aiken,

Winters' mature poetic prevents him from accepting or understanding exuberance, "either in image or in word" [The New Republic (21 April 1941): 559]. Instead, it commits him to a rather sterile form of classicism which produces only "a negative purity . . . a mild decorousness." Finally, even Alan Stephens, who is among the most sympathetic of Winters' early critics, complains that his adherence to his mature poetic occasionally causes Winters to appear "too much at home with sorrow." Stephens is particularly concerned with the Wintersian notion that the proper end of poetry is wisdom, acquired "not in order to live better but for its own sake, even though [Winters] sees clearly that his program is fatal" [Twentieth Century Literature 9 (October 1963): 136].

The prevalence of these criticisms raises important questions about the relation of theory and practice in Winters' career. Implicit in such complaints is the belief that the mature poems conform exactly with the mature theory. But one might well wonder if this is true. As we have seen, even after he had consciously renounced the early visionary poetic of his youth, Winters continues to remain preoccupied with many of the same thematic and epistemological problems which he had first encountered in his early experimental poems, suggesting that his poetry was not always identical with his conscious intentions. Similarly, one might well wonder precisely what is meant by

the phrase "inward riches." Are these riches produced only by a poetic which is capable of absorbing experience "to the point of giving in to it"? Or must they express an exuberance of "image and word"? Finally, even if Stephens is right when he says that in some poems Winters does seem "too much at home with sorrow," we might well ask whether this trait is the product of his mature poetic, or of Winters' tragic view of human experience, which became more clearly defined as he grew older?

In fact, the truest test of any literary career is its range and its diversity, and considered in these terms, Winters' career is exemplary. Even if we exclude his early experimental poems in free verse and confine ourselves instead to the mature poems in traditional meters and forms, we see that there are descriptive poems, devotional poems, satirical poems, love poems, epigrams, sonnets, ballads, odes, elegies. Moreover, these poems range in style from the Williamsesque minimalism of certain of the early experiments in traditional meters and forms, to the more lush descriptiveness of the poems in the post-symbolist mode, to the plain style discursiveness of the occasional poems. Rather than speak of Winters' accomplishments in such general terms, however, I would like to conclude this discussion of his mature verse by examining three groups of poems, the public and occasional poems, those dealing with history and with myth, and Winters' final offerings. Taken

together, these poems indicate that Winters' development was determined by his adherence to a conception of poetry as a moral discipline, but they also indicate that the influence of this conception of poetry upon his practice was not restrictive. In fact, this definition of poetry may be regarded as a central enabling factor in Winters' development.

I

Among all of his poems the poems in Winters' oeuvre which would appear to come closest to confirming the negative criticisms of his development are the public and occasional poems he wrote during the '30s and '40s. These poems consist of dedications, elegies, personal addresses to family and friends, and the poems concerning the Lamson case which we have already looked at. They are united by a common style and by their common concern with the fate of central humanistic values in the modern world. Taken together, they would appear to indicate the negative consequences of Winters' adherence to the belief that the end of poetry must be wisdom, or the "putting by of the claims of the world without the abandonment of self control."

The most conspicuous feature of Winters' public and occasional poems is their style, which is quite unlike the

customary style of much modern poetry. The difference lies in the plainness of the language which Winters uses in these poems.³⁶ Generally speaking, they contain few concrete images, and even fewer metaphors, symbols or allusions. Instead, the poems rely heavily on direct statement, generalizations and abstraction. Consider, for example, the first stanza of the poem "On Teaching the Young":

The young are quick of speech.
Grown middle-aged, I teach
Corrosion and distrust,
Exacting what I must.

The diction is simple and unaffected, the meter perfectly regular. Enjambment occurs between the second and third lines but otherwise the lines are heavily end-stopped with perfect or near-perfect rhymes.

The style which Winters uses in these poems is adapted, as Raymond Oliver has demonstrated, from the Elizabethan plain style, from Gascoigne, Greville, Raleigh, and Jonson;

³⁶Discussions of Winters' use of the plain style can be found in Comito, 152-73; Kaye, 179-80; Peterson, 927-8; and Powell, 155-7. But by far the most detailed and most sympathetic exploration of this topic appears in Raymond Oliver's essay "Yvor Winters and the English Renaissance" (Southern Review 17 [Autumn 1981]: 758-80). Oliver traces Winters' use of the plain style to his reading of Renaissance plain stylists, in particular Gascoigne, Greville, Raleigh, and Jonson, and defines many of the formal, thematic and stylistic features which Winters' plain style poems share with their Renaissance models. But he is also careful to show that Winters' own experiments with this style are not simply slavish imitations of these models. As he puts it, Winters' plain style poems are "recognizably kin to those of the Renaissance; but they are not clones" (770). Although I do not actually share in Oliver's enthusiasm for many of these poems, I am indebted to his discussion of them nonetheless.

and Winters' description of the typical poem in this style characterizes his own occasional poems quite succinctly:

a theme, usually broad, simple and obvious, even tending toward the proverbial, but usually a theme of some importance, humanly speaking; a feeling restrained to the minimum required by its subject; a rhetoric restrained to a similar minimum, the poet being interested in his rhetoric as a means of stating his matter as economically as possible, and not . . . in the pleasures of rhetoric for its own sake ("The Sixteenth Century Lyric in English" 95).

In his occasional poems, Winters attempts to recover the plain style of the earlier poetry, as well as its moral imperatives. To this end, he addresses himself to traditional themes, such as the permanence of art, the transience of life, the vulnerability of virtue. Because the emphasis in these poems is upon the content of the communication rather than the intricacies of subjective experience, the language which is employed by the poet is relatively free of ambiguity.

Several poems are concerned with the traditional conception of the permanence of art. The most succinct formulation of this concept appears in the second stanza of the poem "On Teaching The Young":

A poem is what stands
When imperceptive hands,
Feeling, have gone astray.
It is what one should say.

For Winters, a poem is a stay against time, a statement whose formal and intellectual clarity raises it above the contingencies of experience.

The same claim is made for poetry in "A Dedication in Postscript," which is addressed to Winters' longtime friend and fellow poet Agnes Lee, shortly before her death:

Because you labored still for Gautier's strength
 In days when art was lost in breadth and length;
 Because your friendship was a valued gift;
 I send these poems--now, my only shift.
 In the last years of your declining age,
 I face again your cold immortal page:
 The statue, pure amid the rotting leaves,
 And her, forsaken, whom Truth undeceives.
 Truth is the subject, and the hand is sure.
 The hand once lay in mine: this will endure
 Till all the casual errors fall away.
 And art endures, or so the masters say.

Winters praises Lee for her dedication to art, and offers his own Poems as a sign of gratitude and affection. The reference to the "statue, pure amid the rotting leaves" comes from one of Lee's own poems, "A Statue in a Garden." In Winters' hands, the image serves as a metaphor for the permanence and the purity of art. It is significant that he should use such an image, since, in their own way, Winters' occasional poems frequently seem to aspire to the fixity and the permanence of sculpture.

The poems to William Dinsmore Briggs form another obvious group within the occasional poems, and they too explore the theme of permanence. As I mentioned earlier, Briggs was one of Winters' teachers at Stanford. A Renaissance scholar with a strong interest in 19th century American literature, he encouraged Winters to undertake the historical study of English and American poetry which would

form the basis of his mature criticism. He also introduced him to the study of philosophy and the history of ideas.

The first poem to Briggs, the sonnet "To William Dinsmore Briggs Conducting his Seminar," describes the teacher in the classroom lecturing on some incident from the past:

Amid the walls' insensate white, some crime
Is redefined above the sunken mass
Of crumbled years; logic reclaims the crass,
Frees from historic dross the invidious mime.
Your fingers spin the pages into Time;
And in between, moments of darkness pass
Like undiscovered instants in the glass,
Amid the image, where the demons climb.

The crime referred to in the first line may be the Overbury scandal of 1613, a favorite lecture topic of Briggs (see Davis 83-4). The scholar is depicted as a detective uncovering meaning in the past. As Davis writes, "the poem records and to some extent enacts those values of rational skepticism and passionate regard for the truth which were, apparently, Briggs's distinctive characteristics and which Winters hoped to emulate" (83). Yet the emphasis falls upon the precariousness of the enterprise, the scholar poised, like meaning itself, above the abyss of time. The demonic imagery recalls the language used in the "Foreword" to Before Disaster. Like other poems from this period, the sonnet to Briggs seems most concerned with the hazards involved in any attempt to apprehend reality.

