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Winters, Ben Jonson and Chivalry

YVOR WINTERS OFTEN VIEWS THE POET as a sort of Herculean hero. This perspective is most explicit in the gloss he provides for his own poem on "Heracles": "allegorically he is the artist in hand-to-hand or semi-intuitive combat with experience." As a critic, too, Winters is frequently seen in hand-to-hand combat, intuitive *and* rational, and nearly always solitary, isolated, whether confronting the symbols of the zodiac or the zombies of the literary scene. Winters is a kind of lone warrior, heroic and courageous in the face of powerful forces, some of them demonic and all of them hostile. But on behalf of whom, or what, are these struggles undertaken? The traditionally chivalric answers—in the name of God, or on behalf of a woman, or in the service of both at the same time—may seem less than immediately relevant, but all of those answers are worth a second look. Raymond Oliver once remarked that "Winters has no taste for poetry to or about women, amorous or satiric—even less taste than Ben Jonson."¹ Oliver is no doubt right that neither has much time for Petrarchan hyperboles, neither plaining nor complaining, but clearly both Winters and Jonson have more than a passing interest in poetry to and about (and by) women. Winters, it seems to me, is frequently gallant, even fundamentally chivalric in his dealings with women. The question is: can he maintain a balance between chivalry, which risks condescension, and equality, which risks the obliteration of individual differences? And can he maintain that balance in his poetry as well as in his criticism?

¹ "Yvor Winters and the English Renaissance," *The Southern Review* 17.4 (October 1981): 778.

I begin by illustrating something of the range of implication these questions have in Winters' correspondence and his published criticism and then by focusing on what the example of Ben Jonson has to teach in the way of balancing the claims of chivalry and equality. There are two poems by Jonson, "An Elegy" ("Though beauty be the mark of praise") and "Epigram LXXVI: On Lucy, Countess of Bedford" ("This morning, timely rapt with holy fire") that are particularly interesting for their possible connections with Winters' poem "The Marriage." It's not clear to me when exactly Winters read these poems, though he alludes to Jonson's songs as early as 1929,² and he is concerned in several early comments on Hart Crane to analyze the influence of Jonson on Crane—and also of Yeats, to invoke another poet highly relevant to the topic at hand. I am confident, nonetheless, that Jonsonian balance is a useful measure and analogue, even if direct influence, however plausible, is finally unprovable. And the example of Ben Jonson is pertinent to the most important test case for the topic of Winters and women, the relationship of Yvor Winters and Janet Lewis.

A paradigmatic example of what I mean by chivalry and equality occurs in the remarkable series of letters that Winters wrote to Hisaye Yamamoto in 1951 and 1952. The letters exhibit a wholly characteristic combination of wit, blunt authority, kindness, and an unrelenting insistence that, as Jonson would put it, "truth lies open to all." The young woman is obviously intimidated by the prospect of applying for a writing fellowship and of eventually mixing with sophisticated Stanford students. Winters responds briskly:

Your remarks about your ignorance astonish me. You are almost as badly off as most of our Ph.D. candidates. If you have sense enough to use the dictionary there is still hope for you. But don't worry too much about what you don't know; try to do a little related and critical reading from month to month, and you will know quite a bit in a few years.³

² "The Poetry of Louise Bogan," *The Uncollected Essays and Reviews of Yvor Winters*, ed. Francis Murphy (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1973) 56.

³ R.L. Barth, ed., *Dear Miss Yamamoto: The Letters of Yvor Winters to Hisaye Yamamoto* (Ardmore, PA: Fifth Season Press, 1999) 12.

This advice is avuncular, didactic and teasing at the same time, appeasing her fears by deflating the PhD candidates (or at least their pretensions) and putting them in their place on an equal footing with the young woman who has yet to enter college, recommending a little reading and the utility of the most equitable tool the academy has to offer: the dictionary. Winters was in his fifties when he wrote this, but similar tones and attitudes can be found in letters he wrote in his twenties, to Pearl Andelson, for example.

