The Unfleshed Eye: a Study of Intellectual Theism in the Poetry and Criticism of Yvor Winters.

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THE UNFLESHED EYE:
A STUDY OF INTELLECTUAL THEISM
IN THE POETRY AND CRITICISM OF YVOR WINTERS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

John Martin Finlay
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ABSTRACT

Yvor Winters' early poetry, from 1920 to 1928, was written in free-verse; the aesthetic principle governing it centered on the image "purified" of conceptual content, and consisting of a "fusion" between the natural object being described and the poet's own mind. The result is a kind of naturalistic mysticism, destructive of judgments and evaluations of the conscious intellect. The early poetry also registers the effect of certain scientific theories on Winters' mind; these theories were mechanistic and deterministic in nature, and they turned Winters' world into one in which moral and intellectual values had no reality. Other themes that appear in the early poems are the absence, or non-existence, of God, the fear of death, and the apprehension that the ultimate nature of the universe might be demonic.

In the late twenties Winters underwent an artistic and intellectual reformation in reaction to the free-verse and the stylistic violence which that verse finally degenerated into. He embraced a classicism that respected and acted upon the powers of the conscious mind. Writing in conventional meter and employing a style both imagistic
and abstract, he wrote poems dealing with the possibility, and the realization, of moral control and intellectual order. His new poetics rested on the philosophical assumption that absolute truth exists. In order to safeguard that truth and save himself from subjective relativism, he was driven by what he viewed as philosophical necessity to a theistic position. He was influenced in this process by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Only the existence of God could guarantee and validate truth and assure its independence of the human mind.

Winters most reluctantly admitted theism. He had an instinctive fear of the supernatural; he was afraid the supernatural, its ineffability and absolute foreignness, would generate intellectual confusion in the human realm, which he wanted protected at all cost. Consequently, he defined God in the most intellectually respectful terms at his disposal. God becomes Pure Mind or Perfect Concept, existentially neutral and non-providential as far as the human is concerned. Such a "perfect mind" becomes the absolute standard by which everything is judged. We see the effects of this definition and the subsequent standard in Winters' view of the natural world, the body-soul composite in man, and the "giant movements" working in society at large. Since the natural world, as well as man's own body, does not
participate in the reality of the Pure Mind, it was viewed by Winters with some distrust as a possible impediment to man's realizing his moral and intellectual good. Since Winters believed so much of modern society was noted for thoughtlessness, he viewed it suspiciously and recommended detachment and isolation as the means of saving oneself from moral and intellectual contamination. "To the Holy Spirit," a poem written in his late forties, summarizes all themes related to theism and is his most complete statement on the subject.
INTRODUCTION

In 1947 Yvor Winters brought together and published in a single volume, entitled *In Defense of Reason*, three books of criticism he had previously published separately. In those books are to be found the major critical statements on which his reputation as a critic is based. They are *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), *Maule's Curse* (1938), and *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943). Earlier, in 1940, he had issued from his own private press a volume he simply called *Poems*; this book contains all the poems he wished to save from his previous volumes, to which only a handful of later ones would be added when the book was commercially published by Alan Swallow in 1952.¹ In fact, by the time he came to write the Foreword to *In Defense of Reason*, all but four of the poems that make up his total work had already been written and published. It was consequently a time of summing up; for all practical purposes he had finished his poetic career, and the two remaining books of criticism he would write, *The Function of Criticism* (1957) and *Forms of Discovery* (1967), would be only further, though perhaps deeper, applications of the principles already to be found in *In Defense of Reason*.

¹
In the Foreword he takes a comprehensive view and surveys in summary fashion all other theories of literature to which his own can be contrasted. The essential feature of his theory, which he sees as separating it from the others, is its commitment to the proposition that the mind through concentrated study and discipline can apprehend some degree of truth about human experience and can then express that truth in poetic language which realizes it both emotionally and intellectually. He also sees that the effect of such apprehension and expression is not just intellectual, but also moral: the mind is enabled not only to recognize in truth what a particular good is, but also to define, and then avoid, those things that would interfere with the realization of the good in question. The value of poetry is that it achieves this end in a more inclusive manner than philosophical or scientific discourse by utlizing both aspects of language, the connotative and the denotative, and by appealing to and engaging both the emotional and the intellectual faculties of the human being. Poems should be judged and evaluated, then, according as they do or do not realize this end.

He then states, at the very end of the Foreword, and as if in an aside, that a further and final consequence of his theory of literature is that it rests on a theistic basis, which the moral absolutism of that theory would
inevitably necessitate. He states this position reluctantly, and in such a tone that the reader soon realizes that only the rigor of the argument could have compelled him to such an uncomfortable position.

Finally, I am aware that my absolutism implies a theistic position, unfortunate as this admission may be. If experience appears to indicate that absolute truths exist, 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 the conclusion.2

It will be the purpose of this dissertation to study the causes and consequences of the theistic position Winters here summarizes. We shall see that one of the major causes is located in his free verse and the aesthetic principles, formulated in a very early essay, *The Testament of a Stone*, according to which the free verse was written. These principles restricted him to a severe form of imagism and exposed him to forces over which he could finally maintain no control; the poems themselves are records of a mind often on the point of hysterical fragmentation. We shall see that it was in reaction against them, and the anguish they caused him, that he began in the late twenties the intellectual and artistic reformation that eventually issued in the 1947 "confession" of theism. The first part then will be a study of the major themes of the free verse, all of which was

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written in his twenties and published in the following four books, *The Immobile Wind* (1921), *The Magpie's Shadow* (1922), *The Bare Hills* (1927), and *The Proof* (1930). (The contents of all four of these books can be found in the 1978 *Collected Poems*, and all references to poems in the text will be to it.)

But the major part will be devoted to a study of the consequences of Winters' theism, especially as these appear in his poetry, which I consider greater than the criticism. As I have said, he most reluctantly, almost unwillingly, admitted the existence of God, against which he had earlier maintained strong humanistic suspicion and distrust. It is not surprising that he should then define God, once he was forced by the logic of the argument to reckon with Him, in the most intellectually respectable terms at his disposal. For Winters these terms are always rational, and God then becomes the Pure Mind of "To the Holy Spirit," his most complete poetic statement on the subject, and one which I shall discuss in some detail in the last chapter.

Such a definition is of the greatest importance. Since the formulation of a first principle is the basis on which everything else depends, we should not be surprised then if we discover that the effects of Winters' definition of God are extensive and touch crucial areas of his thought. These consequences appear most tellingly
in those poems of his which deal with the mind and its relationship to either the body or the natural world, a relationship that in both cases, for Winters, is fraught with ambiguity and peril. The degree of intellectual reality, if any, which either the body or the natural world possesses is a theme that preoccupied him from the beginning to the end of his career, and his solution to the problem is a direct result of what led him to think of God in terms of "mind." I shall also treat how such thinking affected his political and social thought in certain of his poems that are concerned in an impersonal way with the public issues of his day.

Winters lived a quiet life, devoted almost exclusively to poetry and the teaching of it at Stanford University, with which he was connected, either as a student or teacher, from 1927 to a short time before his death in 1968. As Donald E. Stanford has noted in a review of the 1952 Collected Poems, "Winters' career has not been sensational enough to catch the public eye, nor fashionable enough to interest the elite. He has not visited Paris, gone insane, joined the Communist party, become converted to Catholicism, or committed suicide."

Yet two events of more than an ordinary nature occurred during the early part of his life. Since they had a rather profound effect on his poetry, perhaps it would not be inappropriate if in this introduction I briefly list and discuss them.
In 1918, when he was seventeen and a student at the University of Chicago, Winters discovered he had tuberculosis. His family first sent him to California, the home of his childhood, then to the drier climate of Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he entered a sanatorium sometime in the late autumn of 1918. He remained there as a patient for almost two years, spending most of his waking hours following the mistaken medical practice of the time and lying flat on his back in a state as immobile as possible. Nearly all of his first two books of poetry, The Immobile Wind and The Magpie's Shadow, were written in the sanatorium. The disease produced in him a state of mind, at times hallucinatory in its intensity. His senses were rendered feverously active and the resulting clarity caused him acute pain. We can see the effects of such a state in the poems. Their imagistic vividness and disconnectedness are so startlingly apparent that the reader, even without any knowledge of his biography, is forced to posit some abnormal state of mind as their cause. In fact, the single-minded intensity with which Winters devoted himself to the image in both the poetry and criticism of the period must be intimately connected with the whole "psychology" of tuberculosis. It surely has to be reckoned as one of the chief factors, I think, in his later reaction not only against free verse, but against Romanticism in general, which, as
Susan Sontag recounts in *Illness as Metaphor*, often glorified the disease and made it an infallible sign of spiritual and poetic authenticity.\(^5\)

He was released from the sanatorium in October, 1921. For the next two years, and before he resumed his academic career, first at the University of Colorado, then at Stanford, he taught school in two or three small coal-mining towns south of Santa Fe. This experience forms the background of a great deal of the free verse written after *The Magpie's Shadow*, as well as some of the later traditional poems. Its main importance lies in the concrete instances it gave him of a primitive irrationalism which he spent the rest of his life defining and opposing. As he says in the Introduction to *The Early Poems*, "Accidents, many fatal, were common in the mines, from which union organizers were vigorously excluded and sometimes removed; drunken violence was a daily and nightly occurrence in both towns; mayhem and murder were discussed with amusement."\(^6\) It was also during this time that he experienced in an acute form what we might call a metaphysical state of imprecision and indeterminancy. Noting the moral aimlessness of the men who inhabited these isolated towns, Winters saw in actual human terms what the absence of a regulating principle can cost the human being. As he says in a prose poem which deals with the experience:
Then I withdrew to an empty room I shared with an indeterminate consciousness. There was no head, and the soiled blankets were thin.

I did not believe in the existence of precision. It was no matter whether I sat behind my desk or behind the window of my room. Often I heard the pale Slavs stamping and shouting below me, and one night a man wept with drunkenness.

The cinders in the moonlight were the same; I saw nothing but perpetuity.7

For his remaining years Winters committed himself to opposing this "indeterminate consciousness," and his definition of God as Pure Mind directly results from his realizing the pain and anguish such a consciousness can cost the human being.
NOTES

1 I am indebted for this fact, as well as all other bibliographical information concerning Winters, to Kenneth A. Lohf and Eugene P. Sheehy, Yvor Winters: A Bibliography (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959).


4 My information is derived from the autobiographical Introduction Winters wrote to his The Early Poems (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1966), pp. 7-16.


6 Winters, Early Poems, p. 11.

7 Winters, Early Poems, p. 102.
CHAPTER I
THE FREE VERSE OF YVOR WINTERS:
GROUND FOR REACTION

1. Solipsistic Mysticism

The aim of poetry, according to the early Yvor Winters writing in *The Testament of a Stone*, is the obliteration of differences existing between subject and object, so that the two can become fused into one. The subject in this case is the poet's own mind, a mind, it is important to note, deprived of reason and restricted to just sensory impressions; its corresponding object is any fragment or detail found in a natural world from which all intelligible order is as absent as it is from the poet's own mind.

The means by which this fusion is conveyed in poetry is the unique and unparaphrasable image, purified of concept and consisting of only the poet's naked perception and the thing perceived. In the ideal situation, of course, the two are so blended they are indistinguishable. The poet becomes what he perceives; what he perceives becomes himself. When he is successful at this in a poem, the result is what Winters calls, in a
startling phrase, "waking oblivion"—a state of mind, all but mystical in nature, in which the poet loses his identity as he becomes one with the object, and yet still impossibly enjoys the consciousness of his own annihilation.

In some of the early poems Winters emphasizes the **outwardness** of this movement, and the resulting obliteration of the human mind as it fuses with the external object. Since extreme sacrifice and renunciation are involved in this process, the language of these poems inevitably has religious connotations to it. In a poem entitled "The Priesthood," first published in 1920, four years before *The Testament of a Stone*, he states

We perish, we  
Who die in art,  
With that surprise  

Of one who speaks  
To us and knows  
Wherein he lies.  

The last stanza is difficult to understand—the reader does not know if the verb in the last line means "to reside in" or "to express a falsehood." Perhaps the ambiguity is intentional; so often in these early poems one senses a calculated obscurity on the part of the poet. In any case, the drift of what Winters is saying in these lines is that the intensity of the poetic experience, involving as it does what we might call a
naturalistic mysticism, is inexpressible in conceptual language. The "surprise" of the speaker is occasioned either by his speaking at all, and thus shattering the mystical trance he is caught up in, or by his attempting to express that trance in language which will only distort it and be false to its uniqueness. But the dominant idea of the poem is sacrifice, of the poet's surrendering himself either to the experience itself or to the attempt to express the experience in language, both requiring, though, a loss of mind and consciousness. And the poem is the earliest example of a theme that will occur repeatedly in Winters' poetry, namely the intimate relationship he saw existing between art and death.

Another poem with much the same theme is "The Chapel," written about the same time as "The Priesthood" and continuing its religious connotations:

Like hour of death
I entered in,
Before I knew the cost.

The altar's form,
Though seen of men,
I polished until lost.

And I shall not
Turn eyes again
Toward my own face of frost.

"The altar's form" in the second stanza I take to symbolize the poet's medium, language, which, apart from its transformation at the hands of the poet, is "seen of
men," that is, is public and accessible in its denotative and practical nature. But the poet transforms it by polishing it until it becomes an effaced transparency through which the fused image can become arrestingly apparent. What is to be noticed again, though, is the awareness of the human cost this involves—the poetic act is an "hour of death" and the poet's own face, insubstantial as frost to begin with, is rubbed out in the exigencies of the fusion.

Another poem on the subject is "Song." In it the poet speaks of running disembodied both outside and before himself, and falling into a silence within silence, mystical in its quiet and brief intensity. Since he is rapt outside himself, he can speak of the experience as belonging essentially to another person:

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

If at times the movement is outward and calls for an almost inhuman sacrifice on the part of the poet, at other times it becomes inward and involves an equally inhuman assimilation. The poet's mind becomes fragmented and dispersed in the process of receiving into itself non-human elements. In The Testament of a Stone Winters speaks on a theoretical level of the poet's absorbing
the "milieu" surrounding him, which is, as he says, "infinitely variable." Recognizing the dangers of a "plastic nature," he insists upon the necessity of the poet's possessing "a more or less immobile nature," one which will render him resistant to being invaded and destroyed by that same milieu. Yet such resistance is seldom encountered in the poems themselves dealing with the theme. Instead one finds first absorption, then fragmentation and dispersion. Consider one of his best early poems, "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.

Howard Kaye in his unpublished dissertation, The Poetry of Yvor Winters, discusses the poem at some length and gives an account of its thematic content:

This (i.e. "Alone") seems about as close to Whitmanian pantheism as to solipsism which views the world as a projection of the self. In either case, there is no clear distinction between subjective and objective, self and the external world. Perceiving an object may not be separable from being that object. The speaker is what he sees, and his own eyes do not exist. Such a state will result in, or threaten, the extinction of personality.
The assimilation of such inhuman swarms, as we see in "Alone," can only result in "extinction of personality." The "unbelief" of the fourth line of the poem, as Kaye goes on to say, is "a lack of confidence in one's own conscious existence." This absence the poet approves of, though one senses an incipient hysteria working underneath the surface, and conditioning the approval in a radical way. Yet the poet grimly maintains his aesthetic principles to the extent that he is forced to designate belief in separate consciousness as a "lie." We see this definition operating in "I Paved a Sky," the first stanza of which follows:

I paved the sky  
With days.  
I crept beyond the Lie.  
This phrase,  
Yet more profound,  
Grew where  
I was not: I  
Was there.

As in all monistic systems of thought, there is here no distinction between subject and object, nor is there one between "here" and "there"--the hunter and the hunted of Emerson's poem are one and the same, as the line from "Alone," "Where I struck I never missed," suggests. In "I Paved a Sky" Winters in eliminating his own separate consciousness locates himself beyond such distinctions, and conceptual language is destructured in the attempt at describing the experience. The poem verges on impenetrability.
The drift of all this is toward what the mature Winters will call "solipsistic mysticism." At the time he could not see it as a consistent philosophical position—all he knew of philosophy then, as he says, was a smattering of Plato, Emerson, and Herbert Spenser; instead "it struck me as a kind of revelation in early childhood, and stayed with me for some years; I had to think my way out of it."  

The mystical nature of this "revelation" is apparent. Though the object of its contemplation is not God, but fragments of the natural world, yet Winters' naturalistic mysticism shares all the essential characteristics of the transcendental variety. As we have seen in the discussion above, in both there is a fusion of two entities, a blurring of all objective distinctions found in "outside" reality, a loss of separate consciousness and a trance-like state of being that is, because of its uniqueness, inexpressible in conceptual language. In fact, Winters, in trying to render it in language, an attempt that can only fail, is forced to rely on extreme associations and connotative intensities that result oftentimes in total obscurity.

Yet the solipsistic nature of such a mysticism is not so apparent at first, primarily because the mystical obliteration dramatized in these poems renders the survival of the solus ipse problematical, to say the very
least. What can be left of the mind after it has become a thousand bees? But there is a curious double vision in Winters' early poetry. Not only does he have his eye so riveted on the outside object that he becomes that object, at the same time he has another eye, as it were, blindly locked inside his own mind, that is equally riveted on the process of his perceiving and absorbing the object, and watching quite dispassionately what it is doing to his own mind. The other eye is the solus ipse of solipsism. According to its vision, the world is seen, as Kaye says, only as a projection of the self. The first stanza of "The Morning" affords us a useful example of this kind of thing:

The dragonfly
Is deaf and blind
That burns across
The morning.

The insect in these lines is real. Without explicit descriptive detail, one has the unaccountable impression that it is there and is being observed. One is also just as aware that the dragonfly is becoming the mind of the observing poet in a way that traditional symbolism cannot account for. Like the solipsistic eye that can only study its own internal surfaces, the insect is "deaf and blind" to everything outside itself. The situation of the poet is the same. Consequently the whole poem, as Kenneth Fields has noted, "is dominated by the obscure
feeling of the inability to get beyond one's own private and hallucinatory perceptions." The poet himself is locked inside his own perceptions, and everything apart from them, for the moment, becomes unreal.

It is important to note that this "solipsistic mysticism" is more a state of mind than anything else. It is not a philosophical system for which Winters was able to provide any sort of rigorous, technical justification. He fell into it, as he says, as children do, and it resembled for him an emotional state which he later thought himself out of. It does, of course, have philosophical implications, as any state of mind has for one observing and evaluating it, but Winters was insufficiently aware of them on an intellectual level. In fact, his aesthetic principles made such an understanding impossible--his mind had been made an intellectual void in order to create the fused image.