The "Dedication for a Book of Criticism" is more typical of Winters' occasional poems. In this poem, Briggs

is praised as the "Heir of Linacre and More, / Guardian of Erasmus' store." These lines refer no doubt to Briggs' teaching of Renaissance literature. But there is a larger claim being made here. Winters is suggesting that in his capacity as a scholar, Briggs is actually a guardian of those humanistic values embodied in Linacre, Erasmus and More. The most explicit statement of Winters' own humanistic convictions appears in the second stanza of the poem:

Strong the scholar is to scan
 What is permanent in man;
 To detect his form and kind
 And preserve the human mind;
 By the type himself to guide,
 Universal wisdom bide.

The pun on the word "scan" suggests that poet and scholar are allies in the preservation of the mind. Both are defined in Arnoldian terms as guardians of the best that has been thought and said.

The final poem to Briggs, written to commemorate the opening of the William Dinsmore Briggs Reading Room at Stanford, places the scholar's accomplishments in their historical context. The date beneath the poem's title, May 7, 1942, reminds us that Briggs taught Renaissance literature during one of the darkest periods in modern history, at a time when the humanistic values of men like Linacre, Erasmus and More could not have seemed more vulnerable. Winters praises Briggs' commitment to scholarship during these years in a metaphysical and quasi-

theological language that is familiar from his critical prose:

Because our Being grows in mind,
And evil in imperfect thought,
And passion running undefined
May ruin what the masters taught;

Within the edge of war we meet
To dedicate this room to one
Who made his wisdom more complete
Than any save the great have done.

That in this room, men may yet reach,
By labor and wit's sullen shock,
The final certitude of speech
Which Hell itself cannot unlock.

The poem rests upon an opposition of Being and evil, the one associated with the mind, the other with "passion running undefined." The war exists as a contemporary form of evil which threatens to deprive men of their being. Yet, in Winters' view, the room bearing his mentor's name may serve to preserve the wisdom that Briggs had labored so long to acquire and to impart to others, and in so doing, to preserve their being from the "sullen shock" of the age. As we have seen elsewhere, Winters regards the war chiefly as a threat to the intellect and to those humanistic values associated with it.

Finally, to this group of occasional poems, we may add several poems addressed to members of Winters' family, including "To My Infant Daughter," "A Prayer For My Son," "A Testament, To One Now A Child," "At the San Francisco Airport" and "The Marriage" (the last of which I have discussed earlier). Davis suggests that it is their

emphasis upon the uniqueness and fragility of human life which unites these poems as a group and distinguishes them from the other occasional poems. But it is equally important that they frequently conceive of this uniqueness and fragility in explicitly religious terms. In fact, they attest to the depth of Winters' sympathetic identification with Christianity. In addition, these poems display the fatalism that was to become so characteristic of Winters' writing during his later years.

Throughout these poems, life is depicted as a moral minefield to be traversed fearfully and with great care. Winters' fatalism is expressed most succinctly in the poem "A Testament, To One Now a Child":

We will and move: the gain
Is purchased with our pain;
The very strength we choose
With what we lose.

In the light of such wisdom, his advice to his daughter is simple and proverbial:

God is revealed in this:
That some go not amiss,
But through hard labor teach
What we may reach.

In Winters' mature view of life, the world is an "appalling place" and the "conscious soul must give / Its life to live."

"To My Infant Daughter" re-enforces this fatalistic view of human experience. The poem consists of two sections. The first concerns the father's anguished

awareness of the pain and disappointment that awaits his daughter in life:

Ah, could you now with thinking tongue
Discover what involvèd lies
In flesh and thought obscurely young,
What earth and age can worst devise!

Then I might thread my path across
Your sin and anguish; I might weigh
Minutely every gain and loss,
And time each motion of my day--

The situation is familiar to most parents, but Winters' response to it may seem unusual. Again it is necessary to see that the problem is conceived in traditional terms. The child is involved in the evil of the world because she is born bearing the traces of original sin. The father's helplessness derives from his understanding that he is powerless to protect her from what Hamlet would refer to as "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." The speaker refers, rather obscurely, to the "impact of [his] wrath" upon the child, and then goes on to envision her death among strangers:

Whose hands will lay those hands to rest,
Those hands themselves, no more the same,
Will weeping lay them on the breast,
A token only and a name?

The second section of the poem is more accessible than the first. It is written in the proverbial style of "A Testament" and several of Winters' other public poems.³⁷

³⁷It is worth pointing out here that the poem "To My Infant Daughter" was first published in The New Republic in October of 1932, and that "The Testament" did not appear until a full decade later. In fact, many of the public and

The father laments the age difference separating him from his child and then goes on to offer her advice on how to live her life:

Take few men to your heart!
Unstable, fierce, unkind,
The ways that men impart.
True love is slow to find.

In the last lines of the poem, his advice to his daughter on how to live is combined with a theory of art:

True art is slow to grow.
Like a belated friend,
It comes to let one know
Of what has had an end.

In both life and art, according to this view, wisdom is slow in coming, and is concerned largely with marking endings rather than beginnings. Although such a sentiment might suggest that for Winters the end of his career was already in sight, it is more likely that this view of life and of art grew out of the poetics of renunciation which he had adopted by this time. In fact, the lines provide yet another clue to what it actually means to equate wisdom with the putting by of the claims of the world.

The poem "At the San Francisco Airport" is also addressed to Winters' daughter, but it is a richer and more interesting poem than either "A Testament" or "To My Infant

occasional poems range over a long period of time, making it difficult to discuss Winters' career in terms of stages or periods. This fact also makes it difficult to discuss his development in terms of progress or decline. Hence the danger of suggesting that his adherence to his mature poetic contributed to any single result.

Daughter." This is so partly because in "At the San Francisco Airport" Winters departs from the plain style, with its emphasis upon abstraction and generalization, and instead treats the father-daughter relationship in concrete, imagistic terms. The main reason for the difference between this poem and the others addressed to his daughter, however, is that in "At the San Francisco Airport," he treats his central theme, that of separation, in emotional and psychological rather than ethical terms.

The poem describes a father's feelings as he says farewell to his daughter, who is boarding a plane that will take her into the night and beyond his care. The poem is about beginnings and endings, youth and old age, and the fragility of the bond that exists between parent and child:

This is the terminal: the light
Gives perfect vision, false and hard;
The metal glitters, deep and bright.
Great planes are waiting in the yard--
They are already in the night.

And you are here beside me, small,
Contained and fragile, and intent
On things that I but half recall--
Yet going whither you are bent.
I am the past, and that is all.

Throughout images of light and darkness function to express the speaker's acute consciousness of the painful significance of the moment. The harsh light of the airport terminal is equated with the father's knowledge of the necessity of his daughter's departure. The references to darkness and to night serve to evoke his fearfulness for

her, a sentiment which is enhanced by his description of her as "small, / Contained and fragile "

The central difficulty for the father in this poem is not in saying good-bye, however, but in reconciling himself to the fact that after this moment he will no longer be an active part of his daughter's life. With her departure, he fears, he will simply be relegated to her past. Although the speaker would appear to dwell almost self-centeredly on his fears of becoming de-centered from his daughter's life, and therefore insignificant or obsolete, it is significant that he shares in his daughter's knowledge that this development in their relationship is necessary. In fact, in their shared response to this knowledge he discerns a vital bond:

But you and I in part are one:
The frightened brain, the nervous will,
The knowledge of what must be done,
The passion to acquire the skill
To face that which you dare not shun.

Finally, however, the poem emphasizes the father's sense of abandonment, described here in visceral terms:

The rain of matter upon sense
Destroys me momentarily. The score:
There comes what will come. The expense
Is what one thought, and something more--
One's being and intelligence.

This is the terminal, the break.
Beyond this point, on lines of air,
You take the way that you must take;
And I remain in light and stare--
In light, and nothing else, awake.

The speaker's knowledge of the finality of this moment is expressed in various ways in these stanzas--in the pun on the word "terminal," for instance, in the syntax and the meter of the last line, in the image of the solitary figure in the brilliantly-lit airport terminal--but nowhere is this knowledge more effectively conveyed than in the line and a half expressing his momentary collapse under the weight of emotion: "The rain of matter upon sense / Destroys me momentarily." In isolation, the lines are as plain as any to be found in Winters' public and occasional poems. It is hard to imagine more general words than "matter" and "sense," for instance. But within the context of the poem, they speak volumes; the word "matter" is used to signify both the material presence of the airport where this encounter takes place and the "matter" or substance of the speaker's emotions at this particular moment, while the word "sense" is used to signify the speaker's sensibility, his "being and intelligence." What makes this line, and the poem in general, so remarkable, however, is not that it concentrates so much meaning into so few words, but that it is so open to the meaning of the experience it describes. Whereas in "A Testament" and "To My Infant Daughter," Winters seems most intent on deducing general moral truths from his experience, which requires that he step back from the world to view his encounters with it dispassionately,

here he seems to have no choice but to immerse himself in this experience so overwhelming is its effect upon him.