In his critical writings, too, Winters can be blunt and authoritative (and wonderfully funny) when he champions the cause of an intellectual heroism open to women as well as to men. His assumptions are based on a pattern of chivalry that has been perceptively analyzed by John Fraser. "The honorable scholar," says Fraser,

sets the claims of truth above those of decorum, of deference, of corporate security and comfort, of personal advancement He is willing to engage in unmasked, uncondescending, person-to-person encounters, whether with his seniors and peers, or his students, or outsiders. He knows that if reason and the life of the mind are really and not merely nominally estimable, arguments must be allowed to go all the way, without magic shields and without privileged positions and sanctuaries.⁴

Winters' dedication to reason and the life of the mind is well known, and it results in a tough egalitarianism that rejects the kind of genteel and aristocratic vision of society that he came to attribute to Yeats. I quote, from his 1960 essay on Yeats, his satirical portrait of what Yeats imagines to be the role of women:

⁴ *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 224.

The ladies should be beautiful and charming, should be gracious hostesses (although there is a place for more violent ladies—videlicet Mrs. French of *The Tower*), should if possible be musicians, should drive men mad, love, marry, and produce children, should not be interested in ideas, and should ride horseback, preferably to hounds. So far as I can recollect, the ladies are not required to go fishing [as compared to the gentlemen, who are].⁵

The satire here appears to be comprehensive, but its real force, I believe, is connected to one central notion, that women should not be interested in ideas. That they should be, or that the possibility remain open to them that they could be, is for Winters axiomatic.

The effectiveness of the satire, however, should not be allowed to obscure the admiration that a younger Yvor Winters felt for what he called "the Yeatsian grand manner." He celebrates this in a 1930 review of Edmund Wilson in *Hound and Horn*: "Mr. Yeats's [grand manner] has grown out of his ... strenuous and life-long if somewhat idiosyncratic discipline; it is an intensely personal thing. It might be conceivably taken over in a measure by another poet, but only by a poet who had in a sense earned the right, who had performed a comparable amount or kind of moral labour."⁶ By the next issue of *Hound and Horn*, he had grown more wary, and he worried, in a review of "Recent Verse," that Yeats's "habit of striking histrionically noble attitudes" was dangerous, the more dangerous for being "particularly tempting to a generation whose more intelligent members are struggling desperately to reassert the dignity and moral values lost by their predecessors" (94).

Three years later, in a review of T. Sturge Moore, he inserts a particularly telling reference to Yeats's narrative poem, "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid": "Mr. Yeats ... amid the superb rhetoric of the close, allows his aged scholar to praise his young wife in moral and aesthetic terms for her effectiveness as a kind of supernatural telephone instrument" (141). The satire of the "supernatural tel-

⁵ *Forms of Discovery* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1967) 208.

⁶ *Uncollected Essays and Reviews* 84.

ephone" is devastating, but the praise of the "superb rhetoric" is accurate and genuine, for all that. Winters does not specify exactly which lines he means, but I believe the following, which come some fifty or so lines before the end, are the focus of his attention. The scholar imagines that a genie is speaking, with the young wife acting as a kind of medium:

A live-long hour
 She seemed the learned man and I the child;
 Truths without father came, truths that no book
 Of all the uncounted books that I have read,
 Nor thought out of her mind or mine begot,
 Self-born, high-born, and solitary truths,
 Those terrible implacable straight lines
 Drawn through the wandering vegetative dream,
 Even those truths that when my bones are dust
 Must drive the Arabian host.⁷

Winters is surely right that the rhetoric here is superb. It is even conceivable that the last four or five lines, if we were to substitute "American" for "Arabian," could stand as a sort of epigraph for certain aspects of Winters' own career, pursuing "implacable straight lines / Drawn through the wandering vegetative dream, / Even those truths that when my bones are dust / Must drive the American host." And given that Yeats's lines deal with a kind of perfect meeting of the minds of husband and wife, it seems to me that this poem, while perhaps not exactly an influence on "The Marriage," is nonetheless a significant fact in the background.