Perhaps a few biographical details will help clarify the situation. Nearly all the poems dealing explicitly with "solipsistic mysticism" appear in Winters' first book, The Immobile Wind, published in 1921 and written for the most part while he was recovering from tuberculosis at a sanatorium in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He was eighteen when he entered the sanatorium, twenty-one when he left it. Facing the possibility of imminent death, he lay for hours flat on his back, following the mistaken
medical practice of the time, in a state as immobile as the human body will permit. In a passage in *Forms of Discovery* devoted to another victim of tuberculosis, Adelaide Crapsey, he has described the pain and fatigue he suffered then as "poisonous and pervasive." As with Adelaide Crapsey, as well as John Keats and others, the disease caused in Winters a heightening and intensification of sensory impression to the point of acute clarity. While undergoing such an experience the poet might well have fallen into believing they were the only things real, especially since they duplicated earlier childhood experiences of isolation in the natural world, and were furthermore confirmed and justified by his current aesthetic principles.

Two other observations are in order. As we have said earlier, the subject matter of these poems is mystical and, strictly speaking, inexpressible in either conceptual or metaphoric terms. Most of them, such as "The Chapel" and "The Priesthood," are more commentaries that use, contradictorily enough, abstractions instead of the images one would think more appropriate for naturalistic mysticism. The best of those which actually attempt to "dramatize" the experience is "Alone," and even it has to be, and is, only an approximation, though it is surely close enough to the real thing for intellectual comfort. The very nature of the situation makes
approximation inevitable, and necessarily involves the poet in an element of deceit—he attempts something which from the beginning he says is impossible to accomplish. Winters will later recognize this fact, and it will furnish him with the means of evaluating and rejecting what he saw as spurious mysticism in both 19th century Romantic poetry and modern poetry. The proper subject matter for the poet then becomes, not the ineffable, but the knowable, which he will locate, not in the natural, but the human realm.

Secondly, there is on the part of the poet what we might call an instinctive, involuntary objection to both the mysticism and the solipsism we have been discussing, an objection that will form the basis for the gradual intellectual and artistic reformation that will begin for Winters sometime in his late twenties. The evidence of this objection is found in such poems as "Where My Sight Goes" and "Ballad of Men":

And all these things would take
My life from me.
from "Where My Sight Goes"

And all my life
And all my sight
Are scattered like green sea.
There is death in women walking.
Thus I come unto Thee.
from "Ballad of Men"

He is too much aware of what the mysticism cost in actual
human terms to be able to celebrate it naively and sentimentally. Instead of enlarging his being, he will discover the full extent to which it contracts and diminishes it. But at the time, he records it accurately in language that registers at a level deeper, I believe, than conscious intent, his protest against it. He more quickly became aware of the dilemma solipsism itself was creating for him. From the title poem of The Bare Hills, written only a year or two after The Immobile Wind:

And he emerged into the diningroom
with redveined eyes
that guttered into sleep.
And he sat down
and ate the bread
as if he ate rock,
while he ground his buttocks.
He got up and smiled
and went upstairs
to meet the monstrous nakedness of his own face...

These lines are similar to a passage from "The Brink of Darkness," a short story first published in 1932 in Hound and Horn, after he had abandoned the techniques of experimental poetry and embraced a poetics that included and respected the evaluations of the conscious intellect. The difference is that now he sees solipsism as a desperate problem over which he possesses some kind of control, even if it is only the control found in language itself.
He is describing himself in an empty house, staring out a window at the smooth surface of the snow outside:

Again I had the illusion of seeing myself in the empty room, in the same light, frozen to my last footprints, cold and unmeaning. A slight motion caught my eye, and I glanced up at the darkened corner of the window, to be fixed with horror. There, standing on the air outside the window, translucent, a few lines merely, and scarcely visible, was a face, my face, the eyes fixed upon my own.

The tone of both these texts is that of drastic, even desperate, criticism. Solipsism has become reduced to nakedness and isolation with inhuman costs involved. The poet's face, in "The Brink of Darkness," is disembodied and turned against him as if it were a demon, existing only in the element of air.

2. The New Science

Solipsistic mysticism in its pure state soon disappears in the experimental poetry of Yvor Winters. In an undiluted form it appears only in certain poems of The Immobile Wind (1921) and in some of the one-liners that make up his second book, The Magpie's Shadow (1922). What does remain, though, is the situation implied in the remarks I have already quoted from The Testament of a Stone: the rejection of the evaluations and judgements of the human intellect, a literary technique that relies
exclusively on the unparaphrasable aspects of language, and, finally, an intellectually blind receptivity to the poet's milieu, a word which, in Winters' case, is interchangeable with the natural world. It remains to ask what Winters discovered in that world that brought him close to a state he himself quite simply called "madness."\textsuperscript{12}

It will become a fact of literary history, I think, that the effect of the "new science" on poets and intellectuals during the first part of this century was far more dislocating and more a source of anguish than was the effect of the "new philosophy" on John Donne and his generation. The very nature of the universe itself, not the arrangement of its parts, was at stake, along with the identity of man himself. The effect on Winters was intensified by the fact that his interest in science was more than just interest in the vague concepts which make up what is rather innocently called "intellectual backgrounds." He studied it from an early age and knew it "technically" in detail. As Howard Kaye informs us, "Winters taught biology in New Mexico mining camps, read proto-zoology, and may at one point have considered coming to Stanford to study ichthyology with David Starr Jordan."\textsuperscript{13}

And it was this "new science," working in conjunction with the equally revolutionary "new poetry," which produced his dilemma.

Kenneth Fields, in a review of The Early Poems,
which appeared in the *Southern Review*, gives a concise account of the nature of this dilemma:

The physical universe that Winters seems to be confronting in isolation, especially in the later of the experimental poems, is very close to the universe of atomic physics of the twenties as described by Whitehead and others. It is marked by relativity of time and space which renders relationships arbitrary; hence, perhaps, something of the method of disparate association. It is marked by the interchangeability of matter and energy in a kind of Heraclitean flux, in which apparently solid matter is divisible into atoms in constant motion.  

From the earliest times poets have always been preoccupied with the theme of mutability, but the change which Fields is describing here is radically different. In the older way of thinking, in its terminology and imagery, it is the surface, the external, the palpable, that suffers change, while an inner core remains constant and untouched, a notion influenced, of course, by the Aristotelian and Thomistic definition of change as either the actualization of potentiality or the development of form. In Winters the situation is reversed. The "inner core" is in such a state of utter flux that the surface can appear relatively stable. Yet such an appearance is bitterly deceptive. We see this external appearance of "feigned rigidity" in "The Vigil," one of the last of the experimental poems and one in which time is "speeding" the poet "to violence and death":

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The floor burns underfoot, atomic
flickering to feigned rigidity: God's
fierce derision.

The outside "rigidity" can only appear so because
the core itself of the thing, according to the vision of
the poet, is being so ceaselessly and constantly under­
mined by atomic change. From the title poem of The
Immobile Wind:

Blue waves within the stones
Turn like deft wrists interweaving.

And from the last poem of the 1927 Fire Sequence, "The
Deep: A Service For All the Dead," a poem describing a
world in which, as Howard Kaye says, "thought and will
can no longer armor man against the ravages of time, but
the nostalgic longing for such means of transcendence is
as evident as the despair of the conclusion":

And in the bent heart of the seething rock
slow crystals shiver, the fine cry of Time.

The most moving poem on the subject is one from the 1930
The Proof, "The Longe Nightes When Every Creature." The
title as well as the first four lines of the poem come
from Chaucer's "Complaint to his Lady," yet Winters bor­
rows for the sake of bitter irony. His "lady" is a naked
girl and his "complaint" is not concerned with her possible
inconstancy, but about a world that is moment by moment
falling apart. In the poem he realizes, to his horror,
the full scope of the confusion and anguish this subatomic flux, which modern science was revealing to him, can cost the human being. The whole poem follows:

Through the long
winter nights when every
beast turns steaming
in his sleep
I lie alone an eddy
fixed, alive with
change that is not I:
slow torture
this to lie and hold
to mind against the stream
with nought
to seize on: the bed trembles
to my blood. I break
the night, I break
the soundless flow, I
cry and turn and the cold
gathers round my hands
and thickened brain:
a girl lay naked
in my bed
with cold small arms
and wept. The humming tongue
burrows the nightwind
of the nightingale
that comes no more.

We have here a reversal of the mystical position found in such poems as "Alone." Instead of fusion, there is conflict and opposition between the poet and the nightworld surrounding him with its soundless flow of change. He sees it as a force foreign and hostile to his own nature, against which he is afforded no protection. The traditional symbolism of the nightingale, with its suggestion of human suffering transformed into art and song, is inoperative in this world of "terrifying confusion,"
as Fields characterizes it, and the naked girl in the poem appears more as a fellow victim than as a consoling lover. Even the identity of the poet is threatened, "insofar as the observer," as Fields notes, "is a participant in the flux."^17

The conclusion of such a scientific philosophy of pure process is an irrationalistic monism, as Winters soon discovered for himself. It resembles in several essential points, ironically enough, the solipsistic mysticism discussed earlier, as well as the aestheticism of The Testament of a Stone, so that Winters made no intellectual progress, as it were, when he shifted to science away from the solipsism and mysticism of his first phase. All three, as well as the aestheticism, are noted for either the negation or the absence of the intellect. In the scientific theories change is so radical that nothing remains constant long enough for the intellect to know it and define it; the intellect itself is in such a condition of flux that it cannot know itself from one second to the next. No intellectual continuities can survive in such a world. As we have seen, both the solipsistic mysticism and the aestheticism negate the intellect in favor of the fused image, so that the distinction between observer and observed object is deliberately destroyed and a monistic vision consciously sought after, as far, that is, as this is humanly possible.
The monism of the scientific theories is equally apparent. Robert Jungk in his *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns: the story of the men who made the bomb* pinpoints the dilemma the scientists were creating for themselves, and one which Winters was grimly duplicating in poetry: "In the act of observing subatomic processes it was no longer possible to draw any clear distinction between the subject (that which observed) and the object (that which was observed)." Another scientist, one whom Winters, according to Thomas Parkinson, was reading at the time, P. W. Bridgman, states the same problem in *The Logic of Modern Physics*: "From the operational point of view it is meaningless to attempt to separate 'nature' from 'knowledge of nature.'" With this loss of any valid distinction between subject and object, a loss we saw occurring in such a poem as "Alone" and in *The Testament of a Stone*, all other distinctions immediately disappear. The physical world, as a consequence, is plunged into one undifferentiated state of pure flux. There is no other for the intellect to work with.

More was at stake than the physical structure of the universe; the "new science" destroyed in the minds of many thinkers any reality moral and intellectual values might possess. In this regard, Winters was influenced by the theories of Jacques Loeb, "a biochemist with a strict mechanical interpretation of natural phenomena."
who was at the Rockefeller Institute in Chicago when Winters was growing up there. Loeb was an uncompromising materialist for whom, in time, the "inner life of man should be amenable," as he predicted, "to physico-chemical analysis."21 The main outline of his theories can be seen in the following typical passage from The Mechanistic Conception of Life, first published in 1912:

If our existence is based on the play of blind forces and only a matter of chance; if we ourselves are only chemical mechanism—how can there be ethics for us? The answer is, that our instincts are the root of our ethics and that the instincts are just as hereditary as is the form of our body. We eat, drink and reproduce not because mankind has reached an agreement that this is desirable, but because, machine-like we are compelled to do so.22

If, at one level, Winters was repelled by this sort of thing, nevertheless he saw it at the time as an accurate description of the universe. The only alternative, as he saw the situation, was the illusion of religion. Nearly all the Fire Sequence and a great number of the experimental poems in The Proof are heavily indebted to Loeb, in particular to the idea of the crystal as being intermediate between organic and inorganic matter.23 Throughout his correspondence with Hart Crane and Allen Tate in the twenties and early thirties Winters insisted, at times dogmatically, on the validity of Loeb's theories. His two friends, though, remained stubbornly skeptical, Crane calling them "pure hocus-pocus"24 and Tate viewing

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them as destructive of any coherent metaphysical, religious system, the absence of which he saw then and for the rest of his life as a severe handicap for the modern poet.

Yet Winters slowly became aware of the bleakness of the alternatives confronting him. Such an awareness is implied in a letter Crane wrote Winters in August of 1927: "I have . . . come to about the same conclusions regarding the present cul-de-sac of modern science and their drift that you voice in your letter." By 1929 this objection had become articulate in a poem first published in his own magazine, *The Gyroscope*, in May of that year, first titled "The Countryless: Refugees of Science," then retitled "The Invaders" for *Collected Poems*. The "invaders," as Winters informs us in a footnote to the poem, are the modern physical scientists:

They have won out at last and laid us bare,
The demons of the meaning of the dead,
Stripped us with wheel and flame. Oh, where they tread,
Dissolves our heritage of earth and air!
Till as a locomotive plunges through
Distance that has no meaning and no bound
Thundering some interminable sound
To inward metal where its motion grew--

Grew and contracted down through infinite
And sub-atomic roar of Time on Time
Toward meaning that its changing cannot find;
So stripped of color of an earth, and lit
With motion only of some inner rime,
The naked passion of the human mind.

Yet during all his experimental poetry these demons possessed Winters. The cul-de-sac they were leading him
into, without his knowing the name for it at the time, was nominalism, the anti-intellectual doctrine which says all universals, and consequently all knowledge, are only names with no reference to reality. We have seen how no intellectual survivals are possible in a philosophy or science of pure process. All ideas, if they are referential, hence true-to-something, presuppose continuities in the real world. When these "continuities" are consumed, as they are in the Heraclitean flux of modern science, then of necessity ideas collapse back into mere subjective impressions, or else become, when they are articulated, the *flatus vocis* of medieval philosophy. This is certainly true of such a poem as "The Longe Nightes When Every Creature." There the poet can have no way of understanding his dilemma, which necessitates the use of ideas; his mind has nothing to hold onto, and he can only cry out ineffectually against the night-world invading and consuming him.

Yet only to a certain extent is the designation of nominalism an accurate one. This is a world of violence and extreme deprivation which Winters is describing. The "subatomic" change that is undermining it is so total that the very identity and integrity of the *res* of nominalism are called into question. In fact, the only "thing" that seems to be real in such a world is the undifferentiated process of change itself, silent, constant, and
seamless. By the time he came to write *Primitiveness and Decadence* he will call this state, borrowing a term from the criticism of Allen Tate, Pure Quality, and will give it, not an exclusively philosophical designation, but a theological one as well, evil.

Behind all of Winters' later objections to romanticism lies his belief that its final conclusion is this Pure Quality. He thought its cultivation of the emotions at the expense of the mind, its appeal to the irrational, its abandonment of the human to the exclusively natural, were all so many approaches to Pure Quality, which if carried out and acted upon would result in disintegration. The suicide of his friend Hart Crane became an emblem for such a conclusion, and nearly all his latter essays will be studies of approaches to and realizations of some form of mental suicide. *In Defense of Reason* is a kind of intellectual *Inferno*. One also thinks of the sea in "The Slow Pacific Swell," "heaving and wrinkled in the moon, and blind," and the swarming green world of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," which would graft the thick, rapid growth of laurel in the bone of the knight. The value of the classical poet, on the other hand, will consist in his possessing enough mind to save himself from such a condition of blind change that was first revealed to Winters by the modern scientists. Consequently, poetry will be looked upon as a sort of spiritual discipline by
which one's human identity can be protected and preserved. Yet during the twenties, while he was writing his experimental poetry, Winters did not possess this mind. His aesthetic and scientific theories both made it impossible. Since he was incapable of merely theoretically entertaining an idea--inevitably he lived it through--the result for him was a nightmare that at times brought him close to actual madness.

3. Death

The alternative to sub-atomic flux for the early Winters was the stasis of death, the only absolute he knew at the time. Images of fire, bees, and grass, symbolizing life and change, alternate with those of stone, ice, and bare hills, representing death. He was obsessed with one as with the other; consequently, death assumes almost a palpable presence in the early poems, and weaves itself into their very texture.

This obsession was not imaginary or literary. As I have already indicated, much of the early poetry was written under the threat of death from tuberculosis, a disease that precipitated then the same terror as cancer does today--too frequently it was terminal or totally incapacitating. His third book, The Bare Hills, comes out of the time he spent as a schoolteacher, immediately after his release
from the sanatorium in Santa Fe, in the coal-mining towns of Madrid and Los Cerrillos, New Mexico, where death, as we find out, was frequent and commonplace. "Accidents, many fatal, were common in the mines," Winters informs us in the Introduction to the *Early Poems*: "Drunken violence was a daily and nightly occurrence; mayhem and murder were discussed with amusement."27 This forms the background for one of his later poems, "The Journey," written after the experimental phase:

These towns are cold by day, the flesh of vice
Raw and decisive, and the will precise;
At night the turbulence of drink and mud,
Blue glare of gas, the dances dripping blood,
Fists thudding murder in the shadowy air. . . .

Facing the possibility of dying himself and surrounded by murder and accident in these barely settled towns of the Southwest, Winters with reason became acutely sensitive to death, which he saw as a presence always just beneath the surface of things, a "brink of darkness," as he calls it in his short story of that title. It was an immediate problem he had to deal with, in isolation, without benefit of family, friends, religion, or any sort of philosophical consolation, and it provoked in him some rather complex emotions that have, I think, important philosophical implications. Consider the following passages taken from each successive phase of his experimental period:
Death goes before me on his hands and knees,
And we go down among the bending trees.

Weeping I go and no man gives me ease... .

My hands are cold, my lips are thin and dumb.
Stillness is like the beating of a drum.
from "Death Goes Before Me"

My hair is smooth with death
And whirls above my brain.
from Two Dramatic Interludes for Puppets

The steady courage
of the humming oil drives back the
darkness as I drive back sweating death;
from out a body stricken by this thought, I
watch the night grow turgid on the stair--
I, crumbling, in the crumbling brain of man.
from "Prayer Beside A Lamp"

Night. Night the terrible. Where niggers die
unseen and sink like stones.
from "The Passing Night"

I came down about seven, passed the coffin in
the first gray of the dawn, moved through the
motionless cold, which seemed to be gathering
heavier about it and which was somehow identi-
fied with the thin sweet odor, perhaps the odor
of death, perhaps of the flowers, of which the
casket itself, with its frosty tent, might have
been the visible core.

At noon I returned. As I opened the door
into the darkened hall, the casket awaited me,
the sweet odor deepening on the still air. I
was a trifle sickened; it affected me like the
smell of ether. I had lunch and returned to
my teaching. The casket awaited me in the
darkness at five o'clock. . . . I went up to
my room and lay down but could not sleep. I
was beginning to shudder a little as I passed
the body. . . . The thought of her inexpressible
solitude filled me with pity.
from "The Brink of Darkness"

The attitude revealed in these passages is a rather

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complicated one. While recognizing death as natural and inevitable, the poet opposes it, nevertheless, as something insidiously foreign to the human being. He sees it both as a naturalistic phenomenon, the repulsive details of which he faces and spells out, and a state of spiritual deprivation. In fewest words, for Winters it is an evil, and its presence in the world, as we shall see later, suggests actual demonic forces operating behind, and using, natural processes, an idea he took quite seriously then as well as after his classical reformation. At one and the same time death is natural and unnaturally obscene, and the emotions it inspires in him are pity and horror. It is also important to note that this attitude remains constant throughout all of Winters' career. The only thing that changes is the degree of control he has over it. In his youth he had no intellectual or stylistic means of exercising much control; consequently, the attitude often assumes almost hysterical proportions, such as we see, I think, in "Prayer Beside A Lamp."