The last poem from this group of poems addressed to members of the poet's family which I would like to discuss is the poem called "A Prayer For My Son," which, interestingly enough, is the only poem in The Collected Poems which Winters addressed to his son. In diction and style, it resembles the other poems from this group which we have looked at. That is to say, it is written in a relatively plain unadorned style. But here Winters combines the plain style with the lush descriptiveness of the post-symbolist method.

The poem is, as its title indicates, a prayer, addressed to the "Eternal Spirit . . . Whose will maintains the world, / Who thought and made it true." The attributes given to this spirit suggest that Winters conceives of it not in Christian but in Aristotelian terms as a sort of Prime Mover. (In a related poem, "To The Holy Spirit," he refers to this spirit as "pure mind," which suggests that he conceives it in Platonic terms as well.) In "A Prayer For My Son," he prays to the Eternal Spirit to "pity" his young son, and to preserve him from becoming too much involved in the physical world of nature.

Beneath the title is an epigraph which sums up the central theme of the poem. The epigraph, taken from Janet Lewis' poem "The Earth Bound," reads "Tangled with earth all

ways we move." The poem is concerned with the child's entanglement in nature's vicissitudes. The speaker describes the boy as being "half akin" to nature and "half divine":

The honey-suckle curled
Through the arbutus limb,
The leaves that move in air,
Are half akin to him
Whose conscious moving stare
Is drawn, yet stirs by will;
Whose little fingers bend,
Unbend, and then are still,
While the mind seeks an end.
At moments, like a vine,
He clammers through small boughs:
Then poised and half divine,
He waits with lifted brows.

The general theme is familiar from previous poems. "A Prayer For My Son" is concerned with the integrity of the self when it is brought into close contact with the nature. In fact, in his description of the child climbing "like a vine" through small boughs, Winters projects his own dilemma as a poet upon his young son. But it is interesting to note how alive he is in this description to the pure physical pleasures of the natural world, and to the physical movements of the infant's body. "The honey suckle curled / Through the arbutus limb." The boy's fingers that "bend / Unbend, and then are still" Such images are both strikingly fresh and capable of registering many of the subtle intricacies of the felt experience, and once again reveal the presence of an internal dynamic in Winters'

poetry, which informs his writing at every stage of his career.

In fact, the last lines of the poem affirm the most important lesson of Winters' entire career and sum up the humility he'd come to feel in the presence of both the Eternal Spirit and nature:

Earth and mind are not one,
But they are so entwined,
That this, my little son,
May yet one day go blind.
Eternal spirit, you
Who guided Socrates,
Pity this small and new
Bright soul on hands and knees.

This humility is not exactly a Christian humility. In fact, it is best described as a rare rapprochement between the Romantic anxieties that troubled Winters throughout his career and the Platonic stoicism he eventually adopted after his change of direction. In other words, Winters' "Eternal Spirit" is not the "Holy Ghost," nor even D.H. Lawrence's "Holy Spirit." Instead, it may be more aptly described as Winters' own peculiar daemon, which functions, to use Stonum's phrase, as a central enabling factor in Winters' development.

In general, Winters' public and occasional poems confirm the criticism that his conception of poetry as a moral discipline occasionally did rob his poetry of its inward riches. With the exception of "At The San Francisco Airport" and "A Prayer For My Son," these poems do seem to

lack the diverse energies that animate his finest poems.³⁸ Moreover, they sometimes seem to suggest that Winters could be "too much at home with sorrow." But it is important to add, I think, that the poems do not aim at an exuberance of image or word. For Winters, the pleasure to be gained from poetry lay not in exuberance but in clarity, and in the pleasure of using language with the utmost precision. Moreover, it is important to add that the public and occasional poems are not really representative of Winters' mature poetry. In fact, at the same time that he was experimenting with the plain style and with the broad traditional themes which are explored in these poems, he was also experimenting with a variety of other styles, and exploring many other themes and subjects, among them themes and subjects drawn from his readings in American history and classical myth. The historical and mythological poems are more representative of Winters' achievement.

³⁸Both Howard Kaye and Grosvenor Powell have made the same point. As Powell notes, "although Winters is well known as the defender of the virtues of the plain style, his talents as a poet lay in a different direction" (155). For Powell and Kaye alike, Winters' talents are more clearly evident in his experiments with the post-symbolist method (see Kaye 179-80). As is evident from my own commentary, I share this view.

II

Winters' historical poems may be read as variations on a single theme. The poems are concerned with the effect of non-native settlement upon the California wilderness. In this respect, they are ecological poems, but, as Comito observes, "the ecology which Winters remains most interested in is the ecology of the mind" (174). In fact, with one notable exception, these poems are concerned with the genealogy of the modern will to technique, which Winters traces to nineteenth-century America and to the frontiersman's desire to master the wilderness and to extract its wealth of gold and silver.

The poems are written in an heroic style which is modelled loosely on the heroic style of the great narrative historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writers like Hume, Gibbon, Macaulay and Parkman. From his study of these writers, Winters attempts to fashion a style suitable for his own "native odes." The virtues of this style, to quote Winters himself, are "its precision, its structure and its dignity" (In Defense of Reason 417). At its best, it is a style which is capable of handling with equal ease the general and the particular, the concrete and the abstract. In movement, it is both quick and intricate. Finally, it is a style which in its formality is well suited

nineteenth century. The miners' arrival is described as an invasion, and a desecration of the land:

Then the invasion! and the soil was turned,
The hidden waters drained, the valleys dried:
And whether fire or purer sunlight burned,
No matter! one by one the old oaks died.
Died or are dying!

In Winters' view, the exploitation of the landscape for its mineral resources has all but guaranteed the eventual destruction of the California wilderness. As he writes in the last lines of "The California Oaks:

The archaic race--
Black oak, live oak, and valley oak--ere long
Must crumble on the place
 which made them strong
And in the calm they guarded now abide.

The poem "John Sutter" deals exclusively with the last phase of the history outlined in "The California Oaks." It is concerned with the consequences of the California goldrush as exemplified in the life of John A. Sutter. Sutter was a Swiss-American adventurer and philanthropist who had presided over the first white settlement in the great central valley of California in the early 1840s. Sutter's Fort, as the colony came to be known soon after its founding in 1841, consisted not only of a fort, but a trading post, and a hospice which provided food and shelter to newly arrived immigrants.

In Winters' poem, which is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, Sutter describes himself as "the patriarch of the shining land":

The earth grew dense with grain at my desire;
 The shade was deepened at the springs and streams;
 Moving in dust that clung like pillared fire,
 The gathering herds grew heavy in my dreams.

He conceives himself as an heroic figure with almost God-like powers. Yet Winters clearly regards him as a victim of his own self-delusions, and of the course of events which he himself set in motion.³⁹ In fact, his hopes for a new Eden are destroyed when gold is discovered on his property. His workers leave him to go to the mines, where they destroy the land that he had nurtured:

With knives they dug the metal out of stone;
 Turned rivers back, for gold through ages piled,
 Drove knives to hearts, and faced the gold alone;
 Valley and river ruined and reviled;

"Reviled and ruined" himself, Sutter eventually left California for Pennsylvania, where he spent his last years. He died in 1880 in Washington, D.C., where he had gone to defend his land titles from the prospectors and the miners who had destroyed his colony and his dream of a paradise on earth. In Winters' hands, his story reads like a parable on the inherent dangers in the frontiersman's desire to re-create Eden in a fallen land, and on the disastrous results

³⁹As Clive Wilmer writes, Sutter is not actually guilty of the destruction of the wilderness, "but he is in a sense responsible for it, and like a doomed tragic hero, suffers for it. The origin of the invasion lies in his . . . proprietorial relation to the land: the criminals are 'my own men'" ("Adventurer in Living Fact: The Wilderness in Yvor Winters' Poetry," Southern Review 17 [Autumn 1981]: 969).

of trying to control and exploit nature for purely selfish ends.