What it gets wrong, of course, for Winters is the handling of the supernatural.⁸ And for this—and for a more satisfactory correla-

⁷ W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1983) 449.

⁸ In a letter to R.P. Blackmur (26 September 1936), he offers a more explicit account of his opposition to this aspect of Yeats: "I have been reading your essay on Yeats. I like it a good deal, but can't help feeling it was intended as a kind of covert reproach to me, the reproach, of course, to be visible to no one but me. So I offer these tentative comments.

I agree with your objections everywhere, and with much of your praise. I have never felt, myself, any objection to his magic on the grounds that I couldn't believe in it. As a matter of fact, I could believe in a great deal of it with very little

tion of the ethical and the supernatural—he turns to the example of Ben Jonson. I think it's clear, however, that in turning to Jonson, he is (in several important ways) turning from the example of Yeats. The Elegy, "Though beauty be the mark of praise," is focused on an ethical theme, and it draws a contrast between two women. To quote Winters' summary of the poem: "[the woman addressed] is praised for her virtue and her constancy in love, at the expense of the woman whom the poet loves; and because of these qualities she is identified with the god of love."⁹ Winters celebrates the poem for its "fusion of two kinds of poetry: the song and the didactic poem," and in a broader sense for its fusion of the two styles of the Renaissance, the Petrarchan and the plain: "It is a poem," he says, "in praise of virtue in love; and in connection with love, the machinery of the old Religion of Love (in which virtue as here conceived was scarcely an element) is employed discreetly" (*Forms* 65).

Whether or not it is employed discreetly, it is certainly employed pervasively, occupying the final six of the poem's nine stanzas. Winters acknowledges that the Religion of Love, "introduced quietly in the fourth" stanza, "emerges strongly" in the fifth (*Forms* 66), and I would add that it becomes even more emphatic by the seventh. I quote stanzas five through seven.

effort. The notion that there are spirits meddling in the offing is not inconceivable to me. My mother, for example, who is a violent and somewhat unbalanced person, has had a series of telepathic experiences, perfectly verified, so far as I have ever been able to see, on which one could erect a whole philosophy of something or other if it seemed to one necessary. The point to all that, as I see it, is that it is unimportant in ordering one's affairs, and if gone into uncritically may be deleterious. Yeats's notion of surrender, for example, as a virtue (see that vicious and nasty little poem, "Leda," a beautifully written study in obscene demonism) is simply abominable. He has in the first place, no notion of what kind of creature he surrenders himself to; he has an indiscriminate curiosity. I feel as Chesterton felt about Blake, that if he is really bent on keeping company in the other world, he ought to be more particular about the company." See *The Selected Letters of Ivor Winters*, ed. R.L. Barth (Athens, OH: Swallow Press / Ohio UP, 2000) 244–45.

⁹ *Forms of Discovery* 65.

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

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

And you are he: the Deity
 To whom all lovers are designed,
 That would their better objects find:
 Among which faithful troop am I.¹⁰

The rhythm or movement of these stanzas is very beautiful, and the poem *is* the major achievement Winters claims it to be, but I hope it won't seem merely churlish to inquire a little more closely into the terms by which the language of what he calls the "Religion of Love" is deemed to be appropriate.

Wesley Trimpi has identified the figures in the stanzas I have quoted as "Neoplatonic," and he suggests that the "Deity" of stanza seven is to be associated "with heavenly love, or Aphrodite Urania, rather than with sensual love, or Aphrodite Pandemos, as Plato distinguishes them in the *Symposium*."¹¹ Jonson's language, in other words, stems from a long and honourable tradition—and we are clearly at some remove from Yeats's genie or "supernatural telephone." But isn't the machinery of the Religion of Love, no matter how ancient its lineage or how smoothly it ticks along or how beautiful its form, isn't it still machinery? Is Winters simply willing to accept the machine in this case because it is the perfectly elegant vehicle for conveying the ethical analysis that is his primary focus? Is the courtly compliment to the woman subordinate to the ethical theme, or could it in any way have equal standing? As a

¹⁰ I cite the poem as it is quoted in *Forms of Discovery* 64–65. This version differs very slightly in punctuation from that printed in Parfitt (see note 12 below), and it capitalizes "Deity."