We can see further implications of Winters' response to death by contrasting it to two philosophical attitudes which he has been accused by some critics of totally embracing to the detriment of his poetry. I mean specifically the accusation that he is either some cold-blooded rationalist or an emotionless "pagan" stoic, for whom the plain style of the early Renaissance masters comprises
the essentials of all good poetry. The basic idea is that of a mind exercising such a tight control that it kills off all emotion. Yet whatever he was--his philosophical position is at times extremely difficult to pinpoint precisely--his attitude to death, the terror it provoked in him, proves he is neither a stoic nor a rationalist.

The basic tenet of rationalism is not only that the mind is innately capable of apprehending truth, but that the universe itself is so rationally arranged that its essentially mechanical laws readily reveal themselves to the enquiring mind. The universe in Winters' early as well as late poems is at best chaotic; in fact, in some of the early ones, because of the presence of death, it is demonic. As far as the mind's apprehension of truth is concerned, Winters held no such belief during the first part of his career; it is true he changed his position after 1928, but the supposedly absolute claims he makes for the mind, I think, have been exaggerated. He was too much aware of the "hard familiar wrinkles of the earth," of the coarse and the intractable in human life, of the mind's entanglement in such, to make naive pretenses for the human intellect. But more to the subject at hand, I would maintain it was his recognition of death, the sense of the tragic it caused, the metaphysical horror it inspired in him, that prevented him from taking seriously
the glib ambitions and pretensions of a thorough rationalist, for whom, after all, death caused no wrinkle on the smooth surface of his thought. One thinks of Hume and the apparent fearlessness with which he anticipated his own death, a state of mind that so baffled and fascinated Boswell and so exasperated Johnson, who confessed "he never had a moment in which death was not terrible to him." In this regard, as in many others, Winters is closer to Johnson than to Hume and his kind.

Winters' response to death also disproves the claim that he is a strict stoic, both emotionless and archaic. The stoic saw man and nature as bound together and governed by the same inscrutable law, acquiescence to which affords man his only happiness. The essential spirit of his philosophy is deterministic. Since death has been ordained by this law, and, more importantly, since it liberates man from the impediment of a body, it should, consequently, be no legitimate source of anguish for the human mind. We have already seen how Winters' position is the opposite of such an attitude. It is true that the calmness with which he can write about death toward the end of his life does resemble in certain of its aspects the stoic ideal of "apathy," yet we shall discover that the calmness is deceptive and that underneath its surface are intense emotions Winters honestly accepts. Finally, he was, of course, no determinist.
Notwithstanding earlier lapses into mysticism and scientism, he maintained all his mature life an uncompromising dichotomy between nature and human consciousness, and, following the lead of H. B. Parkes, who influenced him considerably during and after his transition from experimental to conventional poetry, he saw limited areas in human consciousness where freedom was possible.

In fact, there is little or nothing of the "classical" in Winters' attitude toward death, though there is a great deal of it in other areas of his thought. E. R. Dodds, the English historian and classicist, argues in The Greeks and the Irrational with convincing historical support that the classical notion of death is puritanical. He locates the pre-philosophical source of this puritanism in the shamanistic tradition of northern Greece, which ultimately he says was Asiatic in origin. The dissociation of the soul from the body, which the shaman experiences in his trance, led men to think of the soul as enjoying a limitless, superior existence apart from the body, and suffering a sort of shameful confinement when embodied. Hence, the "puritanism," since the whole experience presupposes an opposition between body and soul. The philosophers take this notion further; in nearly all of them the soul's union with the body is viewed as an intellectual and spiritual disaster from which only death can extricate man. Death then is seen as a purgative discipline which
frees an encumbered soul, and philosophy becomes, especially in Stoicism and neo-Platonism, a preparation for and a love of death.

Christianity radically reverses this situation. The idea of a soul entombed in a body, or of a soul using a body, as a workman his tools, is transformed into the idea of the "person," created in the image of God and containing within itself both body and soul so intimately connected that Aquinas thought the soul separated from the body suffered a state of deprivation. The body then became an essential part of the definition of man, and its resurrection a matter of dogma. Death, temporarily breaking up the body-soul composite, is consequently seen as evil. As Martin P. Nilsson, the Swedish historian, says in Greek Piety, "For the pagan, death was the inevitable end of human life; for the Christian, it was essentially an evil, the wages of sin." 32

As I hope will be apparent later on, Winters looked on the body-soul union ("mind" frequently replacing "soul" in his vocabulary) as a source of potential disorder, hence of evil. So often in both his poetry and criticism the mind is spoken of as attaining its end, not because of the body, but in spite of it. He never saw the body as perfecting the soul, as Aquinas, for instance, does. In this respect he is following the classical "puritanical" tradition, but he radically departs from it in viewing
death, not as a liberation or purgation of the mind, but as its annihilation. If, like the classical philosopher but unlike the Christian, he sees the entanglement of the mind in a body as an intellectual liability, on the other hand, he can only view its disentanglement in death with the metaphysical horror mentioned above. It is a horror because it means the annihilation of the mind, which for Winters is the single source of all the good man can know or experience.

Winters' attitude to death is essentially Christian in origin. It resembles St. Paul more than Plato in the sense of deprivation, even of violation, which death suggests in his mind. An air of evil always surrounds it, an "unholy quiet," as he calls it in one of his late poems, which recalls, admittedly at some distance, the Pauline notion that death results from sin. And the compassion it provokes in him, the "inexpressible pity" of "The Brink of Darkness," is closer in spirit to the New Testament than to the Phaedo. This is apparent even in such a poem as "Tragic Love" from the Fire Sequence, which has an explicit, even violent, non-Christian context.

1.
The girl went out
and died amid a
cold that clung
like flame.

    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.

11.
Then between her thighs
the seeded grass
of airy summer--
the slow hairlike flame.

The seeded grass of death, with its hairlike flame
working between the girl's thighs and therefore suggesting
sexual violation is the embodiment of evil. The sense
of outrage and anguish underlying this vision is motivated
on the poet's part by the belief that a God should have
saved her. But the only God present is the seasonal one
of pantheism whose "advent" only covers a blackened corpse.
The poem reminds one of Baudelaire's "Une Charogne,"
which most likely influenced Winters--he had mastered the
French 19th century by the time he wrote "Tragic Love,"
and Baudelaire dominated his thinking both before and
after the transition of 1928. In Baudelaire's poem we
have the same exposed corpse, the same idea of death as
cette horrible infection:
Rappelez-vous l'objet que vous vîmes, mon âme,
Cé beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,

Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
Brûlante et suant les poisons,
Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.

In both poems death is viewed as an obscene and repulsive nothingness, connected in an intimate way with evil. This vision can only be explained by a prior Christian context, one which Baudelaire accepted but which Winters, for reasons of his own, rejected.

4. The Absence of God

The world of The Early Poems we have been describing is a fortuitous and meaningless one. In the absence of God or any kind of informing principle, philosophical or otherwise, there is nothing to provide it with cause or purpose. Whatever "mind" there is in it is found only in man himself, and he is so totally a participant, and victim of, constant and violent change that his mind is incapable of furnishing such a principle. Besides, since the early Winters considered intellectual concepts as destructive of the imagistic stuff poetry is made of, he would have rejected the principle even if it were available to him. Of necessity, then, his world must drift in a nominalistic disorder, so that all the traditional answers

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and consolations from religion and philosophy become inoperative in its atheistic purposelessness. The situation is described most movingly in a poem from *The Bare Hills*, "The Moonlight":

I waited on,  
In the late autumn moonlight,  
A train droning out of thought--  
The mind on moonlight  
And on trains  
Blind as a thread of water  
Stirring through a cold like dust,  
Lonely beyond all silence,  
And humming this to children,  
The nostalgic listeners in sleep,  
Because no guardian  
Strides through distance upon distance,  
His eyes a web of sleep.

Howard Kaye describes the theme of this poem as that of "a nostalgic longing for a missing purpose, or God, in the universe," and goes on to say of it:

The trains are blind because no purpose directs them; they are pure mechanism. The thread of water, glistening in the moonlight, evokes a sense of beauty mingled with regret, because, inhuman, purely physical, it is "blind." A cold-like dust suggests a viscous, opaque cold: intense, resistant, and featureless.

In other poems dealing with the absence or non-existence of God, nostalgia is replaced by either ironic contempt or desperate flippancy. In "The Streets" the poet first meets Christ, quarrels with Him over some
trivial matter, then consigns Him "to the flame"; later he meets God the Father in a streetcar, but both are too embarrassed to speak, and each turns away from the other. In "The Vanquished" Christ is discovered drunk in a gully where, amid deathly white stones, he shudders mindlessly into sleep. As a wind-storm rages outside in "Midnight Wind," the poet finds that the "naked fact" of his room, with its brute passivity of wood, is more real to him than God. And in "To the Crucified" a slowly consuming fire eats at the crucified God until He becomes one with the flame, which finally shrinks and then only licks into the surrounding blackness, the poet all the time reading his newspaper by its glare; at the end, after God has been annihilated in the fire, the speaker is left alone in a "rushing wake of sound."

In fact, the ideas of God and non-existence are so closely linked in Winters' mind that God often simply becomes synonymous with death. This is true of "Hill Burial," the last poem of The Bare Hills, about which Kenneth Fields says, "the quiet association, in two lines, of water, stone, and air, gives a sense of finality to the last line in which the lowered corpse sinks like a drowned man": 36

Jesus Leal
Who aimed at solitude,
The only mean,
Was borne by men.
Wet air,
The air of stone.
He sank to God.

The same association appears in "Strength Out of Sweetness," which in the first edition of The Proof contains an inscription identifying the dead woman as Elizabeth Reid, the one who figures in "The Brink of Darkness" as "Mrs. Stone." He is describing the appearance of her face as she lies in her coffin, after having died in an agony no one around her at the time noticed:

Three nights I sat beside
your bier with two old women,
graying grimaces
now stiffening toward death—
I, cold with grief.

They drew the curtains
back to let me see—
it struck me
dumb that I should know you.

Your two sons
stood there with forearms
great
from tearing at the rooted
hills. They could not see.

But I
had known; had passed
your chair and had not
paused to speak--your face
aflow with agony. Now stopped.

And basic, clear. All
had passed over it. And this
lay bare: rock
rigid unto God.

I stood unseen.
Thus, from the very beginning God, through His association with death, becomes linked in Winters' mind with the Pure Quality to which the flux of the new science, as we have seen, had reduced the material world. Since the mystical monism discussed in the first section similarly destroys distinctions and objectivity, and makes the same reduction, all three concepts--death, mysticism, and God--become intimately connected in his mind. Though he turned what has been called a "reluctant theist" sometime after 1928 and viewed God as philosophically dissociated from a merely subjective existence or the non-existence of death, yet traces of the earlier linkage persist to the very end of his career. He had an instinctive aversion to anything either below or above the capabilities of the human mind; often identifying one with the other, he saw both as threatening presences against which he felt compelled to protect himself, even when he was forced philosophically to recognize God as the guarantee for that mind's reaching any truth.

To mitigate, as it were, the atheism of The Early Poems there are incidental allusions here and there in the book to what some critics have designated as actual belief in pantheism. We have already noted the seasonal god of "Tragic Love" who returns in the heat and grasses of spring, as well as the sort of "consolation" he offers
the dead girl. The same god figures in a beautiful line in "Man Regards Eternity in Aging":

Now rotting time again leaves bare the god.

He also appears in "The Crystal Sun":

.. and my God
Lay at my feet
And spoke from out
My shadow, eyed me
From the bees... .

Some critics have taken this more seriously than I think it deserves. Kaye, for instance, sees "Alone" as just as concerned with "Whitmanian pantheism as with .. . solipsism."38 Yet it seems to me Winters is dealing with something different from pantheism in the poem. It is important to note that in those poems that do contain explicit references to pantheism the context of each is more often than not bitterly ironic and remote from actual belief, even poetic belief, whatever that is finally. If this god does exist, Winters seems to be saying in such a poem as "Tragic Love," he is evil because he resides in, and causes, a world involving human pain and suffering; his non-existence, therefore, is the more acceptable alternative.

Yet there are a few poems in the Fire Sequence and The Proof, such as "Coal: Beginning and End," "0 Sun," "Remembered Spring," and "Wild Sunflower," that are almost
Nietzschean celebrations of the Life Force, a most uncharacteristic mode even for the early Winters, and an argument, based on them, could be made for what I think would have to be only a vague, metaphoric tendency toward pantheism. He does have a great deal of respect for the apparent pantheism found in the "primitive" religion of the American Indians. Writing in a 1928 review of The Path on the Rainbow and American Love Lyrics and Other Verse and commenting on the practical nature of Indian religion, he says of their gods: they "are not spiritual qualities, but natural forces: they are not in any sense abstractions, but are things one can lay one's hands on and control." Yet each of these gods is too limited and localized to be the comprehensive god of pantheism in any real sense of the word. And Winters' respect for them is an insufficient reason to suppose he thought them applicable to his own situation. That situation as he saw it, at least until sometime after 1928, was atheistic. Consequently, in the absence of any cause, final or otherwise, and because of the scientific theories already discussed in the second section, the world of the early poems is bound to be the fortuitous and meaningless one Winters registered it as being.

He remedied the situation with a substitute religion, one centered around a different sort of godhead, whose worship he took seriously indeed. Everything we know
about him, judging both from his poetry and criticism, as well as the few facts we currently possess about his biography, suggests he had a kind of temperamental affinity for the absolute. "His sensibility," Kaye remarks, "could not rest content in a universe where no final answers were possible." He gives voice to this metaphysical restlessness in "Satyric Compliant," one of his last free verse poems, marred by melodrama and an almost hysterical conclusion, yet valuable in that it bluntly expresses his state of mind prior to the 1928 shift in thought and technique:

Born to die for man. Born to believe, to be believed.

Born as he might have been with a desire for truth and order, he nevertheless lived in a world which his science and philosophy had reduced, with the exception of one important area, to an appalling imprecision and disorder. That one area was poetry itself, and it is around poetry that he constructs a religion of his own, much in the fashion of so many of the Victorians before him. I am using Winters’ own terms for the affair. "The artist whose deity is art," he writes in the 1924 Testament of a Stone, "has a religion as valid and as capable of producing great art as any religion of the past. . . . As a conscious and intelligent being, no other religion
will be possible for him, and he cannot, because of his religion, be called a heretic."  

Another observation occurs in The Testament of a Stone which confirms the religious nature of poetry for Winters beyond any doubt. Even allowing for the fervor and hyperbole to which a twenty-four year old is admittedly liable, it is, I submit, one of the most curious passages in all of theoretical criticism. It goes beyond any of the most extreme pronouncements made by French artists in the 19th century, including Flaubert. Because of its importance I should like to quote it in full:

A poem is a state of perfection at which a poet has arrived by whatever means. It is a stasis in a world of flux and indecision, a permanent gateway to waking oblivion, which is the only infinity and the only rest. It has no responsibilities except to itself and its own perfection—neither to the man who may come to it with imperfect understanding nor to the mood from which it may originally have sprung. It is not a means to any end, but is in itself an end, and it, or one of the other embodiments of beauty, is the only end possible to the men of intellect.  

It is almost as if Winters here considers poetry as uncreated, so totally does he invest it with the aseity of a godhead. In fact, the attributes he gives it—perfection, infinity, undeprived sufficiency in itself and for those who submit to its study, or worship, as the case might be—are identical with those found in any standard Medieval discussion of the Christian God. The only
one missing is existence itself, a fact which will be important for my argument later on. We should also notice what can only be called the tyranny of this god. He, or one of his surrogate embodiments of beauty, is the only end possible for an intelligent man. All the other liberal arts and sciences are to be discarded in favor of this god before whom there are to be no other gods. One is reminded of Flaubert's famous statement in the Letters: "Art, like the God of the Jews, feasts on holocausts."\textsuperscript{43}

It might be objected that he is being figurative and rhetorical in the manner of one arguing intensely for his point. If so, it is the first and last time he was so in a statement of principle such as this passage is. Both early and late, Winters is one of the most precise users of language in our literature. He knew exactly what he wanted to say, and he said it with little or no rhetorical embellishment. I see no reason to doubt he said exactly what he meant to say here.

We should take into account, though, the artistic and intellectual background against which Winters was working in the twenties when The Testament of a Stone was written. Throughout all of the 19th century, and during the first part of the 20th, there occurred a veritable profusion of excessive claims made on behalf of poetry. One thinks of Flaubert and the Symbolists
in France, with Rimbaud insisting on the poet's ability, magical in nature, to achieve supernatural epiphanies through the derangement of the senses. In America, there was the idea of the poet as pantheistic seer, with expanded, and still expanding, consciousness, which Emerson theorized about and Whitman, and later Hart Crane, put into practice. The movement was not restricted to avant-garde poets; it affected the schools and traditions of all artistic persuasions. Poetry in the minds of many of the intellectuals and artists became a sort of substitute religion, and in the process became the "spilt religion" of T. E. Hulme's famous remark. Winters was bound to be affected by these trends; they were part of the intellectual air he breathed. Yet at the same time he made of them something of his own.

It is true that Winters after 1928 modified this extreme position, toning down its ardor and qualifying its claims, but he never abandoned entirely its essential spirit. We shall see that when he became a theist, however reluctantly, he defined God, not in terms of existence, as Thomas does, but in those of thought, in the manner of Aristotle. He considered approximations to that divinity possible on the part of man, notwithstanding the almost monstrous discipline they would require. These approximations, he thought, were accomplished, not by means of grace or of any of the other traditionally religious
avenues, about which he always maintained a vigorous suspicion, but by thought itself. As we learn from his criticism, the highest form of human thought for Winters was embodied in poetry, primarily because all aspects of language were incorporated in its making, the denotative as well as the connotative, and because all the faculties of man, the mental and the emotional, were involved in its study. It was, for him, the most complete form of judgement the mind could make and through it man was enabled in however a limited way to participate in the only divinity he could know. Thus, poetry became a spiritual discipline and some connection between it and divinity can be found in late Winters as well as early.

5. Conclusions: A Note on Demonism

Allen Tate has described the main outline of Winters' poetry in the following metaphoric terms: "the poet stands perpetually at the edge of an abyss (or at the 'brink of darkness'), which he knows to be an abyss in spite of the fact that everybody else is eagerly trying to fall into it."45 Years before Tate's remark, Agnes Lee Freer used similar language. In a review of The Bare Hills, which appeared in Poetry in 1928, she said: "He is full of the horror of death and the pain of history, as indeed anyone must be who thinks sincerely." She
went on to speak of the flow of time as being "almost a physical sensation of pain for him." Winters himself insisted on such a tragic vision as the proper subject for the modern poet. He does so most notably in a passage in "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit," first published in 1929 and consequently a "bridge" essay between the early and the mature Winters. He is speaking in theoretical terms, but the remarks are particularly applicable to himself:

The facts of life at best are disheartening; the vision of life which man has little by little constructed (or perhaps one should say stripped bare) is all but crushing. To evade the facts and attempt bluff vigor, as Browning often seems to do, is not convincing to the man who has experienced the imaginative facts. The artist who is actually ignorant of the metaphysical horror of modern thought or who cannot feel it imaginatively--and there are many such--is of only a limited, a more or less decorative value.