In their adoption of the heroic style, "The California Oaks" and the ode to "John Sutter" owe a substantial debt to Hume, Gibbon, Macaulay and Parkman. But Winters' historical poems are indebted to these writers in other ways as well. Like the earlier narrative historians whom he mentions, Winters conceives of history as a struggle between individuals and the large impersonal forces that shape them. The historical poems focus on the heroic actions of men confronting nature. As we have seen, Sutter is described as a man with almost god-like powers, who believes he is able to bend nature to his will only to discover otherwise. The hero of the poem "John Day" is given a similar stature:

Among the first and farthest! Elk and deer
Fell as your rifle rang in rocky caves;
There your lean shadow swept the still frontier,
Your eyes regarded the Columbia's waves.

Such a view of history is essentially romantic, placing man in the centre of the scene, but it is also tragic.⁴⁰

⁴⁰In another context, this view might also be described as satiric, however, since, as Hayden White points out, it is satire, and not tragedy, which is dominated by the apprehension "that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master, and by the recognition that, in the final analysis, human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming definitively the dark force of death, which is man's unremitting enemy" (Metahistory 9). In fact, tragedy, like comedy, frequently holds out the possibility of a release from the conditions of the Fall. The reconciliations which often occur at the end of a tragedy may amount to a resignation to the conditions under which human beings are forced to live, but the spectacle of tragedy offers some gain of consciousness

Sutter is destroyed by the mining community which he indirectly helped to create. Day is driven mad by the hardships he is forced to endure as he passes over the Rockies on his way to the Pacific coast:

Broken at last by very force of frame,
By wintry hunger like a warrior's brand,
You died a madman. And now bears your name
A gentle river in a fertile land.

The only historical poem which does not conform to this view of history is the poem "On Rereading a Passage from John Muir." Significantly, it is Winters' finest poem on an historical subject. For Winters, the great nineteenth-century naturalist is a sort of culture hero. His love and knowledge of nature represent an ideal which Winters himself aspires to, and as he seeks in vain for a "subject fitting for a native ode," he admits to being "haunted" by an image of the man:

Climbing from road to path, from path to rock,
From rock to live oak, thence to mountain bay,
Through unmoved twilight, where the rifle's shock
Was half absorbed by leaves and drawn away,
Through mountain lilac, where the brown deer lay.

This was his "childhood revery," Winters writes:

. . . to be
Not one who seeks in nature his release
But one forever by the dripping tree,
Paradisaic in his pristine peace.

for the spectators if not for the participants. In this respect, Winters' vision of history is more satiric than tragic, since the lessons contained in his historical poems are almost always unremittingly fatalistic.

It is tempting to regard this as yet another statement of nostalgic longing for that merging of self and nature which had haunted Winters throughout the early years of his career, for as Clive Wilmer notes, it clearly recalls "his childhood passion for nature, untroubled by guilt or fear of annihilation" (970). But the lines contain a distinction which runs counter to such a reading. Muir is "not one who seeks in nature his release." That is to say, he is not a naive romantic who loses himself in nature. Instead, he is, in Winters' words:

a knowing eye
 Moving on leaf and bark, a quiet gauge
 Of growing timber and of climbing fly,
 A quiet hand to fix them on the page

The emphasis falls upon the word "knowing." Muir is admired for his affectionate and knowledgeable regard for nature, not for any mystical identification with the "Universal Being" circulating through the physical world. Although Winters admires Muir, he does not think it is possible to become like him. His own understanding of nature makes it impossible to inhabit the world in "pristine peace." In the final analysis, Muir is "a gentle figure from a simpler age."

The inherent difficulty of the heroic style, as Winters himself recognized, is its rather rigid definition of decorum. The writer who adopts this style is "frequently constrained by the very nature of his instrument" to include only those details which accord with the heroic character of

his or her subject. Of the several historians whom Winters mentions by name, only Macaulay, in his estimation, overcomes this difficulty. In his finest historical writing, Winters observes, "the prose remains heroic, but has ceased to be grandiloquent; the stereotyped phrase is rare; there is no difficulty in rendering the dagger left sticking in the body or the dungheaps beneath the windows of the country gentlemen" (IDR 421).

As for Winters himself, it is surely significant that he is most successful in adapting the heroic style to his own needs when he is treating historical subjects in personal terms, or in terms of the central thematic concerns of his mature poetry. It is no coincidence that "On Rereading a Passage from John Muir" is freer from grandiloquence and stereotyped phrases than the other historical poems, since it is more intimately concerned with the original thematic and epistemological preoccupations of Winters' early poems than any of the other historical poems. Similarly, it is surely no coincidence that the most powerful lines in "The California Oaks" are those in which the speaker appears to adopt the perspective of the trees themselves. Winters may have changed direction since the days of his "Song of the Trees," but the adoption of such a perspective in so obviously an heroic poem and with such a long historical view indicates a deep underlying continuity in his work. In fact, it indicates once again the presence

of an internal dynamic in his career which persists in the midst of more consciously authorial decisions regarding the disciplines of historical analysis and of the heroic style.

The presence of this internal dynamic can also be felt in the poems which Winters wrote using Greek allegories and myths.⁴¹ Although these poems are more complicated and less accessible than the historical poems, making their relation to Winters' oeuvre more oblique, they nevertheless contain traces of Winters' central theme, that of the relation of nature and consciousness, here treated in the seemingly timeless context of myth.

The poems proceed by a single method, as Davis writes, "the myth is presented as the vehicle of an implicit metaphorical argument" (121). Moreover, they are classical both in subject and in style, addressing themselves to specific classical themes--love, death, the immortality of the soul--in a language recalling not only the Greeks but the Greek tradition as it has been preserved and modernized by Pound, Keats and the Elizabethan translators.

The poems "Chiron" and "Socrates" concern the fate of the man of intellect and of the man of principle respectively. In "Chiron," the Greek centaur is depicted in old age. Once the tutor of Aesculapius, Achilles, Aeneas

⁴¹Detailed discussions of these poems can be found in Comito, 152-73; Davis, 121-31; and Powell, 126-46. For an interesting discussion of Winters' use of Greek myth in "Apollo and Daphne," see Howard Baker, "The Gyroscope," Southern Review 17 (1981): 754-56.

and other heroes, he describes himself now as a "Dying scholar, dim with fact, / By the stallion body racked" While old age and death may destroy the body, the last lines assert a form of immortality for the mind and soul: "On the edge of naught I wait, / Magnitude inviolate." That is to say, Chiron's moral greatness remains untouched.

Similarly, "Socrates" views the Greek philosopher at the moment of his death. Hemlock in hand, he remains unrepentant before his accusers. His only crime is to have "raised the Timeless up against the times," for which he is willing to pay the ultimate price. Winters' poem focuses not only on Socrates' self-sacrifice but his legacy, which is revealed in the form of a prophecy:

If of my talking there should come a soul
Of tougher thought in richer phrase empearled,
Then were I sire and grandsire, scroll by scroll,
The vast foundation of a Western World.

Socrates is "sire and grandsire" to Plato and Aristotle, whose writings form the foundation of western philosophy. Socrates is able to face death without fear because of his knowledge of this legacy, but also because he knows that the world he is departing is merely a shadow of the real world of timeless forms. This eternal world is his "estate," wherein the mind dwells imperturbably. As in "Chiron," the last lines of the poem assert a form of immortality for the mind:

Consistency gives quiet to the end.
My enemy is but a type of man,

And him whom I have changed, I call my friend.
The mind is formed. Dissuade it, he who can.

In theme and style, such poems recall certain of the public and occasional poems. Like those poems, they are concerned with the hazards of the ethical life. Like those poems, they lack the diverse energies of Winters' finest poems. In fact, they seem rather stiff and schematic, lending credence to Aiken's claim that Winters' classicism occasionally produces "only a negative purity or a mild decorousness." Yet it is important to add that these are among the least successful of Winters' poems on Greek myth. Far more interesting and more successful are the poems which deal with the legends of Heracles and Theseus. The classicism of these poems is anything but sterile.

In fact, "Heracles " and "Theseus: A Trilogy" are among Winters' most powerful poems, containing precisely the same sorts of tensions and contradictions which distinguish his finest work. Both poems explore a central Wintersian theme, the temptations and the hazards of direct intercourse with nature. Moreover, both poems are noteworthy for their compression of complex myths into concise symbolic narratives. According to Winters, Heracles "is treated as a Sun-god . . . ," and as an allegorical representation of the artist in "hand to hand or semi-intuitive combat with experience," while Theseus stands for "the man of action" ("Notes," Collected Poems).