¹¹ *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1962) 230–31.

matter of fact, the gallant compliment, which describes the woman as a "Deity," and the moral vision, which celebrates her ability to exercise her freedom to choose in accordance with the laws of honour and faith, are not quite the two distinct things that my question seems to imply, but more like two aspects of the same thing.

All the same, both Winters and Trimpi give a slightly misleading account of certain details in the poem. The stanzas I have quoted consistently apply masculine pronouns to Love—"His falling temples," "His altars," "As love ... himself," "And you are he: the Deity"—so the first object of the allusion pretty well has to be Cupid rather than Aphrodite (in either of Plato's senses), even if Trimpi is largely right that the nature of the love that concerns Jonson may be generally indicated by the concept he labels "Aphrodite Urania." Winters similarly over-rides the importance of these details. A poem which in its climax tells the lady being addressed that "you are he: the Deity" is not exactly employing the Religion of Love "discreetly." The line calls attention to itself. It is, in its way, as flamboyantly hyperbolic as anything in Donne and, in its conflation of genders, as paradoxical. The paradox is both serious and playful, playfully teasing in the incongruity of referring to the lady as "he," while seriously exploring the possibility that love, as Jonson understands it, may transcend the categories of gender. Both Trimpi and Winters convey an accurate sense of the direction in which Jonson is headed, and both make abundantly clear that the example of Jonson is not simply a matter of his "plain style" but of his nearly perfect balance of the Petrarchan and the plain—or in my terms, of chivalry and equality.

But to see more exactly how he uses the machinery of the Religion of Love to get at something not in the least mechanical and to see more sharply how the elements of both Petrarchism and Neoplatonism are assimilated to the central tenets of Christianity in Jonson's plain style, I turn now to the epigram "On Lucy, Countess of Bedford." Winters does not discuss it in detail, but it is one of a list of poems "which," he urges, "should be read with especial care" (*Forms* 71). The poem is highly self-conscious about the conventions of courtly praise.

This morning, timely wrapt with holy fire,
 I thought to form unto my zealous muse,
 What kind of creature I could most desire,
 To honour, serve, and love; as poets use.
 I meant to make her fair, and free, and wise,
 Of greatest blood, and yet more good than great;
 I meant the day-star should not brighter rise,
 Nor lend like influence from his lucent seat.
 I meant she should be courteous, facile, sweet,
 Hating that solemn vice of greatness, pride;
 I meant each softest virtue, there should meet,
 Fit in that softer bosom to reside.
 Only a learned, and a manly soul
 I purposed her; that should, with even powers,
 The rock, the spindle, and the shears control
 Of destiny, and spin her own free hours.
 Such when I meant to feign, and wished to see,
 My muse bade, *Bedford* write, and that was she.¹²

This poem consists of four quatrains and a couplet. If we were to excise the last quatrain, we would have a sonnet. The sonnet would be very elegant and very conventional—Jonson very clearly *can* do what poets are supposed to do—and the resulting portrait of a lady would be surprisingly close to the satirical portrait that Winters draws out of Yeats: the lady would be courteous, aristocratic, beautiful, and charming—and she would *not* be interested in ideas.

But the final quatrain, of course, consists of the most interesting lines in the poem:

Only a learned, and a manly soul
 I purposed her; that should, with even powers,
 The rock, the spindle, and the shears control
 Of destiny, and spin her own free hours.