The "metaphysical horror of modern thought" is indeed the subject matter of The Early Poems. Yet one aspect of that horror eluded his understanding at the time, notwithstanding his comprehensive grasp of its other aspects and the acuteness with which he rendered them in language. This particular horror consisted of Winters' illusion that he possessed some degree of control over his subject; whereas, in reality he was not possessing anything, but was himself being possessed and, in the process, spiritually and intellectually destroyed. His
aesthetics, and everything else we have discussed in this chapter, made no degree of control possible for him, so that his subject matter, because of its inevitable tendency to invade and overwhelm, ended up controlling him, dictating extreme tension and violence. The poems after The Bare Hills are especially characterized by hysterical fragmentation. Their actual movement, as Fields has noted, had become nervously more rapid, in contrast to the slower, more measured movement of The Immobile Wind and The Bare Hills. It is no exaggeration to say that during the last phase of his experimental poetry a kind of demon possessed him finally, with Winters locked into an aesthetics that blinded him to the possession. Only gradually, beginning sometime in 1928, did he become aware of the exact nature of his situation.

Apart from such possession, there were times, both early and late, when he considered the possibility that the ultimate nature of the universe itself was partially demonic. It is a fact that the theological definition of a demon as formulated by Thomas Aquinas became an important concept in his criticism, particularly in his understanding of the Romantic genius, such as Rimbaud and Hart Crane, whom Winters thought of as not existing more than existing, and only valuable in those restricted areas where they do indeed exist. I have heard from
private sources that he had a demon in mind, such, I suppose, as is defined by Aquinas, when he wrote the 1936 poem "An October Nocturne." There is also the rather cryptic note appended to the Swallow Pamphlets edition of "The Brink of Darkness," written on the authority of the author by the editor: "Winters says that this story is a study of the hypothetical possibility of a hostile supernatural world and its effect on the perceptions of a consideration of this possibility." In the story itself, toward the end, there is the following statement made by the narrator who for all intents and purposes is Winters himself: "I thought back over the past months, of the manner in which I had been disturbed, uncentered, and finally obsessed as if by an insidious power. I remembered that I had read somewhere of a kind of Eastern demon who gains power over one only in proportion as one recognizes and fears him."

Grosvenor Powell takes this passage and in his study of Winters, _Language as Being in the Poetry of Yvor Winters_, qualifies it somewhat, then applies it to the whole of his intellectual life:

Although Winters believed in a unified universe, he also held a Manichaean position with the regard to the influence of the supernatural on human experience. He felt that we are beleaguered in some undefined way by evil. He could not determine whether this evil is merely a product of our minds or whether it is, in some sense, demonic.
The Early Poems themselves furnish further evidence. So often it is not to particular passages one can refer, but to the overall tone of a specific poem, to its almost preternatural vividness and specificity of imagery. Yet there are some explicit passages on the subject, all from The Bare Hills. In one of them, "Moonrise," the object of the demonic invasion is a dog, an animal Winters was particularly fond of—he kept and trained Airedales all his life, but literally lived with them during the periods of isolation before his marriage.53

Upon the heavy
lip of earth
the dog
at
moments is
possessed and screams:

The rising moon draws
up his blood and hair.

A dog also figures in "The Cold Room," but the human presence of the poet has been added by implication, and it is he who registers, and is affected by, the hallucinatory "dream" that dominates the deadly quiet room. About the poem Powell makes the following observation: "The poem could hardly be more schematic in its exploration of the relationship between being and the invasion of nonbeing. The dog is relatively imperious to invasion; possessing less than human consciousness, it is less vulnerable."54 The implication is, of course, that it
is the poet's own human consciousness which makes him the more proper object of the "invasion." The whole poem follows:

The dream
stands
in the night
above unpainted
floor and chair.

The dog is
dead asleep
and
will not move
for god or fire.

And from the
ceiling
darkness bends
a heavy flame.

Finally, "The Barnyard," with its background "the western wasteland and mindlessness," as Powell characterizes it, is permeated by the same undefinable evil we saw operating in the preceding poems. The child's "short fierce cries" as it staggers into "the clotting cold" is a terrifying image of non-human possession, almost animalistic in contrast to the more spiritual predicament of the old man, "wrinkled in the fear of hell." In its intensity it suggests not so much the demonic as the diabolic, which moves in through ice to kill the two creatures:

It was the
spring that left
this rubbish
and these scavengers
for ice to kill—
this old man
wrinkled in
the fear of hell, the
child that staggers
straight into
the clotting cold
with short fierce cries.

His preoccupation with demonism persists just as strongly in his mature poetry as in his early. Two of the most remarkable poems on the subject are "The Werwolf" and "A Petition," which Winters included in Before Disaster but excluded from the Collected Poems he himself edited in 1952, published by Alan Swallow. (They have now reappeared in the 1978 Carcanet-Swallow Collected Poems.) "The Werwolf" is a savage denunciation of his mother, whom he calls the "wolf-bitch who suckled me," and who is seen as flooding the veins of her son with the spume of sin, which "no living tears may dissipate." Her actions, and "the hairy shadow" of her hate, are only explained by demonic possession, the agent of which is symbolized in the poem by the moon, a typical symbol of the irrational for Winters, which "plays acid havoc." In "A Petition," another autobiographical poem, as so many of Winters' poems, in fact, are, the poet has committed some unspecified act of cruelty against his wife, for which he now asks her forgiveness. He explains the cruelty as a result of an inherited evil over which he has no control, an "unkindness from a past," a "bitterness
of crime," which arises inexplicably in the night and which has the power temporarily to possess him. He cannot even assume moral responsibility for the act:

It was not I that spoke;  
The wild fiend moved my tongue.

I shall go into this subject of demonism in more detail later on, and discuss some of the philosophical reasons for Winters' preoccupation with it--it is not the spiritualistic nonsense some readers might too hastily judge it as being. I only bring it up now because it is one of the more important, though slightly foreign, factors in the "metaphysical horror of modern thought," which is the subject matter of The Early Poems, and it should be dealt with in any adequate discussion of these experimental poems, even if it introduces a complicating element of primitiveness into a desperate, peculiarly modern situation.
NOTES


3 Except where noted, all poems quoted in this chapter, as well as in all others, may be found in the *Collected Poems of Yvor Winters* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1978). As the volume is relatively short, and has a table of contents, page references have been omitted. Winters' only short story, "The Brink of Darkness," may also be found in this edition.


7 Winters, "Clarification," 132.


9 My account follows Winters, *Early Poems*, pp. 7-16, already referred to in my Introduction.


13 Kaye, pp. 46-47.

14 Fields, 770-71.

15 Kaye, p. 52.
16 Fields, 771.
17 Fields, 771.
22 Loeb, p. 31.
23 See Parkinson, p. 48.
24 Parkinson, p. 56.
26 Winters, Defense, p. 98.
27 Winters, Early Poems, p. 11.
30 Winters was especially influenced by Parkes' The Pragmatic Test (San Francisco: The Colt Press, 1941), the contents of most of which had first appeared, much earlier than 1941, in Hound and Horn, of which Winters was the Western editor.
36 Fields, 768.
38 Kaye, p. 37.
39 Winters, Uncollected, p. 41.
40 Kaye, p. 46.
41 Winters, Uncollected, p. 196.
42 Winters, Uncollected, p. 195-96.
46 Agnes Lee Freer, "A Poet-Philosopher," Poetry, 32 (1928), 42, 47.
47 Winters, Uncollected, p. 226.
48 Fields, 768.
49 Donald E. Stanford has provided me with this information.
51 Winters, Collected Poems, p. 223.
53 See especially the autobiographical "The Brink of Darkness" in Collected Poems.
54 Powell, pp. 89-90.
55 Powell, p. 89.
CHAPTER II
TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF GOD

1. The Abandonment of Free Verse

In a 1929 review of one of Louise Bogan's books of poems, Winters writes, "The poet of the present age, in order to free himself from the handicap of the philosophical misconceptions of the age, has, I believe, to turn metaphysician in a profound and serious way if he is not to be victimized by false emotions." He goes on to say that once these misconceptions have been eliminated and a "more or less classical dignity of attitude toward human destiny and human experience" has taken their place, the poet's task is not yet finished. Because of pervasive confusion and temptations he continually faces, the poet maintains such an attitude only with "a good deal of effort, suspicion, and trembling."¹

Beginning in 1927, the year he started graduate studies in English and American literature at Stanford University, and continuing up to the 1930 publication of The Proof, with 1928 as the decisive year, Winters himself began the process of turning metaphysician in a

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serious and profound way. The effect of the insights and discoveries he achieved during those years was fundamental and lasted for the rest of his life. Further expansions later on and a few modifications here and there do not alter the basic "classical" pattern that was then established. He saw the benefits of such a pattern as inestimable, even though its cost, as he discovered in his own way, was indeed "effort, suspicion, and trembling."

The immediate result of these studies was the abandonment of free verse. He came to realize the full extent, as he saw it, to which free verse had restricted him to a narrow emotional range, while at the same time that it had excluded him from any understanding or mastery of the particular emotions involved. The concentration upon specialized areas of human perception, usually those bred in a kind of hallucinatory isolation, and unsupported by any rational motivation, had cut him off, he discovered, from the intellectual complexity he was beginning to admire in such poets as Baudelaire, Valéry, Hardy, and Bridges, all of whom were irreproachably traditional in their methods and subject matter. He saw that he never could write a poem like Valéry's "Le Cimetière Marin" or Bridges' "Low Barometer" in free verse written according to the principles of The Testament of a Stone, and, because he now wanted to attempt such poems, he saw no way except to renounce his former methods and adopt others which would make such complexity possible.
At first he attended to the problem of metrics. It is important to note the plural of this word, since Winters considered free verse as having a metrical form of its own, one which he defined and analyzed in the concluding chapter of *Primitivism and Decadence*, and consequently he never viewed his shift to conventional meter as being one from formlessness to form. Even still, the "form" of his free verse presented him with insurmountable difficulties. Its basic metrical foot, such as he saw employed also by poets like William Carlos Williams, H. D., Ezra Pound, and Marianne Moore, consisted of one primary accent with an indeterminate number of secondary accents and an equally indeterminate number of unaccented syllables, the position of which is random and unfixed. Since it was difficult, even at times impossible, to distinguish primary from secondary accents in such a meter, and since the number of unaccented syllables could proliferate at will, as it were, no clearly focused pattern could emerge that would immediately assign some sort of metrical value to even the least important syllable in a poem, so that all is metrically accounted for. If there is no such pattern, significant variations become either impossible or else extremely difficult to achieve. Poetry then becomes an inadequate medium for handling subtle distinctions or achieving any kind of intellectual clarity. The result
inevitably, for the reader, is monotony and, for the poet, a restriction to the initial emotion out of which the poem "grew," an emotion that in the absence of intellectual control is apt to become exclusive and tyrannical.

The possibility for such tyranny is further enhanced by a typical rhetorical device found in most free verse poetry, especially in Winters'. More often than not, the whole poem will consist of only one sentence that piles itself up, as it were, until it reaches a kind of breathless climax. The poet will attempt, of course, to slow the movement down by varying his line-length or breaking the sentence up into such units that either surprise or give pause, but usually the movement is irresistible and will have its own way. Such a device encourages neither development nor complexity, but instead emotional consistency. There can be no development in the "space" which only one sentence gives a poet, nor is there room for complexities. Consequently, the exclusiveness of the emotion is confirmed and given free rein. I do not mean to imply here that all free verse leads to this situation, only that the tendency is there and that Winters fell victim to it time and again.

But more was involved than just meter and rhetorical devices. As a graduate student at Stanford, Winters began an intensive, systematic study of English poetry, beginning with Chaucer and continuing up to the contemporary
scene of his day. He had already mastered French literature, especially the 19th century, and he was also familiar with a good deal of the Spanish and Latin as well. Under the guidance of William Dinsmore Briggs, his major professor at Stanford and one of the chief influences on his thinking at the time, \(^3\) he augmented the poetic studies with readings in the history of ideas, with special emphasis on classical and medieval philosophy, which he saw as still furnishing the background of English poetry up until the first part of the 18th century. All in all, this study revealed to him the full range and power of traditional poetry, and acquainted him with a body of poetry written on assumptions radically different from those operating in his free verse. He also became aware for the first time of the moral and philosophical implications of certain poetic problems he had previously thought were purely technical and aesthetic. The final effect was that the deficiencies of free verse became that much more clearly focused in his mind after he saw its stark contrast to a poetry that respected and acted on the powers of the conscious mind, such as he found, for instance, in the masters of the plain style in the Renaissance. If at first he only instinctively knew something was wrong in his poetry, now he could state reasons and start applying remedies.

This study further enabled him to arrive at an
interpretation of the origin of modern poetry, which Harold Bloom says is his greatest single contribution to critical studies. The dominant idea during the twenties and thirties was that modern poets in their extreme technical and stylistic innovations had achieved a radical breakage with their Romantic predecessors. If they felt the need of legitimizing their poetry by connecting it with a tradition, they usually went to the Metaphysical School of the 17th century to do so--specifically they had in mind John Donne with his irregular meter, his brusque diction, and often violent conceits, all of which they saw as similar to techniques of their own. Winters recognized these similarities, but at the same time he saw radical differences which rendered the similarities superficial and accidental. For him the great dividing line in English poetry occurred sometime toward the middle of the 18th century, when certain ideas centered on Lockean psychology finally predominated over the older traditional conceptions of poetic composition. Before the 18th century poets attempted to organize their poems according to rational principles; the progression from one idea to another in a poem was logical; and the final cause of poetry was conceived as being the moral and intellectual illumination of human experience. During the 19th century these basic principles changed. Then, and afterwards, poetic organization became irrational, the progression
from one idea to another being, not logical, but either associational or imagistic, and the whole aim of poetry became the self-expression of a poetic personality in which the imagination, not reason, was considered the supreme faculty.

Consequently, for Winters the 18th and 19th centuries were of the same piece of cloth. And since he saw the aims and methods of modern poetry as being in no basic disagreement with the anti-intellectual tendencies of the two previous centuries, he judged that poetry to be essentially romantic in spirit, notwithstanding its stylistic similarity, here and there, to certain of the Metaphysical poets. In other words, for Winters the history of English and American literature from the Earl of Shaftsbury to Hart Crane is continuous and unbroken. He is quite aware that this history is various and complicated by extraneous factors that make one period somewhat different from another, yet its basic unity is assured for him by the one idea that remains constant throughout it, the idea, namely, that reason is inimical to the essential spirit of poetry. What replaced reason varies as the history of the three centuries unfolded itself. At first it was merely a distant, theoretical admiration for the primitive and the uncivilized, but by Winters' time it had degenerated into a sort of psychic irrationalism that automatically assumed the superiority of the unconscious over the conscious mind.
Since Winters had lived out these ideas in his free verse and had seen how they had brought him to a state bordering on actual madness, he reacted violently against them once he had traced their history and learned the full extent of their consequences. It would be no exaggeration to say the final consequence he saw quite simply as suicide, terrifyingly illustrated for him by his friend Hart Crane, whose death Winters interpreted as a direct result of Crane's scorn for the conscious mind and his deliberate cultivation of irrational impulses.6

It cannot be doubted that the study of Renaissance poetry, and its classical and medieval philosophical background, helped him to this insight. The poetry of Ben Johnson and Fulke Greville especially should be noted. But some critics, among them Allen Tate,7 have overemphasized this debt to the Renaissance masters and have overlooked who I think is the major influence at this point in his career. I am speaking of Charles Baudelaire, whom Winters considered the first critic of Romanticism. Baudelaire dominates the opening section of the 1929 essay "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit," Winters' first full critical statement of his reaction against Romanticism and modernism. The French poet is praised as the embodiment of that kind of spiritual control still possible for a poet who finds himself in a disintegrating time and wishes to save himself from its
influence. What especially attracted Winters to Baudelaire was a poetic history similar to his own. Baudelaire also had undergone the immersion in sensation, had experienced what he felt to be its deprivation and evil, and had successfully recovered himself from it. Such a recovery and reintegration are precisely what Winters himself was attempting in the late twenties and early thirties. Two other poets should be mentioned in connection with Baudelaire, T. Sturge Moore and Paul Valéry, both of whom had made a recovery from a background quite similar to Baudelaire's and Winters'. For Moore, the background was the English Romantics and the French Symbolists; for Valéry, specifically, the purified obscurity of Mallarmé, who had surgically removed all rational meaning from poetry.

These three poets afforded Winters examples of poetic escape from "the metaphysical horror of modern thought." They form a complex in his mind with the Renaissance poets and certain medieval philosophers, especially Thomas Aquinas, whose pages Winters was beginning to see as packed with the density of human experience understood and illuminated. Renaissance poetry, with its moral and intellectual content and its rational organization of its subject matter, afforded him a stark contrast by which he saw modern poetry, that is, his own poetic inheritance, as coming out of, and continuing, the irrationalism of the Romantic tradition, which for Winters originated in the 18th century.
philosophy of associationalism formulated by John Locke and popularized by the Earl of Shaftsbury. Baudelaire, T. Sturge Moore, and Paul Valéry provided him with examples of how a recovery from such a tradition was possible, but a recovery, it is extremely important to note, that does not return simply to the plainness and abstraction of the older tradition, but one that, still insisting on intellectual content in a poem, attempts to retain and incorporate the imagistic richness of certain Romantic poets, especially the French. In other words, Winters' reformation is not as Draconian as some of his critics would lead one to believe. He still maintains a concern for the image, so essential for Romantic and modern poetry, but instead of cultivating it to the point of inscrutability, he attempts to incorporate it in a poetic structure that is rational in its organization and treatment of subject matter. The result is not, strictly speaking, classical poetry, but what Winters will later call in *Forms of Discovery* "post-Symbolism."

By and large, what the preceding comes to is a new awareness on Winters' part of how a poem can be enriched and made more inclusive by the presence of the intellect. He had seen how the earlier "fusion" of the poet with the object, and the consequent obliteration of the two in the image, had resulted for him in confusion and derangement. With the mind brought into operation, value
shifted from fusion to detachment and understanding, and new areas of human experience were opened for him that hitherto had been sealed off. Three consequences immediately follow. One we have already dealt with, the shift from experimental to conventional meter as the subtler instrument for handling these new areas of experience. The other two concern diction and what Winters calls "poetic convention."

His free verse had been built up of perceptions of sensory experience, the movement from one perception to another in the poem being non-rational and associational. Since it aims at an "untranslatable" originality which mirrors the uniqueness of the particular perception involved, the diction of his free verse tends to be startlingly idiomatic, even at times impenetrably obscure. The reader often has the unmistakable feeling that the poet is straining after a new language, one peculiar to himself and his experience, but that he is forced, as it were, to form that language in the restricting mold of conventional language. Above all, abstractions are avoided as trite substitutes for experience, as inevitably leading to second-rate commentary and moralizing. The only justification for their presence in a poem is a negative one. They point out by contrast imagistic vividness, and Winters calls them in The Testament of a Stone "anti-images," as if their identity consists exclusively
of what they are opposed to, not what they are in themselves.