The legend of Heracles is well known.⁴² The son of Zeus and Alcmena, he was to have been the greatest of Greek heroes, but Hera ordered Eurystheus to rule over him and afflicted him with a madness which caused him to murder his own children. In penance for this crime, he was ordered to perform the twelve labors for which he is best known, which included slaying the Nemean Lion and capturing Cerberus, the "fiery dog" that guards the gates to Hades. Heracles distinguished himself by performing these labors, and by helping the gods in their battle against the giants. His death came, however, when he was accidentally poisoned by his wife, Deianira, who had given him a shirt which she had received from the centaur Nessus. In reward for his service to the gods, Heracles was granted immortality. According to legend, his soul ascended from the funeral pyre in the form of an eagle and flew straight to Mount Olympus, where he was reconciled with Hera and given a place among the gods.

Winters' poem depicts the Greek hero after his unintentional murder of his own children. He has been called before Eurystheus to do penance for his crime:

Eurystheus, trembling, called me to the throne,
Alcmena's son, heavy with thews and still.
He drove me on my fatal road alone:
I went, subservient to Hera's will.

As Powell has observed, each of the twelve labors that Heracles is asked to perform is identified with one of the

⁴²For a detailed discussion of these stories see Robert Graves, Greek Myths (London: Penguin Books, 1981).

constellations in the Zodiac. "The signs are predominantly the signs of winter, beginning with the sign of Leo and the slaying of the Nemean lion" (131). In this way, Heracles is "treated as a Sun-God," to quote Winters, his successful completion of his twelve labours representing the return of spring. At another level, however, Heracles' labors are variations of the hero's singular exploit, the subjection of nature to his will. His performance of these labors represents the control of nature by man.

Yet, as in other poems on this theme, this mastery of nature proves to be illusory. Winters treats Heracles' death as evidence of the impossibility of actually subjecting nature to the will. Nessus is made to represent the evil in the world which evades and frustrates the desire for control over nature. Stanza six makes the point explicitly:

Older than man, evil with age, is life:
Injustice, direst perfidy, my bane
Drove me to win my lover and my wife:
By love and justice I at last was slain.

In a sense then, Heracles is undone by his own overarching ambition to conquer nature.

Implicit in the Heracles legend is an irony which Winters exploits to its fullest. Although the greatest of Greek heroes, and a man of superhuman strength, Heracles is subjected to forces far greater than his own. Though Eurystheus is his inferior in every way, he cannot touch him for fear of angering Hera: "This stayed me, too: my life was

not my own, / But I my life's; A god I was, not man."
 Implicit in these lines is the hero's recognition of the
 burden of being chosen to possess a fate. Because of his
 lineage, he cannot behave like other men.

According to legend, at the time of his birth, Zeus
 decreed that Heracles would be killed by no living man. So
 it is that he is killed by a dead man and a woman. In the
 Greek myth, Heracles' death results in an apotheosis. He is
 transformed into a demigod and thereby given immortality.
 In Winters' poem, the apotheosis is treated with
 considerable ambiguity. Winters' hero experiences a
 metamorphosis at death, but it is depicted in terms of loss:

This was my grief, that out of grief I grew--
 Translated as I was from earth at last,
 From the sad pain that Deianira knew.
 Transmuted slowly in a fiery blast.

Moreover, the immortality that he experiences consists of an
 icy perfection which appears to be inimitable to human
 concerns:

Perfect and moving perfectly, I raid
 Eternal silence to eternal ends:
 And Deianira, an imperfect shade,
 Retreats in silence as my arc descends.

The poem's conclusion suggests that there is a price to be
 paid for immortality, the price of one's humanity. In his
 apotheosis, Heracles loses his life, his lover and the world
 that they inhabited.

"Theseus: A Trilogy" is the longest and most
 complicated of the poems based on Greek myth. It also

contains Winters' most explicit treatment of the hazards of direct intercourse with nature. In legend, Theseus is frequently associated with Heracles, either as his companion or as an imitator. The son of Aegus and Aetra, his name means "founder" and he is often honored as the founder of the city-state of Athens. Theseus is also known for his heroic exploits, which range from his slaying of deadly robbers on the road from Troezen to Athens to the rape of Helen and his subsequent descent into the underworld. Winters is most interested in his amorous exploits, however, focusing on his relationships with Hippolyta, Ariadne and Phaedra respectively. All three are represented as "avatars of the moon" (Powell 135), and thus may be regarded as belonging to the moonlit world of the unconscious and the irrational. Thus "Theseus" enacts a quintessentially Wintersian drama, the encounter of the dominant intellect with those forces in nature which threaten to destroy it.

The first section of the poem, called "The Wrath of Artemis," focuses on Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. She is described as a devotee of Artemis, the huntress, who is traditionally associated with the moon and with chastity. Winters' description of Hippolyta is remarkable both for its beauty and its formal control:

On the wet sand the queen emerged from forest,
Tall as a man, half naked, and at ease,
Leaned on her bow and eyed them. This, the
 priestess,
Who, with her savages, had harried Greece

From south to east, and now fought down from
 Thrace,
 Her arrows cold as moonlight, and her flesh
 Bright as her arrows, and her hatred still.

In his re-telling of the story of Hippolyta's rape, Winters has Heracles and Theseus appear together on the shores of Thermydon. Although both are intent upon removing the Amazon queen's girdle, Heracles displays a rare modesty or tact before Hippolyta. Theseus, on the other hand, watches her with rapacious intent. Her capture is described in terms recalling Artemis and the hunt:

Hippolyta smiled, but Heracles moved softly
 And seized her suddenly, bore her to the ship,
 Bound her and left her vibrating like a deer,
 Astounded beyond terror. And her women
 Fell as they came, like water to dry earth,
 An inundation of the living moon.

When Theseus appears to rape Hippolyta, it is as if in ironic fulfilment of the victim's prayers to Artemis:

She prayed the goddess to avenge the dead.
 Then, in the doorway, blackened with maiden death,
 Appeared the Attic conqueror in fulfillment.
 Theseus, inexorable with love and war,
 And ignorant with youth, begot upon her
 A son, created in her shuddering fury,
 To be born in Attica, the naked land.

The son, Hippolytus, is his punishment, a living reminder of his rape of Hippolyta, and his violation of natural law:

Insolent, slender, effeminate, and chill,
 His muscles made for running down the stag,
 Dodging the boar, which Theseus would have broken,
 Keeping step with the moon's shadows, changing
 From thought to thought with an unchanging face.

Winters' description of Hippolytus as "a man of moonlight and intensive calm" suggests that he is representative of

that lunar aspect of nature which Theseus had sought to control in his rape of Hippolyta. But like Hippolyta, and like nature, he is an "evasive daemon," changing shape to elude capture.

Section II of the poem, simply called "Theseus and Ariadne," concerns the Greek hero's relationship with Ariadne, daughter of Minos and Pasiphae, and half-sister of the Minotaur of the Labyrinth. According to legend, Ariadne had given Theseus a clew of thread so that he might find the center of the labyrinth and kill the Minotaur. On his return from the labyrinth, Theseus was to marry Ariadne, and make her queen of Attica. Although he did take her with him to the island of Naxos, Theseus eventually abandoned Ariadne there, either at the bidding of Dionysius, who wanted her for himself, or to pursue another woman, perhaps Aegle, the daughter of Panopeus.

In Winters' poem, the story of Theseus and Ariadne becomes a story of ritual purgation. Theseus kills the Minotaur in order to cleanse the blood of Pasiphaë and her children. As he tells Ariadne upon his return from the labyrinth:

The Minotaur is dead.
Pasiphaë the white will sin no more:
The daughter of the moon, who bore this ghast
And dripping horror has been long at rest.
The sin of your blood I have extinguished. . . .

But Theseus himself has been corrupted by his descent into the labyrinth and by his encounter with the Minotaur. In

his words, "the taint of hell / Has eaten through [his] skin." As he tells Ariadne:

Minos contrived
The trembling blackness of that hall of vision;
The prisoned fiend, your brother, beat me down,
I drew him after, and his blood burned through me,
Stinging more wildly than your body.

Having taken on the identity of the monster that he has killed, he also assumes its characteristic irrationality and violence, vowing that he must murder Ariadne to cleanse himself. The earlier reference to Pasiphaë as the "daughter of the moon" suggests that Theseus also hopes to purge himself of Hippolyta's influence. Ariadne's role in this psychodrama is minimal. She passively accedes to her fate, claiming that her mother's sin is inescapable:

My mother's sin has poisoned you, and I
Was poisoned long ago. We share this crime,
And I am yours, I know not to what end.