As in the “Elegy,” Jonson plays with the notion that the lady is divine: Lucy is brighter than the sun—and more influential; she is not only independent enough to “spin her own free hours,” but

¹² Ben Jonson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988) 58–59.

also controls "destiny." The phrase "I purposed her" varies at the climactic point the formula "I meant," used four times in the preceding lines, and it intensifies their cheekiness by claiming that the poet invents the lady's purpose at precisely the moment he has identified what her purpose, her *telos*, is: to exercise "a learned, and a manly soul." The raillery of praising a woman for her "manly" soul creates a certain frisson, in Jonson's time as in ours, though Jonson's age was prepared to accept (as ours generally is not) that "manliness" might also be gender neutral. That is, I take it that Jonson's central point at the climax of the poem focuses on reason and free will as belonging to the essence, that is, the soul of man, that is, of mankind. By imputing to Lucy god-like powers to control destiny, Jonson is defining the sense in which man is made in the image of God. Compare Richard Hooker: "Man in perfection of nature being made according to the likeness of his Maker resembleth him also in the manner of working; so that whatsoever we work as men, the same we do wittingly work and freely."¹³ Only a learned and a manly soul can do its work, can spin her own free hours, wittingly and freely—with reason and free will. By applying this idea to Lucy, Jonson transforms the Petrarchan cliché about the mistress being divine into a substantial Christian truth. Lucy is divine in the sense in which all men are: made in the image of God. One sees why George Eliot admired the poem for its depiction "of that grander feminine type—at once sweet, strong, large-thoughted."¹⁴

One also sees why these poems, the epigram and the elegy, might be especially important to a large-thoughted man who was attempting to define his marriage and who had an intense interest in the ways the ethical and the sacred might be regarded as aspects of one another. Winters' poem "The Marriage" was published in 1931, that is, a year later than the reviews I have been quoting from *Hound and Horn*. It seems to me to be Jonsonian in precisely the kind of balance it achieves between gallant compliment and moral vision, and it seems to me at least plausible that Winters could have seen that balance in the two poems I have discussed, though

¹³ *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* 1.7.2, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 70.

¹⁴ Quoted in *Ben Jonson: Poems*, ed. Ian Donaldson (London: Oxford UP, 1975) 40.

it is discernible in other poems too. I concede, of course, that other influences are at work in the poem, but the Jonsonian balance I argue for is also closely related to the metaphysical balance of opposites that Gordon Harvey perceives in a very acute discussion of the poem.¹⁵ Harvey brings to bear the analysis of the *Scrutiny* critic James Smith—of the metaphysical conceit as embodying two rival claims to reality—and he invokes the example of Donne. I invoke the example of Jonson, and while I am persuaded by nearly everything Harvey says about the poem, I resist the description of it in the last sentence of the essay as a matter of “civil marriage.” To me, “The Marriage” is more than civil; it is sacramental.

But this claim immediately raises a big problem: “sacramental” according to whom, or from the perspective of whose religious views? Winters was not as much at home as his wife was in the ongoing tradition of the religious culture that sustained Ben Jonson. In a poem of this kind, the problem is, among other things, a stylistic problem. Whose terms should prevail: those of the speaker or of the addressee? When the poem invokes the “spirit,” it does so in a manner that more or less accords with the kind of theistic position Winters alludes to in the “Foreword” to *In Defense of Reason* and also with the nature of the spirit depicted in his remarkable poem addressed “To the Holy Spirit.” Since neither of these statements is Christian, the speaker remains, in a sense, safely within the limits of his own judgement; but “The Marriage,” I believe, calls for something more. That more is evident in the astonishingly beautiful compliments of the opening lines:

Incarnate for our marriage you appeared,
Flesh living in the spirit and endeared
By minor graces and slow sensual change.¹⁶

The first line invokes several distinct possibilities. Since to appear is to become visible, the line offers the very traditional notion that love is especially elicited by the sight of the beloved. And since the past participle “appeared” withholds any identification of the agent

¹⁵ “Winters’s ‘Marriage’ and Donne,” *The Gadfly: A Quarterly Review of English Letters* 7.2 (May 1984): 32–42.

¹⁶ *The Collected Poems of Yvor Winters*, ed., Donald Davie (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1978) 126.

who causes the appearance, it leaves open the possibility that in addition to operating through the will of the speaker or the addressee, the appearance could be by the grace of God.