But Winters realized that the intellect cannot perform any of its operations in those areas of the totally original. It will inevitably be aborted there. By its very nature it can only achieve its end by the recognition of sameness in apparent diversity, and to do so it must abstract common properties from discrete particulars. Its purpose in doing so is not necessarily to devitalize or denature the particular, as so many of the Romantics thought and moderns still do, but to further illuminate it and enrich our understanding of its nature. As Etienne Gilson says in The Unity of Philosophical Experience, "To abstract is not primarily to leave something out, but to take something in, and this is the reason why abstractions are knowledge. Before stretching mathematical methods to non-quantitative objects, one should remember that our abstract notions validly apply to what they keep of reality, not to what they leave out." 8

To apply this principle to the situation in poetry, as Winters finally saw it, we may say that the only justification for abstractions in a poem is the degree of reality they illuminate; that if one wishes to concern oneself with reality, and not the stuff of fantasy, and if one wishes to understand it, one has to use abstractions of some sort; finally, that abstractions, because
of their "common" nature, will inevitably rule out "original" diction to the extent that they make poetic statements accessible to other human beings.

As Winters began to see the validity of these ideas, the diction of his own poetry began to reflect the change. It became less original and more conventional, less obscure and eccentric, more accessible and abstract. But in doing so it never abandoned, except in only a few poems, the imagistic vividness of the earlier free verse method. Nor was there any necessity for it to do so. The ultimate purpose of abstraction for Winters, as for Gilson, is the enrichment of our understanding of human experience, not its cleavage into oppositions and dichotomies. Above all, what he was aiming for was the combination of the intellectual and the emotional, conveyed in a language which possesses, as he says in his essay on Edgar Bowers, a "gentle seriousness in the face of an overpowering perception."9

This change is best illustrated by comparing two poems with somewhat similar thematic content, "Satyric Complaint," written in free verse, and "The Fall of Leaves," written in conventional meter. Both poems take seasonal changes and use them to symbolize interior states of mind, the changes in both cases denoting loss and deprivation. The interesting fact is that they were written within a few years of each other. From "Satyric Complaint":

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Wood broken by new light. Dogteeth of dawn. I live and suffer, twist rootfooted from black street to street, blurred in the brain.

Blunt boats all night groan against granite surge. Wet wind strikes solid on the flesh the cry starts from the heels, on concrete, shatters living bone.

The complete text of "The Fall of Leaves" follows:

The green has suddenly
Divided to pure flame,
Leaf-tongued from tree to tree.
Yea, where we stood it came.

This change may have no name,
Yet it was like a word
Spoken, and none to blame,
Alive where shadow stirred.

So was the instant blurred.
But as we waited there
The slow cry of a bird
Built up a scheme of air.

The vision of despair
Starts at the moment's bound,
Seethes from the vibrant air
With slow autumnal sound

Into the burning ground.

The "quiet seriousness" of this last poem, its intensity and control, its accessibility and its peculiarly effective combination of the imagistic and the abstract, all of which is in contrast to the broken and obscure diction of "Satyric Complaint," illustrate better than anything else the exact nature of Winters' "recovery" from the free verse movement.
We have seen earlier how the metrics of free verse allowed the poet little or no room for significant variation and forced him into maintaining at all cost the initial emotion out of which the poem began. The only modulation available to him was either the diminishment or the intensification of the emotion. And in the absence of any rational justification it was apt to become tyrannical and assume hysterical proportions, especially in the later free verse. The initial emotion, or, as Winters calls it, "assumption of feeling," whether justified or not by a reason assigned to it, is what he designates as "poetic convention." Some poets become habituated to, even imprisoned in, particular conventions and can think of poems in no other terms than those of the convention they feel committed to maintaining at all cost. One thinks of the ecstasy and despair of Hopkins or the visionary hallucination of Rimbaud. The emotional range of these poets, intense as it may be in those particular areas of human experience they are familiar with, is, nevertheless, severely limited. Their intellectual range is even more limited, since the convention they are bound to rejects as a poetic impurity any rational understanding of the emotion involved, an understanding that would necessarily mitigate it and act as a calming agent in the texture of the poem.

Winters himself in his early poems was locked into
such a convention. One of the effects of his turning "metaphysician" in the late twenties was the recognition on his part of the severe limitations, stylistic and thematic, which the conventions available in free verse had imposed on him. Concomitantly, he realized the existence of other conventions, ones more flexible and inclusive of wider ranges of human experience. Robert Bridges seems especially important in this connection. In Primitivism and Decadence Winters discusses Bridges' "Eros," and notes how the convention Bridges chose allowed for rational motivation of the particular emotion involved, and that the rational element in no way weakens or destroys the emotion, but instead quietly strengthens it. The emotional range is also extended as a result of such motivation. One feels somehow that the feeling in the poem is more "normal," less wilful and eccentric than that in Rimbaud or Hopkins, that there is more in the poems to which common readers can respond.

Winters calls this convention "tradition," and in Primitivism and Decadence he fully defines it:

One may describe traditional poetry positively by saying that it possesses these closely related qualities: 1.) equivalence of motivation and feeling; 2.) a form that permits a wide range of feeling; 3.) a conventional norm of feeling which makes for a minimum of "strain"; 4.) a form and a convention which permits the extraction from every unit of language of its maximum content, both of connotation and of denotation; that is, a form and a convention which are in the highest degree economical, or efficient.10

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It is this convention which Winters adopts sometime in the late twenties. Through it he is enabled to appropriate the powers of the conscious mind, and the effect in his poetry is immediate and obvious. A calmness and complexity take the place of violence and hysteria:

Music and strength of art  
Beneath long winter rain  
Have played the living part,  
With the firm mind for gain.

Nor is the mind in vain.

2. Poetry and Truth

All the changes we have been discussing, the shift from free verse to traditional meter, the positive use of abstract language, the adoption of a traditional convention, possess in Winters' mind one underlying element, common and essential to all of them, the idea, namely, that the feeling in a poem should have a rational motivation. Without such a motivation, on the one hand, there is nothing to safeguard the poet from the possibility of emotional chaos, especially if his subject matter is as explosive as Winters' was for him--the emotion the poet arouses will necessarily tend to dominate him and eventually cause obscurity and meaninglessness. On the other hand, in the absence of any serious, intelligible motive, meter, abstraction, and a classical convention will
degenerate into nothing more than brittle decorative shells, devoid of what could properly give them life.

If there is an equivalence between the motive and the feeling, as Winters began to assert so frequently in his criticism, and if the poetic language is subtle and complex enough to express both, then the poem not only performs its proper task of understanding some aspect of reality, but it also approaches poetic greatness. Behind this, there is another equivalence, just as important, though it often is only implicit in the former, an equivalence essentially philosophical in nature: before the motive can adequately explain the feeling of a poem, it must itself first correspond to some truth located outside both the poet and his poem in objective reality. If there is no such correspondence, the emotion of the poem becomes self-generated and factitious—it then will lack being and can be said, in a certain philosophical sense, not to exist. But if such a correspondence does exist within the poem, not only is there a reason for the feeling within the poem, but some aspect of reality has been illuminated, just as the poet's mind itself, in turn, is illuminated by the same reality. It is, therefore, this presence of truth which irradiates the poem's entire structure and regulates all the various adjustments and equivalences we have been noting. Put more simply, the end of the mind, as Winters saw it, is the apprehension of truth; so the
greatness of a poem will ultimately depend upon the
quality of mind found within it and the degree of truth
it is able to convey in poetic language, language, that
is, "which permits the extraction from every unit of
language of its maximum content, both of connotation and
of denotation."11

Once Winters admitted as essential for poetry the
existence of degrees of truth, even the least, most
limited of degrees, he immediately faced a philosophical
problem: what or who is to account for the validity,
even the bare existence, of that degree of truth? On
the one hand, if there is truth, it must of necessity be
something other than a mere subjective impression relative
to the mind in which the impression occurs, for if
it were only that, there would be no correspondence
between any operation of that mind and anything in reality
outside it, and the mind would then stay locked inside
itself--solipsism and skepticism, the twin enemies of
Winters' thinking, would be the unavoidable conclusion.
On the other hand, if what we are concerned with is de-
grees of truth, that is, a series more or less true, we
must get outside that series and arrive at some kind of
absolute standard according to which the more or less
can make even the barest of sense. As Thomas Aquinas
states the situation, with Winters' entire approval, "But
more or less are predicated of different things according
as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum."12 And there can be no regress of that series into infinity, for then we could never arrive at an absolute, original and self-generated, and there consequently would be no existence even of the most limited truth for the mind to apprehend. But ordinary experience, so Winters believed, convinces us there is some degree of truth—even the extraordinary experience of the "pure" skeptic proves it, for in the most radical of his doubting he is forced by necessity to admit the truth of the existence of the mind performing the doubting. Where then is this absolute standard to be located?

As much as he might at one time have felt inclined to do so, Winters knew it could not be located in the human mind. There are too many texts in both his poetry and criticism to prove how limited he thought the mind was, how slow and painful the process was by which it achieved any truth, and how precarious and uncertain its hold on that truth was.

No man can hold existence in the head.
I, too, have known the anguish of the right
Amid this net of mathematic dearth,
And the brain throbbing like a ship at night:
Have faced with old unmitigated dread
The hard familiar wrinkles of the earth.
from "The Moralists"

No matter how one leans
One yet fears not to know.
God knows what all this means!
The mortal mind is slow.
from "A Song in Passing"
And from the Introduction to his last book of criticism, *Forms of Discovery*:

> I trust that I have not given the impression that I believe the occidental mind to be progressing by way of poetry or even by way of language in general to some kind of universal perfection. I am pessimistic about the human race. Few men are born with sufficient intelligence to profit by more than a small part of the tradition available to them.

Of all the Christian dogmas, as we have already seen, the one he could most easily accept was Original Sin, "a valuable doctrine in itself," as he calls it in the 1929 manifesto, "Notes on Contemporary Criticism." The mind, for Winters, was mortal, contingent, and prone to tragic error, and could never furnish of itself the absolute.

The Absolute could only be located in God. The argument led Winters to posit a perfect, undeprived, absolute mind, and then forced him logically to recognize its existence. For the more or less true to have any intelligibility, and our common experience tells us that it does have such (according to Winters, following Thomas Aquinas, a belief ultimately derived from sensory experience), there must be absolute truth. Perfect mind, absolute truth are merely other names for God. Therefore, to complete the syllogism, God necessarily exists.

So Winters, in order to safeguard the existence of truth in a poem, in order for his concept of the motive
and the feeling to have any intelligibility, was led inevitably to a theistic position. But he was led most reluctantly, almost against the grain, and it was not until the late forties that he admitted it publicly. Before that time, the argument exists only by implication in the general critical position he had staked out for himself. Writing in the 1947 Introduction to In Defense of Reason, he makes for the first time an explicit statement:

... I am aware that my absolutism implies a theistic position, unfortunate as this admission may be. If experience appears to indicate that absolute truths exist, 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.15

Winters nowhere spells out the argument in any greater detail than he does in this passage. He was, of course, exclusively concerned with poetry and the criticism of poetry, not with philosophy, much less with theology. But he saw that problems raised in poetry and criticism could only be solved in the extrapoetic field of metaphysics. And his desire for certitude in those disciplines, for a solid basis for the insights possible in them, is evidenced by his carrying out the argument to its conclusion in that other field, however reluctant his humanistic nature caused him to be. In fact, he is
admirable in the way he submits to the necessity of the argument. As is apparent from the preceding, Thomas Aquinas is the decisive influence. The argument of the quoted passage from In Defense of Reason is almost an exact duplication of the Thomistic proof of the existence of God by way of the degrees of perfection. This can readily be seen once we cite the Thomistic text:

The fourth way is taken from the gradations to be found in things. Among beings there are some more or less good, true, noble, and the like. But more or less are predicated of different things according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest, and consequently, something which is most being; for those that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in the Metaphysics. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus, as fire, which is the maximum of heat, is the cause of all hot things, as is said in the same book. Therefore, there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection, and this we call God.¹⁵

But profound differences exist between Winters' position and Thomas Aquinas'. As we have already noticed, Winters was forced, against his will, by the logic of the argument. He did not set out to look for God, nor did he apparently have any desire to find Him. Unlike most men, for whom the problem is often a source of anguish, Winters could have well done without God. As we shall soon discover, he had a sort of instinctive distrust,
even at times actual fear, of the Absolute, especially if it were defined in theistic, hence supernatural, terms. He felt, once its existence was admitted, that it would inevitably invade and overwhelm the human realm, which he wanted protected at all costs. Yet he needed God in order to safeguard the existence of truth without which that same human realm would be invaded and infected by enemies far more frightening to Winters than God, namely, relativism and skepticism.

He is somewhat like Descartes, who, as Pascal said, only needed God to give the "fillip" to the operations of his mechanistic universe. Once God had accomplished this task, Descartes could then dismiss Him, and, in the manner of all clear-thinking Frenchmen, go on to the more important job presented by the physical sciences. But Winters discovered he could not so easily dismiss God. The human stuff poetry is made of is not as "pure" as that of physics and mathematics. As we shall see, he will finally face the problem as honestly and straightforwardly as he can in later life, sometime in his late forties, and the idea of God will be seen as something having both nagged and haunted his consciousness. This encounter produces what I think is one of his greatest poems, "To the Holy Spirit." The fact remains, though, that his most urgent concern from the beginning to the end of his life was the safeguarding of the human realm.
and the kind of truth that man's unaided mind can find in it.

His arrival at theism was indeed gradual. The most explicit statement on the subject, the one quoted above, he did not make until 1947. The earliest statements of philosophical principle after the "conversion," the ones he makes in his own magazine, The Gyroscope, and in "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit," contain no mention of it, though the existence of God is admitted as a possibility in the former and it is implied in the latter. But such a possibility affords him no consolation—the God could just as likely be for Winters a deity of evil as He could be the source of moral perfection itself, as in Christianity, and nowhere does he mention Him in connection with the philosophical problem of truth. Winters' position in The Gyroscope essays and in "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit" is, on the other hand, defiantly humanistic and stoical, insisting as he does on the unaided powers of the human mind, the "effort, suspicion, and trembling" of the Louise Bogan review, and, finally, unrelenting self-criticism. The following passage from "Notes on Contemporary Criticism," published in The Gyroscope in 1929, is typically defiant and dogmatic in its assertion that the human mind can dispense with God and pursue its own activities in philosophical isolation:
We have ruled out the possibility of a firm religious belief, and so are forced to define the least comforting possibility; namely, that God, if he exists at all, having no practical connection with man, ceases to exist for man, and, so far as actual human experience is concerned, the visible universe is the beginning, middle, and end of human life. Man comes from the earth and returns to the earth and makes of the interim what he can, of his own unaided powers. This does not imply of necessity a belief in a mechanistic universe nor in any system of determinism. I, personally, hold no such beliefs. It is simply a bare statement of the inescapable necessities, and nothing more, of belief in existence. Anything beyond this basis is inferential and subject to revision and hence unsafe as a foundation for a rule of living.17

It is interesting to observe that the qualified agnosticism of these early statements resulted temporarily in a relativistic position for Winters, a fact which might have influenced the explicit statement he makes in In Defense of Reason. In the essay I have just quoted from, he asks himself how he can account for the truth of what he calls a "violation of equity"; he replies: "By a violation of equity, I mean an act that seems unjust to the actor after he has put himself as best and as honestly as he is able in the position of a disinterested observer."18 But as disinterested as Winters' observer might possibly be, if it only seems such, there is no absolute assurance that it is such. And Winters himself realizes what the absence of an unmitigated theism is costing him: "This is a dangerous standard, but it is the only one available without religion."19
Likewise, the three volumes of criticism written and published in the thirties and forties, *Primitivism and Decadence*, *Maule's Curse*, and *Anatomy of Nonsense*, contain no explicit reference to a theistic position, though the allusions to God found in them have lost the belligerence and sarcasm of the earlier remarks and have become calmer and more receptive. It was not until the late forties when he came to collect these three volumes together in the one volume *In Defense of Reason* and was able to take an overview, as it were, of his critical principles that he realized the logical dependence of those principles on the existence of God and so made, however reluctantly, his "confession" of theism. The poetry, as we shall see, is a different matter. There the poet often "confesses" at levels deeper than planned intent, fortunate or unfortunate as this might be.

However gradual it was, the theism originated in a study of poetic styles and in a certain sense it remained there. Sometime in the late twenties he became acutely dissatisfied with the frenzied, ejaculatory style of his free verse. He saw this kind of poetry as a severely limited instrument, which allowed him to make only specialized observations of sensory experiences. He was helped to this discovery by an intense, prolonged study of Baudelaire and Valéry, and a few poems by Hardy, Bridges, and Stevens, supplemented by the extensive graduate studies.
in English and American literature he began at Stanford in 1927. What he admired in the poets mentioned was not their theism--only Baudelaire among them had a consistent, clearly focused notion of a deity--but certain stylistic qualities. The outcome of these studies was his realization that these qualities were the effects finally of the presence of the mind in the poem, the judgements and evaluations of which he had earlier rejected as poetic impurities. With the introduction of mind into poetic theory and practice, the question of truth inevitably arose, the solution of which was inescapably theistic. It is probably the only instance in the history of recorded human thought where a study of style resulted in a proof for the existence of God. But this is to take a somewhat superficial view of the matter. Style meant a great deal to Winters. Writing in "Statement of Purpose" in The Gyroscope, he once said, "Stylistic precision is merely the ultimate manifestation of spiritual precision and strength."  

3. The Fear of the Absolute

I should like to return to remarks made in the preceding section about Winters' fear and suspicion of the Absolute and make further observations on the subject. My purpose in doing so is to understand more clearly his
reluctance in coming to a theistic position and his apparent embarrassment at stating it publicly. And by Absolute I do not mean philosophical or moral certitude, but rather that Being, necessarily defined in supernatural terms, on whom such certitude depends for its existence.

We should first note the equation existing in Winters' mind between God and death, which we saw operating in his free verse and which continues in his traditional poetry as well. As Winters saw it, death and divinity are alike in that each shares with the other a simplicity and purity of being, or non-being, which he saw as actively opposed to the dualism and complexity of the human composite. Both are radically foreign elements, in the presence of which the human being is reduced to nothingness; they also transcend all known categories, so that each is unthinkable for the human mind. "Sonnet," one of the transitional poems which appeared in The Proof, illustrates this equation quite well. The relevant lines follow:

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.

O you were joyous when the doorbell rang
And God's pure presence froze your bony jaws.
God here is defined in terms of the fatal effect He has on the human being. He is the salt of drowning in the sea; the brain, overshadowed by His presence, cringes in fear, and any joy it might have felt in anticipating His approach is destroyed in His actual presence, which spells out its instant annihilation. Divine incomprehensibility is emphasized in other parts of the poem; God is connected with the meaninglessness and cacophony of modern jazz, which "sucks" the human mind to "shrieking."