There is no hint of her revenge upon Theseus. Instead, the last lines of "Theseus and Ariadne" describe the lovers' departure for the island of Naxos, where Theseus kills Ariadne:

So Theseus took her by the hand, boarded
The limber galley, and the foam distended
Coldly above the crash on rock. The boat,
Quick on the heavy tumult, scoured the inlets
And found that island where he slew her, yet
Escaped not, took her sister, her for whom
Poseidon betrayed him, when he slew his son.

It is only in the last lines that we learn that Theseus does not actually escape his fate since he takes Ariadne's

sister, Phaedra, thus perpetuating his original crime against Artemis.

Section III of the poem, called "The Old Age of Theseus," depicts the aged hero with his young bride, Phaedra, who is described as being "hard with childhood, small, / Shivering in arm and breast" Theseus is depicted as a man who has gained self-knowledge in his maturity:

He knew his age at last. Sin with this child
Was sin in solitude. Arms that had bound
The Heracleian bull, Phaea the sow,
That had fought side by side with Heracles
And beat their black way from the ice of Lethe,
Were hard with realized identity,
Beyond her comprehension, and he lay
Whole in the salty toughness of his age.

More important, we are told that the man of action has turned to a life of contemplation in Attica:

Here were abstractions fitter for his years:
The calculation of corruption, thus
To balance evil against evil surely
And establish immitigable good.

Thus Theseus plans to spend his last years, gathering up the knowledge of his youth, and distilling from it "the honey calm of wisdom." But, of course, this is not Theseus's fate. Instead, he is betrayed by the state, which exiles him to the island of Scyros, and by his "treacherous host," Lycomedes, who pushes him from a clifftop above the Aegean:

So cast him from the rock to solitude,
To the cold perfection of unending peace.

Again Winters' hero achieves a kind of immortality, but it is an immortality that is characterized by its "cold

perfection." That is to say, it remains inimical to human concerns.

In its general movement, "Theseus" resembles several other of Winters' mature poems. In fact, its "pattern of fusion, purgation and fulfillment" (Powell 144) may be regarded as a quintessentially Wintersian pattern. The hero immerses himself in nature, undergoes a transformation in which he assumes the identity of nature, and slowly recovers to assume his own identity. This is the pattern of "The Slow Pacific Swell," "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and several other poems by Winters. Yet there is a major difference between "Theseus" and these other poems. Theseus' fulfillment is a tragic one. Unlike the protagonist in "The Slow Pacific Swell" or "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," he does not so much immerse himself in nature as seek to violate and dominate it. Moreover, unlike the protagonists of these other poems, Theseus does not finally return to himself after his encounter with nature. Instead, he remains enmeshed in nature's destructive capabilities. His betrayal by the state and by Lycomedes figures as a form of retribution for his sins. Despite the differences between "Theseus," "The Slow Pacific Swell," and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," it is clear that it derives much of its force from the same structures of feeling and belief that inform Winters' two earlier poems. In fact, it is clearly a product of the same

renunciatory poetic that had produced so many of Winters' finest poems. Far from being a hindering factor then, Winters' mature poetic remained a central enabling factor in his development.

III

I would like to conclude my discussion of the shape of Winters' poetic career by considering a number of his final offerings as a poet. In general, these poems combine the directness of plain statement with the lush descriptiveness of the post-symbolist method. Many are valedictory, as Powell has pointed out (164), and several are concerned with the limits of judgement and of art. There are two broad themes which run throughout these last poems, the problem of religious belief and the nature of the poetic career itself, and its overall significance. Both themes are typical of the poet who is writing "at or near the end of his career," as Said would say, and both themes belong to what Lipking refers to as "the moment of summing up" in a poet's career.

The problem of religious belief in Winters' poetry is by no means a simple one. As we have seen, his change of direction was prompted by an intellectual conversion with strong religious overtones. Yet Winters generally regarded religious themes from an areligious perspective. The

nature of the problem is especially evident in his one discussion in prose of his own religious beliefs.

In his "Foreword" to In Defense of Reason (1947), he admits that his critical absolutism "implies a theistic position, unfortunate as this admission may be." "If experience appears to indicate that absolute truths exist," he reasons, "that we are able to work toward an approximate apprehension of them, but that they are antecedent to our apprehension and that our apprehension is seldom and perhaps never perfect, then there is only one place in which those truths may be located, and I see no way to escape this conclusion" (14). Although his own reasoning led him to the admission of God's existence, it is clear that this knowledge did not actually amount to religious faith. The existence of God may have been logically necessary to Winters' mature critical and philosophical position, but his personal experience of Him was always problematic. As he wrote in a short poem simply called "A Fragment":

I cannot find my way to Nazareth.
I have had enough of this. Thy will is death,
And this unholy quiet is thy peace.
Thy will be done; and let discussion cease.

"A Song In Passing" reveals another side of Winters' religious skepticism. The poem contains the poet's ruminations on his own mortality:

Where am I now? And what
Am I to say portends?
Death is but death, and not
The most obtuse of ends.

No matter how one leans
 One yet fears not to know.
 God knows what all this means!
 The mortal mind is slow.

Eternity is here.
 There is no other place.
 The only thing I fear
 Is the Almighty Face.

In its effort to demystify death, it recalls "The Realization." As in the earlier sonnet, death is conceived as a simple end of life, and nothing more. Yet what is most interesting about "A Song In Passing" is the way that it simultaneously invokes and rejects the traditional religious response to this theme. In style and structure, the poem recalls the traditional religious poetry of the Renaissance. Yet the poem itself refuses the traditional religious consolation to be found in such poetry. In fact, the poem is among Winters' most skeptical treatments of the theme of religious belief. The statement "God knows what all this means" may appear to be offered as a statement of pious self-assurance, but on second reading it is clearly meant as a statement of the speaker's complete ignorance of the meaning of his spiritual suffering.

The poem which treats the problem of religious belief most fully and successfully, however, is the poem "To The Holy Spirit." It is also, as John Finlay remarks, the most complete statement of the theistic position Winters had

adopted in his later years.⁴³ Set in a graveyard in the Salinas Valley in western California, it presents the mature poet's contemplation of God, death, and the relation of mind, spirit and flesh. The first stanza describes the landscape surrounding the graveyard:

Immeasurable haze:
The desert valley spreads
Up golden river beds
As if in other days.
Trees rise and thin away,
And past the trees, the hills,
Pure line and shade of dust,
Bear witness to our wills:
We see them, for we must;
Calm in deceit, they stay.

The poet describes a landscape shrouded in an "immeasurable haze." In the first lines in particular, the dominant impression is one of softness and permanence. "The desert valley spreads / As if in other days." The presence of the word "pure" in line seven alerts us to an important discrimination that is being made in this first stanza. Although the valley seems to have changed little over time, this is an illusion. Its changes are real; they simply occur in geological rather than human time and are therefore indiscernible to the mortal eye. The "pure" line of the hills is in this way a deceit of nature.

In the second stanza, the speaker turns his attention to the "local fact" of death, which is evident all around

⁴³See John Finlay, "The Unfleshed Eye: A Reading of Yvor Winters' 'To the Holy Spirit,'" Southern Review 17 (Autumn 1981): 873-86.

him. As he surveys the graveyard scene, he is struck by the arbitrariness and the meaninglessness of death:

Low in the summer heat,
 Naming old graves, are stones
 Pushed here and there, the seat
 Of nothing, and the bones
 Beneath are similar:
 Relics of lonely men,
 Brutal and aimless, then,
 As now, irregular.

The adjectives employed in the last lines refer grammatically to the bones, which Winters describes as "relics of lonely men." But the words "brutal," "aimless," and "irregular" also sum up his attitude toward death, which is little changed by his theistic position.

The reason why this is so becomes clear in the third stanza, which is addressed directly to God:

These are thy fallen sons,
 Thou whom I try to reach.
 Thou whom the quick eye shuns,
 Thou dost elude my speech.
 Yet when I go from sense
 And trace thee down in thought,
 I meet thee, then, intense,
 And know thee as I ought.
 But thou art mind alone,
 And I, alas, am bound
 Pure mind to flesh and bone,
 And flesh and bone to ground.

God is conceived as the Father of Humankind and therefore responsible for His "fallen sons."⁴⁴ Ultimately, however,

⁴⁴The phrase "fallen sons" evokes the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and in certain respects, this poem is closer in spirit to Christianity than, say, "A Prayer For My Son." Although it is closer in spirit to Christianity, however, "To The Holy Spirit" is still not exactly a Christian poem. In fact, Winters' religious faith is difficult to define in a single word. This is so, one

he is conceived as pure essence or pure mind. Thus, though he eludes speech and the senses in general, he can be "traced in thought." Yet it is significant that once He is arrived at by intellectual means, His inaccessibility is most clearly understood. In fact, the "meeting" of God and self which the poem describes is not really a meeting at all, since the speaker's knowledge of God can never be as pure as God himself. This is so, as Winters realizes, because God is "mind alone," while he is bound "Pure mind to flesh and bone, / And flesh and bone to ground."