And the handling of "incarnate" is similarly open-ended. It contains echoes of the opening of the fourth Gospel, though it seems unlikely that Winters wants these echoes in any directly denotative way. Among the poems excluded from both the *Collected* and the *Early Poems* (and categorically rejected as "rubbish" in the introduction to the latter volume) is a short poem called "Communion," rejected perhaps because it oversteps a mark, for him, by alluding explicitly to "the incarnate word." At the same time, the connotations of an incarnational theology are not completely ruled out of "The Marriage" either. In a way that is even more subtle than Jonson's, though a way that is fundamentally akin to his way, Winters succeeds in associating the woman he addresses with the divine. And he establishes these associations, in a discreet way, in the first line—and in terms that do not rule out an understanding of the divine that could differ from his own—before settling in to an account of the spirit and the body that is more recognizably his own.

The conclusion of "The Marriage" is similarly tactful:

And when I found your flesh did not resist,
 It was the living spirit that I kissed,
 It was the spirit's change in which I lay:
 Thus, mind in mind we waited for the day.
 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.

Gordon Harvey seems to regard the singleness of the spirit here as something of a "figment" and the knowledge of the parties to the marriage as primarily and fundamentally a knowledge of separateness: "How shall a faithful vestige 'know' another, after years together mind in mind? Still attentively, allowing otherness; yet imperfectly, even at the limits of life still *as* other and separate" (40-

41). This claim seems to me true, but insufficient. It's a claim that begins to turn away from the sense of metaphysical strain (in terms of the marriage of the spirit—irreducibly separate *and* united; single *and* double) that is Harvey's main theme. The partners to the marriage, though they have independent bodies and minds, meet nevertheless in a single spirit. This is a *marriage* of true minds. And as for the body, in the same way that the opening of the poem offers discreet suggestions of an incarnational theology, so the close, in the delicate rhythms of "when flesh shall fall away, and, falling, stand," allows for the possibility of a sort of resurrection of the body (without actually endorsing that doctrine). The sacramental nature of the marriage is partly indicated by the way the speaker gives himself to it and to principles that are not simply or solely his own; he might almost say what the speaker in "Heracles" says, though with a different inflection: "my life was not my own" (*Collected Poems* 148).

I am less interested in the religious views either of Winters or of Janet Lewis than I am in the poise and tension of the debate between them. For Winters' part, his poise in "The Marriage" is a kind of Jonsonian balance between chivalry and equality. What this means, among other things, is that we need to re-think certain aspects of the "heroic" in his career. I do, indeed, think that his career as a critic and as a poet was heroic and that that heroism was very often a highly individual and Herculean encounter with experience—and with other critics. But there are other dimensions that are tied more intimately to his debate with his wife and that involve a less individualistic kind of chivalry. The challenge she offers in "Time and Music," for example, to his poem "The Vigil" and to a re-working of the line she chooses as an epigraph ("Here. Trapped in Time.") is a serious challenge to several of his major premises, and a number of poems from "The Proof" (and later) seem to me to show evidence of his responding to that challenge and finding, in the process, some of his own "better objects." Bob Barth's recent selection of Winters' poems (1999) has performed a valuable service by, among other things, breaking down the somewhat artificial distinction between Winters' "Early Poems" and his "Collected Poems," by reprinting such poems as "The Vigil" (and others connected to it), and by placing at the front of the selection the wonderful poem called "The Dedication"—a dedication to the poems in the selection and to Mrs. Winters. Winters said in his

"Introduction" to his *Early Poems* that he changed his method as a poet because he aspired to the standards set by the examples of such poets as Baudelaire, Valery, Hardy, Bridges, and Stevens; later in the same paragraph, he adds two more poets: Fulke Greville and Ben Jonson (*Collected Poems* 15–16). It's now time to add an eighth poet—though that would be a subject for another paper: Winters and the Example of Janet Lewis.¹⁷

¹⁷ An oral version of the paper printed here was presented at the Yvor Winters Centenary Symposium, Stanford Humanities Center, Stanford University, 16–18 November 2000.