God and death are equally synonymous with each other in another sonnet, "To Emily Dickinson." Winters imaginatively follows Emily Dickinson as she traces her way to the brink of human comprehension; then he sees language itself fail as, dying, she crosses that brink in the "hard argument which led to God." The "unholy quiet" which death possesses in "A Fragment," though not exactly equated with God, is, nevertheless, associated with Him. The only "peace" of God possible for man, the epigram says, is dictated for him in death, and it is inscrutable and destructive of his human nature.

Such a conception of divinity is related to that of Pure Quality, which we briefly discussed in the first chapter. The term comes from an essay by Allen Tate, "The Fallacy of Humanism," which he contributed to the 1930 symposium The Critique of Humanism, to which Winters also contributed what later was revised into the first
chapter of *Primitivism and Decadence*. It became an extremely important concept for Winters, one he used in both *Primitivism and Decadence* and in some of his poems, especially in "The Grave," one of his most complete statements on the subject of death. Tate defines the term in his essay as follows:

Pure Quality is nature itself because it is the source of experience. . . . Pure Quality would be pure evil, and it is only through the means of our recovery from a lasting immersion in it . . . that any man survives the present hour; Pure Quality is pure disintegration.

And from "The Grave," which appeared a year after *The Critique of Humanism* in the 1931 *The Journey*:

There is no faintest tremor in that urn. Each flake of ash is sure in its return--Never to alter, a pure quality, A shadow cast against eternity.

Tate locates Pure Quality in an undifferentiated naturalism, and later in his essay contrasts it to the exclusively quantitative point of view of modern science, which he sees as its equally destructive opposite. Winters, on the other hand, locates it in death and contrasts it to the temporal realm with the "vibrant" light "running in all ways through quick whisperings"; he sees between the two realms the "absolute cleavage" he discusses in his essay on Emily Dickinson--any supposed interpenetration they might share is for him a dangerous
illusion. Though Tate and Winters use the term in these different senses, yet both men agree in equating it with disintegration as far as man is concerned, and there is in both of them the desire to protect man from immersion in such inhuman purity. And if one considers carefully the attributes Winters gives it—perfection, eternity, purity of composition, changelessness—one can immediately see that they are equally applicable in any definition of God. As far as the effects of both God and death on the human world go, Winters insists the two can be treated as one. To approach the divine, all of these poems seem to be saying, is to approach annihilation.

Winters furthermore thought the Absolute, because its nature is ineffable and transcends all human categories, becomes a source of intellectual confusion when it is isolated from "human complications" and viewed as a subject in and of itself. Such concentration, Winters felt, would blur the poet's perception and understanding of human values, which he believed to be the legitimate subject matter of poetry. "In so far as one endeavors," he writes in "The Morality of Poetry," the first chapter of Primitivism and Decadence, "to deal with the Absolute, not as a means of ordering one's moral perception but as the subject itself of perception, one will tend to say nothing, despite the multiplication of words." And in the title essay of the same volume, in connection with the poetry
of T. Sturge Moore, he speaks of "the attempt to violate our relationship with God, or with whatever myth we put in his place, even with Nothingness . . . which leads . . . to the minimizing of moral distinctions, that is, of the careful perception of strictly human experience." To the extent he concentrates on human experience and the moral values of that experience, the poet is safe. If he is forced by philosophical necessity to pay attention to the Absolute, he may safely do so only as a means of "ordering one's moral perception." Once he pays any attention to the Absolute as a subject in and of itself, the poet risks intellectual contamination, and his perception of moral values becomes blurred and distorted, even if that Absolute, we may suppose, is admitted as the very cause of the existence of those same values.

Not only was this attempt to pursue the Absolute in isolation a source of confusion, it was also for him evidence of fraud and deceit, as is apparent in his criticism of such Christian mystics as Crashaw and such "secular" ones as Robinson Jeffers and Hart Crane. Winters thought such poets were attempting to say something about a Being about Whom they insistently maintained that absolutely nothing could be said. The attempt necessarily involved them in theologically suspect analogies, usually concerned with human sexuality, that were tinged for him with deceit and irrationalism.
"Theseus: A Trilogy" is Winters' most complete poetic statement on the dangers of man's relationship with the Absolute. Grosvenor Powell has written an excellent commentary on the poem, in which he classifies its characters into three categories:

Within the poem, there are three classes of characters, each class distinguished by its relationship to the forces of divinity. In the first class, we find characters such as Theseus and Minos, mortal, political, and civilizing. In the second class appear figures such as Artemis and Poseidon, divinities and supra-human forces. In the third class are characters such as Hippolyta, Ariadne, Pasiphaë, Phaedra, and the Amazons. These are humans compromised by their dealings with divinity, humans who in turn compromise the political man. Significantly, they are all women. The characters in the first class are tragic figures, men attempting to master divine forces and to civilize. The characters in the third class are the priestesses or worshippers of divinity, and they are compromised by their intercourse with the gods.

The initial error Theseus commits, fatal in its consequences, is the sexual union with the Amazon Hippolyta, whose own humanity has been destroyed by the totality and purity of her devotion to the goddess Artemis. Out of this union comes Hippolytus, the embodiment of the revenge planned by Artemis and Hippolyta against the "male" intelligence of Theseus. In one part of the poem we find Hippolyta, pregnant with Hippolytus, brooding on the "secrets" of her goddess:
In Attica, the naked land, she strode,
Brooding upon the secrets of the goddess,
Upon the wet bark of the Scythian forest,
The wet turf under bare foot, and the night
Blue with insistence of the staring eye.

The trochees in the second, third, and especially
the last line of this passage, along with its two feminine
endings, work beautifully into the rippled smoothness and
quiet chill of these lines. In them, we are in a frame
of mind remote from civilization, dominated by a female
divinity infected with cold hate for the human world.
And it is Theseus' tragedy that he becomes tainted with
the irrationalism of this feminine moon and that he intro­
duces it, as it were, into the sunlit world of Attica.

The second part of the poem is concerned with the
events on Crete, the "blood-stained island of the gods,"
representative of the mystical and the purely intuitive,
against which Attica, the intellectual and the rational,
is contrasted in the poem. There Theseus becomes "com­
promised" in the blood of the Minotaur, who is the off­
spring of Pasiphaë's mystical and sexual union with the
bull from Poseidon. In killing him Theseus incurs the
pollution that is finally only expiated by the deaths of
Ariadne, Phaedra, Hippolytus, and, at the end, Theseus
himself, who, in the last section, is cast by Lycomedes
into the sea of Poseidon, the other offended deity in
the poem, beside Artemis.

The opposition that runs throughout the entire trilogy
is that between the divine and the human. The establishment of the realm of humanitas, which is the purpose of Theseus' life, is at all times threatened by the invasion and contamination of irrational forces, divine in origin and mystical in nature, which would destroy intellectual values and moral distinctions, and reduce the human vision to a purely subjective, intuitive state of being, symbolized in the poem by the "insistence of the staring eye" of Artemis. Theseus fails because he is too much entangled in these forces—"the taint of hell has eaten through my skin," he says at one point—yet he does acquire in his old age an understanding of human experience which none of the other characters do. Out of the tragedies he suffered himself, as well as those he caused in others, he distils "the honey of calm wisdom," which in essence consists of the recognition of the vital distinction between the divine and the human. The other characters are only victims from the beginning to the end. All in all, the poem is one of the most powerful meditations in modern literature on what can be called the divine contamination of the human sphere.

We are now somewhat in a better position to understand the reasons for Winters' attitude toward the Absolute. It was equated or intimately associated in his mind with death, and, as far as man is concerned, in its purity and inscrutability, it was a source of confusion, even of
contamination, as we have just seen in "Theseus." With such views in mind, Winters' attitude toward the Absolute is necessarily going to be fearful and suspicious.

After this has been granted, it yet remains to ask whether or not there are irrational elements in Winters' attitude itself, which apparently he was not aware of. By asking the question I do not mean to imply the existence of a purely psychological explanation, though I suspect there is one. The evidence found in the autobiographical "The Werewolf," which was briefly discussed in the first chapter, suggests he must have been influenced by his mother in his objections against religion, and the fear it instilled in him. Yet we are in obscure regions indeed when we talk about such matters, and in doing so we neglect others equally important and more accessible. I mean, specifically, the philosophical and literary, realms where he carried on his public life, and where he is to be met, if he is to be met at all.

The legitimate side of Winters' attitude should first be noted. What he is opposing, and rightly so, in much of his critique of the Absolute is the illegitimate invasion of necessity into the moral realm. The consequence of such an invasion inevitably is either some form of determinism or what Etienne Gilson calls "theology," a concept which influenced Winters a great deal. Winters is above all protecting here Aristotle's sphere
of the practical intellect, which presides over what man makes and does of his own free will, and where, consequently, things can be other than they are, in Aristotle's memorable phrase. This sphere of the contingent moral choice is contrasted to the realm of the theoretical intellect, where things can not be other than they are, the realm of necessity, of those immutable laws such as Aristotle thought discoverable in physics and natural theology, over which man has no control. They are the Absolutes in every sense of the word, and if their "necessity" is allowed to encroach too far into the human world, man loses freedom of will and becomes completely determined by inhuman, or supra-human, forces. He then cannot be other than he is; he is forced to renounce all responsibility for his acts, and any moral judgement made on them is meaningless. For Winters the essential human act, the act, that is, that makes one human, is the perception by the intellect of moral law and the execution of that law by the will. Any system of thought that interfered with this act, such as he saw in Calvinism, for instance, he viewed as a violation of the human being, and his opposition to it was uncompromising.

The other consequence which Winters rightly opposed is "theologism." Such a term characterizes those who are animated by what we may call an excessive sense of divine glory, which they allow in blind zeal to invade and
dominate all conceivable areas of human and natural life. Such persons are eager to regard the created world and everything found in it, especially the mind itself, as essentially invalid and meaningless in comparison to the purity and perfection of divinity. And in order to render that divinity all glory, they take away any power and validity the created world might possess, even as a gift from its Creator, and refer all things to God alone, so that He can then rule over a desert of unintelligibility. The results are radical skepticism—what sufficiency can the mind have when it totally and constantly depends upon divine illumination for the least of its operations?—and a denial of the divine power to create anything with an efficacy of its own. In "theologism" nature and grace then are in active and unrelenting opposition to each other, and the Thomistic understanding of grace as the perfection of nature is rejected. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, the French mystic of the 17th century, states the situation with brutal simplicity in his Abandonment to Divine Providence: "When God speaks He uses mysterious words, and they are a death blow to all that we are as rational human beings, for all the mysteries of God destroy our physical sense and our intellectuality." One is tempted to say that this extreme mysticism also issues into a variant of determinism, yet this would be inaccurate, for, after the divine has done with its destroying, there is nothing left to be
determined in the void that follows. There is instead only the silence, and the isolation, of the godhead.

Winters' criticism of these two dangers involved in man's relationship with the Absolute is sound and legitimate, but there are times when he seems to exceed rational limits, and his objections then become a sort of stubborn, automatic reflex. We begin to feel that he is determined, even if he has to proceed against reason itself, to regard any contact, even purely intellectual contact, with God as harmful and irrational. If this is true, if there is indeed an irrational element in his attitude toward the Absolute, then we must ask ourselves exactly what philosophical error he commits that makes him open to such a criticism.

We have seen how Winters was driven to admit the existence of God as the cause of degrees of truth found in a poem. They are effects of an absolute cause. Effects have to resemble their cause in so far as the cause has within itself that which actualizes the effect, unless, that is, one, following Hume, sees the connection between the two as "occasional" and fortuitous, a position Winters himself objected to as destructive of reason itself. A cause also has either to equal the effect, or transcend it; otherwise, one has the logical impossibility of a greater thing coming out of a lesser. If transcendence is involved, the transcendence is such that in no way
does it jeopardize the existence of the effect or annihilate the resemblance between it and the effect, because the specific cause we are concerned with is a perfect one whose will to create cannot be frustrated, nor can its power to maintain the existence of the created thing be questioned. Besides, the mere fact that Winters can refer to degrees of truth as existing, almost as if they are empirical facts, means that the transcendence of their cause, in and of itself, does not threaten their existence. Otherwise, they would not be there for him to refer to.

The cause-effect we are dealing with here is God and truth as apprehended by the mind, truth which for Winters is most completely realized in poetic structures. God then either equals this effect or He transcends it. Since He is God, by His very nature, He necessarily transcends it, but in such a manner that its existence, as we have just seen, is not threatened. Otherwise, both truth and mind, since He is their cause, the very reason of their existence, would immediately lapse into nothingness. The unquestioned fact that we continue to speak of them is evidence that God, as their absolute first principle, which Winters is forced by philosophical necessity to admit that He is, continually safeguards their existence. The error that extreme mystics fall into is assuming automatically that transcendence of an effect means its annihilation. It is the same error that Winters himself
falls into. With them it is as if a cause, after having created an effect, should then wish to turn against it and destroy it, in the manner of a father against his son. God destroys our intellectuality, Caussade says quite simply. Much of Winters' critique of the Absolute is animated by the same belief. But the crucial fact to remember is that if indeed transcendence means annihilation and God does destroy the human mind, then there would be no mind to register the fact of destruction. There would be instead the silence of a non-creative godhead.

The mind that forgets this fact and sees instead a destructive dichotomy between God and reason will eventually view God as beyond intelligibility. He then becomes either Plotinus' One-Above-Being or Meister Eckhart's "wilderness of godhead."29 Such a God will be sought by some mystics and embraced in ecstasy, no matter what entangling contradictions and absurdities they have to cut themselves free of. On the other hand, for someone like Winters--and this fact radically separates him from the mystics--such a God will be both avoided and opposed as threatening the existence of the only thing that gives meaning to his life.

Winters, I think, frequently forgot this fact and viewed any kind of transcendence as irrational, even the sort of transcendence we have noted in the cause-effect
relationship between God and reason. Contradictorily enough, he admits God as the cause and guarantee of reason and then proceeds in other contexts as if God, by His very nature, were opposed to reason, as if he, Winters, were forced by a desperate situation to protect reason from the very divinity that in other places he says caused it and gave it being. "The Absolute is in its nature inscrutable," he says categorically in In Defense of Reason. But how can this possibly be true in so far as that Absolute is admitted as the very cause of reason itself?

4. The Definition of God

What Winters does in view of the situation outlined above is to define God in the most philosophically favorable terms at his disposal, which in his case will be intellectual, not existential. God then becomes, not pure existence as in Thomism, but pure intellect as in Aristotelianism; that is, He is defined as an intellectual essence in which what He is is given philosophical supremacy over that He is. "But thou art mind alone," as he states it explicitly in "To the Holy Spirit," his most important poem on the subject of theism.

Two philosophical possibilities are then open to him that further mitigate the "irrationalism" of a
theistic position, both of which Winters embraced at one time or another during his career. One is to extricate, as it were, the Divine Essence out of God and set it up in isolation as Concept, as a kind of theoretical ideal which man himself might achieve at the cost of almost inhuman effort and, finally, with the sacrifice of his own individual existence. The other is to eliminate everything from the definition of God but that same intellectual essence, including existence itself, which, as Kant has explained to all subsequent idealists, is not essential to the definition of a thing. The former way is basically Platonic in spirit; the latter, Aristotelian. Both depart radically from Thomas Aquinas, who, according to some critics, is the dominant influence in this area of Winters' thought. As Grosvenor Powell interprets the situation in *Language as Being*, "Yvor Winters' development as an artist and man can be best understood as a development from . . . the romantic to the Thomistic."\(^{31}\) But the basic difference, and one so crucially important that it ramifies through all other things, is that Aquinas thought of God, not as concept or essence, but as existence itself. His God is the *Ego sum qui est* of Exodus, not the eternal thought of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, which only thinks of itself in an isolation purified of the accidents of mere existence.

Winters' position, on the other hand, is best
described as the "essentialist" approach of classical Greek thought, which, as Etienne Gilson describes it in *Being and Some Philosophers*, is characterized by the same inclination toward the "intellectualism" we see operating in Winters. In an essay on Paul Valéry and Edgar Bowers, Helen Trimpi has provided us with a concise definition of such an "essentialist" approach. As she admits, her definition is derived from Gilson's book mentioned above.

In the course of criticizing the philosophical position which he calls "essentialism," the contemporary philosopher and historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson has described the variations from Parmenides to Kant of the assumption that essence (what being or a being is) is the first principle of being in reality, contrasting this assumption with that of existence (that being or a being is) as the first principle in reality. It is such a philosophical inheritance of essentialism in which some near primary and essential aspect of being is distinguished and held to be primary, as it was developed and transmitted by Neoplatonic thinkers from Plotinus to his eighteenth-century translator Thomas Taylor and to the German Idealists and American Transcendentalists, that I see as furnishing the intellectual context of Bowers' poems and as presenting him with some of the problems that his poetry concerns.  

For "essentialism," then, primary reality does not reside in the fact that something is, i.e., the act whereby something exists, but rather in what that something is, i.e., its conceptual definition as formulated by the mind, a definition which, in Aristotle, then becomes the "essence" of the thing defined. Helen Trimpi sees this as the
context of Bowers' poetry; it is also the context for Winters', although the influence of the German Idealists and the American Transcendentalists is inoperative in his own poetry. As we have seen, Winters' intellectual discomfort with the idea of God drove him to define God as "mind alone," a definition more Aristotelian than it is anything else.

Such "essentialism" can be approached, as I have said, from two different, but closely related, points of view when it comes to the subject of deity. One is to take the essence out of God and view it as concept; the other is to take everything out of God but essence. To illustrate the first of these approaches I should now like to look at a group of poems in which the isolated concept is thought of in divine terms.

The most complete statement on the subject is "Heracles." The Greek hero is treated in the poem, as Winters' footnote informs us, "as a Sun-God," and allegorically as "the artist in hand-to-hand or semi-intuitive combat with experience." The result of his struggles with "the numbered Beings of the wheeling track" is his total mastery of human experience, the understanding on his part of the Concept governing that experience, and his subsequent deification in terms of that Concept. It is important to note that this apotheosis occurs outside time, in a non-human realm of perfect silence, and
at the sacrifice of his own individual existence:

This stayed me, too: my life was not my own,  
But I my life's; a god I was, not man.  
Grown Absolute, I slew my flesh and bone;  
Timeless, I knew the Zodiac my span.

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.  
Translated slowly in a fiery blast,

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

The "god" mentioned in these lines is not the God  
that appears, for instance, in "To the Holy Spirit"; he  
is, on the other hand, the absolute concept we have just  
outlined. All the accidents of human existence and in­  
dividuality, symbolized in the poem, not only by the "sad  
pain of Deianira," but also by the tragic entanglements  
of Heracles himself, are "unreal" dregs in comparison to  
this timeless concept, divine in its nature, which  
Heracles realizes in the "fiery blast" of his apotheosis.  
Its absoluteness is in tragic conflict with human exist­  
ence; in fact, man has to slay himself in order to become  
the only thing "real" in such a universe, the form, the  
concept, the absolute mind. The same oppositions and  
dichotomies we saw operating in Winters' criticism of  
mysticism are operating also in this poem, but Winters  
now sees them as necessary to, and productive of, an  
intellectual good, even though the cost is still unthinkably  
inhuman:
Grown Absolute, I slew my flesh and bone.