In the final stanza, Winters turns from his contemplation of God to consider the lonely men who are buried in the cemetery:

These had no thought: at most
 Dark faith and blinding earth.
 Where is the trammeled ghost?
 Was there another birth?
 Only one certainty
 Beside thine unfleshed eye,
 Beside the spectral tree,
 Can I discern: these die.
 All of this stir of age,
 Though it elude my sense
 Into what heritage
 I know not, seems to fall,
 Quiet beyond recall,
 Into irrelevance.

His thoughts of death lead inevitably to thoughts of re-birth. But the speaker cannot take any more consolation

suspects, because it was not arrived at through any theological discipline but through the discipline of his art. Thus the "God," or "Eternal Spirit," referred to in the poetry is not the Christian God, but a private deity, or personal daemon, somewhat like the poet's muse.

from these than he can from his knowledge of God's existence. The poem concludes where it began, with a re-statement of the one truth that the speaker does possess, the knowledge that we must all die one day, our lives passing into irrelevance.

Winters' religious poems are interesting not simply for the insight they provide into the spiritual drama of later years, but for the insights they contain into the limits of language and of art itself. Winters does not present his spiritual crises for their own sake, or, as Comito writes, as evidence of "a loss of faith in God . . . ," but as a loss of faith in . . . language" (195).

This loss of faith in the ability of language to express reality is evident in "A Fragment" and in "To The Holy Spirit." The latter poem, however, goes even further to define the limits of judgement or reason itself. In fact, the same absolute cleavage which Winters observes between man and nature can be discerned in his understanding of the relationship between man and God. Significantly, what separates man from both nature and from God, in Winters' view, is human consciousness, since he can perceive neither the phenomenal world nor the pure essence of God directly, without the mediation of the senses or the structures of language and consciousness. In fact, though he is often regarded as a rationalist and a moralist, the

later poems reveal him as an extreme skeptic, content neither with religion nor with philosophy.

In addition to the poems on the problems of religious belief, Winters' final offerings also include a number of poems which are concerned with the nature of poetry, and with the significance of Winters' poetic career. Strictly speaking, not all of these poems belong to the final phase of his career. In fact, two pre-date this final phase by several years. Taken together, however, these poems comprise Winters' most complete assessment of his career and its accomplishments.

The poem "To The Moon" is the most general of these poems. It is concerned with the nature of the poetic vocation. The poem, which is addressed to the goddess of poetry herself, is among the most sobering addresses to the Muse in modern poetry. The chillingly austere tone is established in the first lines:

Goddess of poetry,
Maiden of icy stone
With no anatomy,
Between us two alone
Your light falls thin and sure
On all that I propound.

As Comito writes, the icy goddess of this poem "stands in much the same relation to the poet's imagination as the Holy Spirit does to his reason" (199). Although her "thin . . . sure light" illuminates all that he has said in verse, she remains a presence with "no anatomy," a mystery whose pure being eludes the poet's comprehension. Moreover, her

presence does not make his task any less difficult, or his achievement less tenuous:

Your service I have found
 To be no sinecure;
 For I must still inure
 My words to what I find,
 Though it should leave me blind
 Ere I discover how.

In fact, a lifetime of devotion to his art appears to have taught Winters, to quote Comito, that "the service the goddess demands is precisely an unending struggle with words, their limits accepted, the mystery they skirt undisputed . . ." (200). In this respect, it provides a rather dour perspective on the rewards of the poet's discipline, but it is in keeping with the pessimism of Winters' later years.

The majority of Winters' other poems on the nature of his poetic career are more positive. They are also more alive to the pure pleasures to be encountered in the poet's "quest for reality." In the earliest of these poems, "A Summer Commentary" and "Time And The Garden," which date from 1938 and 1940 respectively, Winters reflects on his early visionary longings, or on what Powell describes as the Romantic poet's desire for the absolute.

In "A Summer Commentary," this desire is seen as a youthful trait. The first stanzas describe and comment upon the visionary intensities of youth:

When I was young, with sharper sense,
 The farthest insect cry I heard

Could stay me: through the trees, intense,
I watched the hunter and the bird.

Where is the meaning that I found?
Or was it but a state of mind,
Some old penumbra of the ground,
In which to be but not to find?

The questions are, of course, rhetorical. Winters invites us to see his early visionary perceptions of nature as the product of a mere "state of mind." The rather shadowy form of being he experienced in youth is contrasted with a more mature form of knowing. As Comito writes, the distinction between being and finding rests upon a contrast between sensibility and intelligence (175). Winters' object, however, is not one or the other, but a balance of the two.

In fact, in the final stanzas of the poem, he remains alive to the pure sensuous beauty of the natural world without succumbing to its charms. The poise is the equivalent of wisdom in Winters' vocabulary:

Now summer grasses, brown with heat,
Have crowded sweetness through the air:
The very roadside dust is sweet;
Even the unshadowed earth is fair.

The soft voice of the nesting dove,
And the dove in soft erratic flight
Like a rapid hand within a glove,
Caress the silence and the light.

Amid the rubble, the fallen fruit,
Fermenting in its rich decay,
Smears brandy on the trampling boot
And sends it sweeter on its way.

"Time And The Garden" provides a slightly different perspective on the poet's desire for the absolute. In this poem, Winters treats this desire as a form of hubris, an

aspiration for a greatness "not yet fairly earned." The poem is set in the poet's garden in spring and equates natural and personal growth:

The spring has darkened with activity.
 The future gathers in vine, bush, and tree:
 Persimmon, walnut, loquat, fig, and grape,
 Degrees and kinds of color, taste, and shape.
 These will advance in their due series, space
 The season like a tranquil dwelling-place.
 And yet excitement swells me, vein by vein:
 I long to crowd the little garden, gain
 Its sweetness in my hand to crush it small
 And taste it in a moment, time and all!

The speaker's desire to "crowd the little garden . . . And taste it, time and all" may be read as a re-statement of Winters' early desire, as expressed in "Quod Tegit Omnia," to "mount into the spring, / upon his tongue the taste of / air becoming body." Whereas in the earlier poem, this immersion in nature is regarded as the summum bonum of poetry, in "Time And The Garden," it is regarded as a sign of transgression. In fact, Winters likens it to that other enemy of the true poet, impatience:

And this is like that other restlessness
 To seize the greatness not yet fairly earned,
 One which the tougher poets have discerned--
 Gascoigne, Ben Jonson, Greville, Raleigh, Donne,
 Poets who wrote great poems, one by one,
 And spaced by many years, each line an act
 Through which few labor, which no men retract.

The desire to experience the garden in a moment is equated with the desire to achieve greatness as a poet quickly and without labor; both are dismissed as false ambitions. But, as Comito notes, "the poem does not [actually] deny the seductiveness of either dream" (164). Instead, it concludes

by re-iterating the central lesson of Winters' entire career, namely, that absolute knowledge of any kind is impossible, and that the only certainty in life is the certainty of death:

This passion is the scholar's heritage,
 The imposition of a busy age,
 The passion to condense from book to book
 Unbroken wisdom in a single look,
 Though we know well that when this fix the head,
 The mind's immortal, but the man is dead.

"A Summer Commentary" and "Time And The Garden" are the earliest examples of poems in which Winters views his career in retrospective terms. Although they pre-date his final poems by more than a decade, they clearly issue out of the poet's concern with the problems of summing up his career. The poems which address themselves most fully and most fruitfully to these problems, however, are the very last poems in the Collected Poems, which are simply called "Two Old-Fashioned Songs." They are concerned not with the problems of writing at or near the end of one's career, as one might expect given Said's description of the technicoethical conditions surrounding this particular phase of the writer's development, but with the more characteristically Wintersian problem of evaluation. Both are beguilingly simple poems when read in isolation, but when read within the context of the career they sum up, each is richly resonant.

The first, called "Danse Macabre," is kind of mad-song, as Powell writes, which puts into "a very moving perspective

Winters' efforts of nearly forty years to defend reason"

(153):

Who was who and where were they
Scholars all and bound to go
Iambs without heel or toe
Something one would never say
Moving in a certain way

Students with an empty book
Poets neither here nor there
Critics without face or hair
Something had them on the hook
Here was neither king nor rook

This is something some one said
I was wrong and he was right
Indirection in the night
Every second move was dead
Though I came I went instead

The poem sums up Winters' lifelong disdain for the conventional wisdom of the literary establishment. But it also lends credence to Lipking's claim that for certain poets--he mentions Propertius, Pound, Winters and Graves as examples--"resistance to orthodox definitions of greatness and public careers itself constitutes a career ideal" (xii-xiii).

The second of these "Two Old-Fashioned Songs," called "A Dream Song," contains Winters' most complete evaluation of his rather unorthodox poetic career. Its position as the last poem in The Collected Poems suggests that it is meant as Winters' final word on his accomplishments:

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.

Orchard tree beside the road,
 Bare to core but living still!
 Moving little was my skill.
 I could hear the farting toad,
 Shifting to observe the kill,

Spotted sparrow, spawn of dung,
 Mumbling on a horse's turd,
 Bullfinch, wren, or mockingbird
 Screaming with a pointed tongue
 Objurgation without word.

"A Dream Song" indicates that at this particular moment in his career, which Lipking would call the "moment of summing up," Winters was able to view his accomplishments with a rare equanimity. In fact, the poem suggests that in his last years of productivity, he was finally at peace with himself and his enemies. The tone of the poem is calm and controlled, without any of the defensiveness that characterizes his other comments on his development. In fact, as the first stanza indicates, in this poem at the very least, he is able to view the controversies of his career as the result of a simple misunderstanding between himself and his audience.

The poem also suggests that at this particular moment in his career, Winters was able to lay to rest the demons of his youth, and to see his transition from experimentalist to traditionalist in its proper perspective. As the second stanza indicates, in changing directions the way he did

nearly halfway through his poetic career, he was simply shedding the errors of his youth, and making his way toward "truth." Finally, the poem indicates that this development was not at all unusual but natural, an outgrowth of latent tendencies in Winters' career.

Generally speaking, Winters' account of his development in "A Dream Song" would seem to accord well with the account he provides in his various prose commentaries on his poetry, where he suggests that his career assumed the shape that it did for largely formal and practical reasons. In fact, the prose accounts and Winters' final poem seem to complement one another quite well. Yet just as Winters' prose commentaries on his development often raise as many questions as they answer, so too "A Dream Song" resonates with several revealing contradictions.

By likening his own growth to that of a tree, Winters suggests that his development was organic, that his career unfolded according to its own latent tendencies. Ironically, however, the metaphor which he uses to make this claim reveals how close he remained to the thematic and epistemological concerns of his early visionary poems even in the final stages of his career. Surely it is no coincidence that in the last two stanzas of "A Dream Vision," Winters adopts the perspective of a tree. As in "The Aspen's Song," "Song of the Trees," "Primavera," and so many of his early poems, Winters seems to be drawn, almost

despite himself, to this trope, and to the moment of unmediated experience it signifies. Although he claims to have outgrown the "madness" of his youth, the poem suggests otherwise. Once again, we see the persistence of an internal dynamic in his career which runs counter to his own conscious intentions and his own conscious understanding of his development. We can also see that although Winters may have consciously changed direction in the late '20s and early '30s, to a very real extent, his poetic career continued to follow the trajectory of certain themes and preoccupations first introduced in his early poems.

To return to the guiding question of this chapter, it is clear that Winters' critical principles did shape his response to the world he perceived around him. It is clear too that they also determined his development, and sometimes negatively. In certain poems, especially the public and occasional poems, he does seem "too much at home with sorrow," to use Alan Stephens' phrase. The wisdom these poems express is often too dour, the conclusions they offer too conclusive. As Stephens has remarked, in reading such poems the suspicion arises that "in reacting against some of the excesses of the time, Winters now and then assumes a kind of monumental numbness" (138). But a poet's accomplishments are measured by his best and not his worst work; and as a study of his mature poetry reveals, Winters continued to write brilliant and powerful poems long after

his change of direction. Moreover, his conception of poetry as a moral discipline was not a hindering but an enabling factor in these poems. I am thinking especially of poems like "A Dream Vision," "A Summer Commentary," "Time And The Garden," "On Rereading A Passage From John Muir," and "Theseus: A Trilogy," where this conception of poetry enables Winters to confront the Romantic themes and preoccupations of his youth, and to treat them within the context of various classical or traditional concerns, or within the context of his own personal understanding of his career. This understanding is never complete, of course. No poet, no person, possesses perfect self-knowledge. Yet, as Winters himself recognized, we do not read poetry for perfection, we read it for what it tells us about a particular life at a particular time. And as Allen Tate once remarked, it is difficult to find in another poet of Winters' generation "[so] much life actualized in language" (The New Republic [March 2, 1953]: 18).

Conclusion

Few poets have been so deliberate in their development as Yvor Winters, and fewer still have placed so much emphasis upon the conscious control which the poet possesses in the exercise of his craft. For Winters, poetry was a moral discipline because it enabled the poet to perfect a moral attitude toward a given range of experience, to shape and control that experience through the conscious shaping and controlling of meter and form. Yet what makes Winters' finest poems so compelling is not only the "spiritual control" they evince, to borrow one of his own phrases, but also the unresolved tensions and contradictions they contain.

In fact, Winters is a poet of strong contradictions. His traditionalism is rooted in the experimentalism of his youth, his classicism in his early surrender to romanticism. Even the theism of his later years is paradoxical. Although his mature critical position committed him to a belief in the existence of absolutes, he remained too much a skeptic ever to embrace this belief.

Yet the central contradiction in his career concerns his controversial change of direction. In many respects, his rejection of free verse in favor of traditional meters and forms represents the single most important development

in his career, his moment of initiation, so to speak, when he discovered his true poetic self and the formal and stylistic means by which to explore and define that self. Yet this initiation is itself paradoxical, since it represents not so much a beginning as a new beginning, and one which carries with it traces of all that had gone before.

Winters is well known for his criticisms of modernism, and for his heretical opinions on the chief modernist poets. He is famous for his preference of T. Sturge Moore over Yeats, and for his preference of Bridges, Hardy, and Robinson over Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Stevens. Yet his critical views should not distract us from the fact that throughout his career he was always closer in spirit and in sensibility to those modernist poets whom he criticized than he was to the traditionalists whom he praised.

In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that in certain respects Winters remained a modernist poet despite himself. Although he deliberately changed directions, renouncing the visionary poetic he had inherited from his modernist predecessors in favor a more conservative formalistic poetic, the change came late, almost halfway through his poetic career, when Winters was twenty-seven years old, and as Grosvenor Powell has remarked, "a man of twenty-seven is pretty much who he is going to be." "He can study himself, discover his weaknesses and strengths so as to realize his

potentialities but," as Powell writes, "he is not likely to change in any fundamental way" (166).

This fact accounts no doubt for the striking continuities one encounters in Winters' poetry, for even after his change of methods, many of the same thematic and epistemological concerns that had informed his early experimental poems in free verse continue to inform his mature poems in traditional meters and forms. The continued presence of these concerns attests to the strength of Winters' attachment to certain structures of feeling and belief developed in youth. But it also attests to the persistence in his career of an internal dynamic whose operations were quite independent of his own conscious intentions.

In his various comments on his poetry, Winters often gave the impression that his development was largely the product of conscious decisions and the exercise of independent will, but the poetry itself suggests otherwise. In fact, it is clear that his poetic career was the product of several determining factors.

Among them the most important was his early and problematic encounter with modernism, which clearly shaped his development in far more profound and complex ways than his own comments indicate. Equally important, however, was his enrollment at Stanford in the late 1920s, and his reading of H.B. Parkes and Irving Babbitt. Despite his

comments to the contrary, these factors effected in him a profound intellectual conversion with lasting consequences for both his poetic theory and practice. Finally, Winters' development was determined to a large extent by his adoption in the early 1930s of a conservative formalist poetic which encouraged him to view poetry as a moral discipline or spiritual exercise.

It is clear then that Winters' poetic career was not simply a product of his own conscious intentions or his individual will. In other words, it was not a "unique self-making," as Lipking would say. But it is important to add that it was not simply the product of its own inner logic either. In fact, it is best described as the product of a fruitful tension between authorial intention and the internal dynamic of the career itself. While Winters' development does not actually conform to the patterns of development suggested by Lipking or Said, it does support their conjectures on the systematicity of the literary career. Moreover, it lends credence to Stonum's conception of the career as a discipline which shapes the writer even as he labors to shape it.

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