All in all, the poem realizes the full consequences of Valéry's gnomic and terrifying remark in *Monsieur Teste*: "The essential is against life." In few other poems Winters wrote did he so starkly and unrelentingly draw out, as here, the full implications of the conflict he saw as inevitable between ordinary humanity and the isolate concept presented as divinity.

The "crime" in "Socrates," another related poem, is the philosopher's having raised up against the times a "Timeless Form," against which the ignorant and the non-philosophical react violently and senselessly. In the sacrifice of his own life, which is offered in atonement for man's general stupidity, Socrates undergoes the same intellectual apotheosis as Heracles and likewise becomes himself the timeless concept:

Thus are the times transmuted: understood,
A Timeless Form, comprising my estate.

No such apotheosis occurs in "To Edwin V. McKenzie," a poem addressed to the trial lawyer who defended David Lamson, a friend and neighbor of Winters, who had been accused of murdering his own wife; neither is there in it the tragic conflict we have been noting in the other poems. But the essential situation still obtains: the Intellect viewed as divine concept separate from man,
but one which man can realize in his own way, though still with considerable difficulty:

The concept lives, but few men fill the frame.

*****

You filled the courtroom with historic power; Yourself the concept in the final hour.

Immortal mind and the individual man, again, are separate from each other in "Time and the Garden," just as the Form is from the particular in the Platonic system. As in the preceding poems, man has the opportunity to reembody the Intellect, though the cost of this "unbroken wisdom" is his own life, and it is never achieved in an existential context. The Intellect is divine and eternal. The temporal realm is relegated to a philosophically inferior position in the order of things; wisdom occurs elsewhere, in death and eternity:

Though we know well that when this fix the head, The mind's immortal, but the man is dead.

The same sacrifice is the subject of "To a Portrait of Melville in My Library," in connection with which Kenneth Fields in his unpublished dissertation reminds us that "one should remember that the poem addresses a portrait and that Melville himself is dead. 'What life was buried, ere you (sic) rose reborn'. refers to the rebirth of Melville's reputation long after his death and
after years of obscurity. The balance is near perfection only in art. The apotheosis here then is artistic; the individual artist dies in the acquisition of Socratic wisdom and becomes immortal only in art, from which the idea of divinity is not absent. And when the speaker of "To a Portrait" meets, not so much the face of the individual man, but the outline of the concept which that man realized in death, and which is now "framed" in art, times becomes inoperative for him, noon is immobile:

O face reserved, unmoved by praise or scorn! O dreadful heart that won Socratic peace! What was the purchase-price of thy release? What life was buried, ere thou rose reborn?

*****

The lids droop coldly, and the face is still: Wisdom and wilderness are here at poise, Ocean and forest are the mind's device, But still I feel the presence of thy will: The midnight trembles when I hear thy voice, The noon's immobile when I meet thine eyes.

The identical relationship between the concept and the individual exists in a poem similar to the one on Melville, "On the Portrait of a Scholar of the Italian Renaissance." In it existential life must also be destroyed and buried before the Form can be realized, and the Form is, again, conceived of as philosophically superior to the accidents and peculiarities of the human personality, which are but "lees/Residual from this clear intent" of the Form. The important thing is the "vision in a frame":

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The face is noble; but the name
Is one that we shall scarcely hold.
This is a vision in a frame,
Defined and matted down with gold.

Our names, with his, are but the lees
Residual from this clear intent;
Our finely grained identities
Are but this golden sediment.

Finally, the two minor academic poems, "For the Opening of the William Dinsmore Briggs Room" and "An Ode on the Despoilers of Learning in an American University," justify the existence of the university on the ground that it can provide the framework for successive re-embodiments of Intellect, since, as "For the Opening" states, "Our Being grows in Mind." The struggle and isolation involved in such an undertaking, again, are emphasized, and its religious overtones are pointed out, especially in "An Ode on the Despoilers of Learning," in which the embodiment of mind is recommended as an appropriate act of atonement for the stupidity and evil of the majority of men.

We are now in a position to summarize. The essential spirit of the passages quoted, as well as the poems from which they are taken, is Platonic. The relationship that obtains between the concept and the individual attempting to realize it is the same one obtaining between the Form and the particular in the Platonic system. The concept is the paradigm of Perfect mind, and is considered as isolated from any phenomenological or existential
context, which is the realm of "becoming," hence the realm of error, ignorance, and evil. The concept, on the other hand, is located in Being, and, consequently, it has philosophical supremacy over the individual man who is in time and is "tangled with earth," to quote from a poem by Janet Lewis. The individual achieves reality, in a philosophical sense, only in so far as he participates and grows in Mind, which in Winters' thought is deified, formed as it is by what he extricates from the idea of God and sets up as a separate divine concept. Such participation on the part of the individual rarely results in his own deification, though this is possible in the case of some men who possess tremendous powers of will and intellect. But when such men do eventually accomplish such perfect realizations of concept, they then cannot possess them, for the very perfection of the process finally necessitates the sacrifice of their own individual lives. Mind, or rather God-as-Concept, resides in a timeless realm, usually thought of in artistic terms, purified of the "existentialism" of life as we know it now; man is inextricably bound up in time, from which there is for him no escape, though he is possessed of the desire for transcendent perfection. Human life, therefore, is ultimately tragic. Man "is so created," Winters writes in his discussion of Valéry's Ebauche d'un serpent in The Function of Criticism, "that he desires
infinite knowledge, and he is so created that he cannot have it. The desire is his nature, his greatness, his sin, and his torture, and it is inescapable.\textsuperscript{37}

Some further observations are in order. As I have said, Winters embraced the alternative of "conceptualism," or "essentialism," as Gilson would have it, in order to mitigate the "irrationalism" of a theistic position he was forced into by logical necessity. Part of the "rationalism" of this approach, apart from its exclusively intellectual nature, is that it opens up the area of the divine to human participation. In fact, nearly all of the poems we have just been considering are more concerned with the human attempt at the realization of the concept of perfect mind, than with the religious nature of that concept in and of itself. What Winters was in essence searching for was a kind of rationalistic variant of the Christian Dogma of the Incarnation. He was, of course, not Christian, and he rejected the belief that God became man and so bridged the gulf that separates the divine from the human. Instead, he habitually thought of an "absolute cleavage" as existing between the two realms. Yet when the argument about degrees of truth led him to theism and he was forced to deal with God, his intellectualism inclined him to define things in such a manner that at least he would not have to deal with the "foreign god" of undiluted mysticism. Hence, the isolation of
the divine essence as Perfect Mind, and the setting up of that concept as a paradigm and model for human participation. His whole purpose in doing so, though, was not so much to deify man as it was to rationalize and humanize God. He wanted to bridge rationalistically the gulf that in Christianity is bridged dogmatically.

Yet the drift of these passages would suggest that he failed in this attempt. If we go back to the quote from Caussade and compare it with Winters' position as illustrated above, we can discover, I think, at least one similarity between the two, though, otherwise, they are quite different indeed. Both the God of mysticism and the conceptual God of Pure Mind, by their very natures, are in active opposition against existential humanity and the ordinary experience that humanity undergoes in time. Each insists on an either-or situation that is nothing short of tragic: either the perfection of themselves outside time or a meaningless individuality in time that only knows its own death. If it would be too much to say that they are both hostile to what we have called existential humanity, at least it would be safe to say that humanity itself is destroyed as it approaches or approximates, in any really significant degree, the purity of these models. The starkly great line from "Heracles," "Grown Absolute, I slew my flesh and bone," states the theme unambiguously and straightforwardly. To approach
this God is indeed to approach annihilation as far as individual human life is concerned.

I do not want at all to give the impression that Winters was happy at the prospect of humanity destroying itself in the process of achieving intellectual perfection. His vision is tragic, as tragic as anything one will find in the Greeks. He saw no way out of this dilemma; for him, it was built into the nature of things. To pretend that it was otherwise, he would say, would be merely exchanging the bleak truth for guile and illusion.

I have said that the spirit of this position is Platonic, yet another philosophy seems hinted at in the conclusion of "Time and the Garden." The last line of this poem, "The mind's immortal, but the man is dead," might strike the unwary at first as intimating a belief in some form of personal immortality, if not that of the individual soul, then that of the individual mind. But Winters never at any time entertained such a belief, and he is quite clear on the subject. Some might say that the immortal mind in question is the figurative, collective mind of the race. Yet the subject of the poem is the individual acquisition of wisdom, and, besides, Winters' opinion of the intellectual capabilities of the human race as a whole would, I think, make such an interpretation seem naive. "Life is painful," he writes in In Defense of Reason, "if one expects more than two or three men in a century to behave as rational animals."
The mind involved has to be the conceptual deity discussed above. It is also almost identical to Averroës' notion of a Separate Intelligence in which man thinks, or, more accurately, which thinks for man. Such an Intelligence is immortal, divine, and perfectly self-sufficient; it is also totally and radically distinct from the individual human soul, which for both Averroës and Winters is deprived and mortal. Gilson has given us a summary of Averroës' position on the matter; his account reads, strangely enough, as if it were an explication of the last line of "Time and the Garden":

. . . the intellectual operations observable in man are caused in him by a separate intellectual substance that is present in him only by its operations. As separate, this intellectual substance is, by the same token, incorruptible and immortal; but its own immortality does not entail our personal immortality. We ourselves have a soul, which is personal to each of us and is the form of our body; but for this very reason it perishes along with the body. To sum up, that which causes intellectual knowledge in us is separate and immortal, but it is separate and immortal for the very reason that it is not the form of our body; it is not our soul. 39

The other alternative mentioned at the first of this section remains to be discussed, though I shall only deal with it briefly here, since I plan to discuss it more fully in the fourth chapter in connection with "To the Holy Spirit." As I have said, if one is intellectually ill at ease with theism, but is forced by the logic of one's argument to entertain it, one will tend to refashion it
in the most intellectually respectable terms at one's disposal. The one alternative which extracts the divine essence out of God and views it as separate concept we have just dealt with and illustrated. The other, which Winters also embraced, leaves that divine essence within God but eliminates everything else from Him, so that He becomes exclusively whatever that essence is defined as being, which, in Winters' case, is "pure mind." Philosophically the most important of these eliminations is "existence." Like the concept of mind, which "exists" more as a theoretical possibility than an actual existant, the God of Pure Mind is existentially neutral, so much so that the two really can be dealt with as if they are one. To view God as Concept or Concept as God is after all much the same thing.
NOTES

1 Winters, Uncollected, p. 58.

2 See especially Winters' Introduction to The Early Poems, pp. 14-16.

3 There is a brief but valuable discussion of Briggs in an Appendix to Parkinson, Hart Crane and Yvor Winters, pp. 157-60.


5 Cleanth Brooks, following the lead of I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot, is the chief critic who advocated such an interpretation. See his "Three Revolutions in Poetry," Southern Review, 1 (1935), 151-63, 228-38, 568-83.

6 Winters, Defense, p. 590.

7 "He (i.e. Winters) has conducted a poetic revolution all his own that owes little or nothing to the earlier revolution of Pound and Eliot, and that goes back to certain great, likewise neglected Tudor poets for metrical and stylistic models," Allen Tate, "Clarity, Elegance, and Power," New Republic, 2 March 1953, p. 17.


10 Winters, Defense, p. 83.

11 Winters, Defense, p. 83.


13 Winters, Forms, p. xxii.
Winters, Uncollected, p. 224.
Gilson, Elements, pp. 74-75.
Winters, Uncollected, pp. 219-220.
Winters, Uncollected, p. 221.
Winters, Uncollected, p. 221.
Winters, Uncollected, p. 217.
Winters, Defense, p. 290.
Winters, Defense, p. 28.
Winters, Defense, p. 96.
Powell, p. 135.
Gilson's definition and illustration of "theologism" may be found in Unity, pp. 31-60.
See Gilson, Unity, pp. 109-110.
Winters, Defense, p. 27.
Powell, p. 53.
I shall treat this case in greater detail in my next chapter.


38 Winters, Defense, p. 100.

CHAPTER III
THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEISM

1. The Nature of Evil

Yvor Winters' recognition and treatment of the problem of evil sharply separates him from the majority of his contemporaries, along with their Romantic predecessors. That he faced this problem and seriously dealt with it in both his poetry and criticism is, by itself, the most telling piece of evidence for his claim to classical reaction against what he considered as the persisting influence of Romanticism in modern poetry. Paraphrasing Pascal, Allen Tate once noted that Winters knew "the abyss" in spite of the fact that everyone else "is eagerly trying to fall into it."¹ Winters himself saw the problem as central in his poetry. In the 1934 Foreword to Before Disaster, he writes with almost theological rigor, "The matter of the following verses is in the main 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."²

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As Winters saw the situation, the "general nature" of Romanticism locates evil in the rational mind and in those disciplines and institutions which are products of that mind. It views the problem of evil as remedial. According to the Romantic myth, man in his primitive, pre-civilized state enjoyed a monistic existence in which "he identified God with the universe" and found his salvation in a surrender to impulse, which he interpreted as the voice of God.\(^3\) This state was disrupted by the "satanic" introduction of reason, which broke man's unity into duality and spawned those disciplines and institutions that stifle man and inhibit the free play of his instinctual existence. Yet the situation can be corrected. Once reason is negated, and its products either purified or destroyed, man will automatically revert to his original innate goodness. Evil is finally an illusion, a medieval encrustation that can be washed away in the blood of revolution.

Winters opposed this view with intensity. For him, the identification of God with the universe and the subsequent surrender on the part of man to impulse can only result in moral suicide and the destruction of human values. Far from locating evil in the rational mind, he saw the proper use of that mind as the means by which man can protect himself from evil and save himself from disintegration. He viewed rationally motivated disciplines
and institutions, not as inhibiting the development of man's nature, but as fostering it. By introducing man to the "collective wisdom of the race," which contains the "norm of what humanity ought to be," as he calls it, in his essay on Robert Frost, these traditions make human growth possible: "The poet is valuable, therefore, in proportion to his ability to apprehend certain kinds of objective truth; in proportion as he is great, he will not resemble ourselves but will resemble what we ought to be. It becomes our business, then, to resemble him, and this endeavor is not easy and for this reason few persons make it."^4

The reason for the difficulty of this endeavor lies precisely in the presence of evil in man's nature. The extent to which Winters considered evil a part of the very texture of that nature is best indicated by his public commitment to the Christian dogma of Original Sin, a doctrine which Romantics view with particular abhorrence. In his discussion of Robert Bridges' "Low Barometer," a poem which had a great influence on Winters' view of evil, he speaks of the various names given the "tenants unknown," which in the poem symbolize evil: the "lower nature" of St. Paul, the "unconscious mind" of modern psychology, the "pre-human memory" of modern anthropology. In his own poem "Heracles" he says, "Older than man, evil with age, is life." As Winters saw the situation, it is
man's fate to be involved, and to an alarming degree, in this ancient life, which is contaminated at its core with evil. It is this view which prompted Grosvenor Powell to designate Winters' metaphysics as Manichaean.\textsuperscript{7}

We may go further and ask ourselves where he specifically locates the source of evil. In answering the question, we shall discover an intimate relationship existing between his theism and his view of evil.

As we have already seen in our discussion of the early poems, Winters at one time located evil in a demonic possession of the physical universe by an actual malignant spirit. In certain contexts he speaks of this spirit as manipulating matter from the outside, as it were; in others, as residing in matter itself as one of its constituent principles. In either case evil and matter share an intimate relationship in Winters' mind. From the beginning to the end of his career, the vision of the universe under its aspect of pure materiality inspired in him a sort of fascinated terror. Certain of the poems in The Bare Hills, which we have cited, as well as descriptive passages in "The Brink of Darkness," possess an hallucinatory intensity barely controlled by the medium of language. In his essay on Herman Melville in In Defense of Reason he signals out the chapter in Moby Dick on the whiteness of the whale for special attention, calling it "the most extensive elucidation and defense of the notion of the
demonism of Moby Dick, as well as of 'the demonism of the world,'" and "equally one of the most astonishing pieces of rhetoric and one of the most appalling specimens of metaphysical argument in all literature." In the third stanza of "At the San Francisco Airport," one of the very last poems he wrote and one that summarizes his entire life, he reverts explicitly to this earlier view of evil as matter in that it causes the destruction of his being:

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

The demonism of The Bare Hills and "The Brink of Darkness" has here undergone considerable modification. It is expressed in terms more abstract and philosophical, not in the admittedly melodramatic ones of the earlier works. Yet "At the San Francisco Airport" proves that vestiges of "demonism," even if discarded at other points in his career in favor of a more sophisticated philosophical solution, persist even into Winters' late poetry. Throughout all his life he thought of evil as some external force to which man exposed himself by submitting to its possessiveness to the end that we become possessed by an evil power which is great enough to control us and diminish our own being. Evil also was closely related
to, even at times actually identified with, matter, so that the redemptive activity of the human mind was seen as the "pull against gravity, against earth and those determined by it." Finally, he always viewed the mind as being actively opposed by inimical foreign influences, and human life as essentially tragic in that "the rain of matter" eventually destroys man's being and his intellect. All three of these attitudes, which we find in both early and late Winters, point to the persisting influence of "demonism" on his thought.

During the transitional period in the late twenties and early thirties Winters shifted ground and located the source of evil in man's emotional life. In "Notes on Contemporary Criticism," an essay first published in The Gyroscope in 1929, he states categorically, "The basis of Evil is in emotion." The good, on the other hand, resides in the rational mind's tight control over the emotions, even in the attempt of eliminating them altogether, that is, as far as this is possible. At first this might appear as unmitigated stoicism. Yet Winters recognized, then and later, an element of what he calls "irreducible emotion" in human nature, which must be accepted, understood, and properly evaluated. Such Stoics as Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, Winters says, failed in this endeavor. "Because the Stoics denied the emotions completely, in favor of the intellect,
they failed to make any provision for them and so became easily their victims, as of an insidious consumption." 13 Besides, Winters at all times recognized the limits of the mind. There are areas in man's own life, especially his emotional life, that are forever closed to the mind's apprehensive abilities. As Winters states concisely and simply in "The Moralists," a poem written roughly during the same time as "Notes on Contemporary Criticism": "No man can hold existence in the head."

Qualified as this might well be, such an explanation of evil must soon have struck Winters as philosophically inadequate to account for certain complexities he wanted to express in poetry. The central drive of his mind was toward a synthesis of concept and image, thought and emotion, as is apparent in his critical principle of motive and feeling and in his formulation of post-Symbolist imagery in which one finds a fusion of the abstract and the sensory, a fusion that unavoidably calls for emotional engagement on the part of the poet. Furthermore, since emotions are quasi-physiological reactions to external stimuli, they lack by their very definition the independent subsistence necessary for such attribution. As Winters makes abundantly clear in his criticism of T. S. Eliot's objective correlative, to engage in such talk is to presuppose, for the moment, that emotions have no causes. The moral issue lies precisely in the cause of the emotions,
which in and of themselves are morally indifferent. Consequently, the simplistic formula of "Notes on Contemporary Criticism" was discarded in favor of one more philosophically adequate to his own poetic purposes. Henceforth, the poet attempts not to eliminate the emotions altogether, but to discipline, even to enrich, them. And poetry is valued and set apart from philosophical discourse precisely because it provides an emotional equivalent for thought.

It was Winters' philosophical theism which provided him with the exact formula for the source of evil. As we have seen earlier, the mind's ability to apprehend certain objective truths and then to live according to those truths is man's proper good. In order for such "good" thought to exist and possess reality, there must exist by philosophical necessity, as Winters saw it, perfect thought, which is another name for God. Consequently, evil will be seen as a deviation from such a perfect standard and will be located in the absence or imperfection of thought. The formula occurs in a 1942 poem written in commemoration of William Dinsmore Briggs:

Because our Being grows in mind,
And evil in imperfect thought . . . .

Evil then essentially is deprivation, not of "existence," in the Thomistic sense, but of "thought," in the more classical sense. We find a world of false fire and
"thoughtless bodies" in "Sonnet to the Moon" suffering from such a deprivation. The whole poem, as Winters himself notes, deals with "the de-intellectualized sensibility" specializing in "verbal hallucination." In other poems the vision becomes not hallucination but a nightmare, as the mind encounters that which has no meaning and is consequently inexpressible in "name" or "word." This vision is most acutely rendered in two poems that have the Second World War as their background; the poet's private vision is duplicated on a worldwide scale involving massive destruction, and so achieves greater density and power. From "Summer Noon: 1941":

With visionary care
The mind imagines Hell,
Draws fine the sound of flame
Till one can scarcely tell
The nature, or the name,
Or what the thing is for.

And from "Moonlight Alert: Los Altos, California, 1943," a poem much more successful in its imagistic intensity than the preceding one:

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.

Moonlight, so described, is an appropriate image for Winters' notion of evil as "thoughtlessness." In its brutality and intellectual deprivation, it indifferently presides over a world of suffering and pain:
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.

It is apparent from Winters' designation of the moonlight as "an icy nightmare of the brute unnamed" that language plays a crucially important role for him in the problem of evil. In fact, Winters adheres to what we might call a doctrine of the Word, which is comparable to the theological doctrine of the Logos: the Word, indicating as it does meaning and definition, embodies order and intellectual perception; whatever is beyond it, or below it, is meaningless and consequently, for him, evil. The poem that best illustrates this is "A Spring Serpent." It is less dramatic than "Moonlight Alert," but in its calm definiteness it is, I think, artistically more successful. The poem is an indirect, even oblique, criticism of Symbolist poetry and its pursuit of an inhuman purity. The poet Winters specifically had in mind when he wrote it was Mallarmé, who deliberately attempted to rid poetic language of rational meaning and to achieve in the process a de-intellectualized, purely connotative state, which Winters saw as almost the essence of evil, even though he was strongly attracted to it. The entire poem follows:

The little snake now grieves
With whispering pause, and slow,
Uncertain where to go
Among the glassy leaves,
Pale angel that deceives.

With tongue too finely drawn,
Too pure, too tentative,
He needs but move to live,
Yet where he was is gone;
He loves the quiet lawn.

Kin to the petal, cool,
Translucent, veined, firm,
The fundamental worm,
The undefined fool,
Dips to the icy pool.

The best commentary on the poem is Winters' own, found in "By Way of Clarification," written in response to Alan Stephens, who, in an earlier essay, had cited the poem as an instance of what he called Winters' "cultishness."¹⁵

The grief and uncertainty (for their own sake) are romantic traits, and so is the hedonistic sensuousness throughout the poem; the snake is a deceiver, and this is always true of the indefinable and shifting perception; his tongue is too pure, and pure poetry, the extreme form of romantic poetry, is poetry as free as possible from concept, from definition; lines eight and nine describe the snake but also summarize the romantic doctrine to the effect that true being can be found only in the moment of change. ... the last stanza continues with these ideas, but its first two lines emphasize the remoteness of the snake from all human concerns or intelligence, and the remoteness is proper to both vehicle and tenor.¹⁶

About the last line of the poem, Howard Kaye writes in "The Post-Symbolist Poetry of Yvor Winters":

The last line of the poem sounds like pure description, but in context has considerable
abstract significance. It suggests something more specific than a sense of strangeness or death. The icy pool is associated with the remoteness from human concerns which is a property of the Symbolist image, with the unimaginable world where Mallarmé's swans float, and with the fatal effect on the human intelligence of following an aesthetic like Mallarmé's.

In its absence of thought, in its freedom from concept and definition, the serpent is Winters' coolest, most effective image of almost pure evil, if such a thing can be imagined. Yet such purity is rarely encountered in the human world; there, more often than not, man has to deal with degrees of evil. This fact raises the following question: If evil is defined as the absence of thought, what then is to be man's proper attitude toward the natural world, which is necessarily "thoughtless," as well as to his own body, which, taken by itself, is just as "thoughtless" as nature itself?

2. "The Brutal Earth"

Winters was attracted to nature as few other poets are in the twentieth century. He experienced pantheistic trances in boyhood, in which he felt, as he describes the experience in "On Rereading a Passage from John Muir," like "one forever by the dripping tree, / Paradisaic in his pristine peace." Not just the "religion" of nature, but the science of it held his attention. He thought
seriously at one time of studying biology at Stanford, and in later life, as Donald Davie points out in a personal memoir of the poet, he could describe the migratory habits of certain birds in bewilderingly minute detail.\textsuperscript{18} In his poetry itself he has one of the clearest eyes for natural detail of any poet in the twentieth century, with only Thomas Hardy as a close rival. In his criticism, the formulation of the principles operating in post-Symbolist poetry places the image drawn from the natural world on an equal footing with abstract thought. As he says in a criticism of J. V. Cunningham, "We live in a physical universe, and we have senses as well as rational faculties, and the physical universe affects the lives and understanding of most of us profoundly.\textsuperscript{19} Yet for all this attraction to nature, and the attention he gives even to its minute detail, there is, nevertheless, in both his poetry and criticism, a certain Manichaean tendency to view the natural world as the domain of disorder and evil. "The ocean is the home of demons and symbols of evil too numerous to mention," he says in his essay on Melville.\textsuperscript{20} He develops the same thought in a passage of great rhetorical power in the same essay:

\begin{quote}
The sea is the realm of the half-known, at once of perception and of peril; it is infested by subtle and malignant creatures, bent on destruction; it is governed by tremendous, destructive, and unpredictable forces, the storms, calms, currents, tides, depths, and distances, amid
\end{quote}
which one can preserve oneself by virtue only of the greatest skill and then but precariously and from moment to moment.

A companion piece to the Melville essay is "The Slow Pacific Swell," a poem in heroic couplets which is one of Winters' greatest achievements. In it the sea threatens everything distinctively human. The conclusion is particularly powerful. The sea there assumes an intention of almost conscious and deliberate bestiality:

By night a chaos of commingling power,  
The whole Pacific hovers hour by hour.  
The slow Pacific swell stirs on the sand,  
Sleeping to sink away, withdrawing land,  
Heaving and wrinkled in the moon, and blind;  
Or gathers seaward, ebbing out of mind.

In other poems the scene shifts from the sea to the land, yet the idea persists of nature as meaningless and thoughtlessly destructive. Consider the following passages from some key poems:

The calloused grass lies hard  
Against the cracking plain:  
Life is a grayish stain;  
The salt-marsh hems my yard.  
from "By the Road to the Air-Base"

This life is not our life; nor for our wit  
The sweetness of these shades; these are alone.  
There is no wisdom here; seek not for it!  
This is the shadow of the vast madrone.  
from "The Manzanita"

Small though its corner be, the weed  
Will yet intrude its creeping beard;
The harsh blade and the hairy seed
Recall the brutal earth we feared.

And if no water touch the dust
In some far corner, and one dare
To breathe upon it, one may trust
The spectre on the summer air:

The risen dust alive with fire,
The fire made visible, a blur
Interrate, the pervasive ire
Of foxtail and of hoarhound burr.
   from "Much in Little"

And where is that which made you just?
Which gathered light about the bone
And moved the tongue, in earth's despite?
   from "The Cremation"

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
Objuration without word.
   from "A Dream Vision," Part Two of
   "Two Old-Fashioned Songs"

In some of Winters' poems, such as "Sir Gawain and
the Green Knight," natural detail symbolizes in an ob­
viously allegorical way certain irrational forces in man
himself. In others, such as "On a View of Pasadena from
the Hills" and "The California Oaks," the beauties of a
natural landscape are recognized as such, and their de­
struction by modern technological society is protested
against. Yet in the poems from which the above passages
have been taken, and they are the majority, nature is
relentlessly opposed to thought, and in this opposition
it is viewed as containing in and of itself the principle of disorder and evil.

Part of the explanation of such an attitude lies in Winters' historical position. He came after the Romantics, whose claims for nature as a moral function Winters finally saw as unrealistic and unintelligible. To submit to nature, as the Romantics recommended, was for him to submit to undifferentiated flux and to destroy one's humanity. Since he himself actively followed this Romantic procedure during the first part of his career, wrote poems about it, and lived according to its principles, he knew the temptation at a level deeper than the merely theoretical. He also knew its consequences. As he is on public record as having said, he came close to a state of clinical madness. Consequently, his reaction against the moralism of nature was bound to be intense, even at times extreme. Howard Kaye states the matter quite succinctly:

J. V. Cunningham, who called him a "congenital romantic" despite Winters' notorious repudiation of romanticism, recognized that Winters' concern with self-control arises out of a specifically romantic context. The temptations which the poet of "The Slow Pacific Swell" must resist are the temptations which Wordsworth and Crane invited.22

"Where is the meaning that I found?" he asks himself in "A Summer Commentary," a poem concerned with his childhood experiences in the natural world. It is a rhetorical question, the answer to which is negative. "The impersonal
universe lying in sunlight" is really an "old penumbra of the ground," as he calls it in the poem, divorced from intelligibility and foreign to human values.

The more significant part of the explanation lies in his theism and his definition of evil. The God Whom one posits as first principle is bound necessarily to furnish one with the absolute standard by which everything in the intellectual and physical worlds is judged. What participates in that God or is analogous to Him in whatever degree becomes thereby good; what falls off from such participation is evil, the degree to which it falls off determining the degree of its evil. Winters' God was Pure Thought, Pure Mind, Who is activated by no providential concern for preserving and ordering either the human or natural world. His isolation in this respect is as absolute as Aristotle's Unmoved Mover's. Since nature by its very definition cannot participate in thought, it inevitably will be sloughed off, according to Winters' vision of things, into a penumbra of unreality. Man may do what he can with it, and the image of the garden becomes crucially important in Winters' poetry. But the "wilderness" of pure nature, inherently meaningless and indifferent to the human realm, finally will have the last word:

The drift of leaves grows deep, the grass
Is longer everywhere I pass.
And listen! where the wind is heard,
The surface of the garden's blurred--
It is the passing wilderness.
The garden will be something less
When others win it back from change.
We shall not know it then; a strange
Presence will be musing there.
Ruin has touched familiar air. . .

The great difference, from which everything else
follows, between Winters and Aquinas in this matter is
that Aquinas' definition of God, not as Thought, but as
Existence, enables nature in its own limited way to
participate by analogy in the Deity. If nature cannot
think, it at least exists, and in so far as it does exist,
it achieves meaning and order in its admittedly restricted
resemblance to a God Who is defined, in what Gilson calls
in The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy "the metaphysics
of Exodus," as I-AM-WHO-AM. Furthermore Gilson declares
in the same passage:

For St. Augustine, as for St. Thomas, coeli
enarrant gloriam Dei, and if the heavens de­
clare His glory it is because they bear His
likeness; only, with St. Thomas, the divine
likeness sinks for the first time into the
heart of nature, goes down beyond order, number
and beauty, reaches and saturates the very
physical structure, and touches the very ef­
ficacy of causality.24

Even matter itself cannot be construed as a cause of dis­
order, much less evil:

. . . matter is not even the cause of the
possibility of evil, nor the reason for its
existence; in itself it implies no tendency
to disorder. As God created it the material
world was excellent: \textit{valde bonum}, and so it would have remained had not a sin that came to birth in the realm of the spirit, and not in that of matter, brought disorder into matter.\textsuperscript{25}

I go into the differences between Winters and Aquinas on this score in some detail to correct a view currently gaining acceptance among certain of Winters' critics that Aquinas was the decisive influence in his notion of the ultimate nature of Being. No doubt there are similarities between the two. Winters was bound to be attracted to Thomistic intellectualism and its rather uncompromising separation of faith and reason. But Aquinas would never have understood nature in any form as a "chaos of commingling power" or a "brutal earth," precisely because nature, participating in the existence of Pure Existence, was for him saturated with order and intelligibility.

Winters' position, on the other hand, is more like the general drift of pre-Christian classical thought, for which matter and the sensible world are tainted in varying degrees with unintelligibility and disorder. Plato often speaks of the body as the prison or tomb of the soul. He never thought knowledge of the sensible world was possible because of the contingency and flux to which that world was subjected. Even Aristotle posits a "mischievous element" in nature, so that the potentiality of matter in his system is the cause of corruptions, alterations, monsters, etc.\textsuperscript{26} What is real for him is not so
much sensible reality as the intelligible form which the mind abstracts out of the material object, and, as many critics have pointed out, his position is not that dissimilar to Plato's.

There are also vestiges of Protestantism in Winters' thought, which Howard Baker alluded to in a very early review of Winters in the *New Republic*. Luther and Calvin, in a certain sense, revert to the classical view of matter by totally rejecting the Catholic position as expressed in Aquinas. For both of them the effects of original sin invade the very heart of nature and contaminate it at its source, so that nature becomes "irremediably corrupted by sin." As a result, an impassable gulf exists between God and nature, just as in Winters' vision of things, and the true Lutheran's retreat inside his own soul to seek God is also similar in its general outline to Winters' reversion to Mind to find there the order and intelligibility that were horrifyingly absent for him in the "burning ground" of nature.

I do not wish to give the impression that Winters was a doctrinaire Puritan who cut himself off from the contaminating influence of the natural world. I deliberately used the words "tendency" and "vestige" in describing this strain in his thought. And Kenneth Fields is quite right in criticizing the view put forward by Paul Ramsey and James Dickey, among others, that Winters
divorced himself from imagistic richness and embraced an arid classicism. The poems themselves, with their own particularity and feel, not only for the temptations, but for the beauties of the natural world, are evidence enough that such a view is wrong. For Winters the relationship of man with nature is complex. It is true he saw dangers in the natural world, but it is equally true he saw intellectual and spiritual benefits from the poet's temporarily immersing himself in sensory experience. Following Melville in identifying the sea with the inhuman and the half-known, and the land with the known and human, Winters states:

The relationship of man to the known and to the half known, however, is not a simple and static one; he cannot merely stay on land, or he will perish of imperception, but must venture on the sea, without losing his relationship to the land; we have, in brief, the relationship of principle to preception, or, in other words, the problem of judgement.29

"The Slow Pacific Swell" is concerned precisely with such a relationship. Fields points out how the two allegorical realms of land and sea interpenetrate each other, correcting each's peculiar deficiencies, and how the poet, after his immersion in the sea in the middle stanza, situates himself in the last one near the "limber margin" of the sea, so that his "principle" may receive the benefits of "perception."30 And there is the hauntingly beautiful late poem, "A Summer Commentary," with nature smearing

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brandy on the trampling boot of the poet and "sending it sweeter on its way."

Yet none of this contradicts what we have said earlier about Winters' Manichaean view of nature. Even in "A Summer Commentary" the poet's boot is a trampling one and he leaves the natural world because no meaning is to be found within the circle of its "old penumbra"; if the two realms interpenetrate each other in "The Slow Pacific Swell," they nevertheless are kept distinct, and the sea is still chaos. However one may describe Winters' view so that justice is done to its complexities, the following are the facts one has to reckon with. He was attracted to the natural world and knew it in detail; he at one time accepted the Romantic interpretation of it, but later reacted violently against it, seeing at times evil where the Romantics nearly at all times saw "morality"; if he knew the poet must venture into the realm of perception, he also knew he does so at considerable risk and peril; nature in and of itself is meaningless and foreign to human values, and man encounters in it evil and disorder.

3. The Debate of Flesh and Spirit

One's attitude toward the human body is just as instructive in determining the final consequences of one's philosophical position as one's attitude toward nature
or the mind itself. We have just cited the Platonic notion of the body as the tomb or prison of the soul, whose salvation depends upon its liberation from such a corrupting confinement. "Think nothing of the body," Marcus Aurelius tells us in the Meditations, "of its viscid blood, its bones, its web of nerves and veins and arteries." Remember, he states later on, to withdraw "into the little field of self" where things "can never touch the soul." Plotinus more insistently recommends separation from the contaminating body, "slave to the corporal nature," as he calls it, "which has barely preserved a trace of the soul." The union of the soul with the body is not essential or necessary in the definition of the person. In Plato's words, man is a "soul using a body," but he is no more his body than a worker is the tools he uses or than any of us is his own garments. Later Avicenna, the disciple of Aristotle, will never admit that the human intellect is the substantial form of its body. "To say that would be to suppose a dreadful confusion of essences," as Gilson paraphrases him in Being and Some Philosophers.

In Christianity, with the Incarnation as its central dogma, we see a reversal of this classical attitude toward the body, which now enters into the human composition as a necessary and essential element. In the Gospels Christ ministers to both body and soul, and promises salvation, not to the soul, but to the whole man. All of St. Paul's
Dogmatic teachings revolve around the fact of the resurrection of the body, so that henceforth the Christian hope, in the words of St. Anselm's *Cur Deus homo*, is "that the whole man shall enjoy a happy immortality both in body and in soul." No one goes as far as Aquinas does in this matter. For him the soul is united with the body in order that the soul might perfect its nature. Separated from the body, the soul is in a deprived state. "It is clear then that it was for the soul's good that it was united to a body," he emphatically states in the *Summa*. Thomistic intellectualism is partly the reason for his elevating the body to such a high philosophical position. In Aquinas' epistemology the origin of man's knowledge lies in the body's senses, which furnish the mind with the essential material for its intellectual operations. Without a body the mind cannot know: "Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things." In the *Contra gentiles* he speaks of "the human intellect, to which it is connatural to derive its knowledge from sensible things." Protestantism reverses this attitude by returning, as we have seen earlier in our discussion of nature and sensory reality, back to what E. R. Dodds calls in his important study, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, "classical puritanism." It is no accident that Renaissance
Protestant theology accepts Plato and so bitterly rejects the Aristotle of Catholic Medieval philosophy.

Winters' attitude toward the body and its union with the mind is just as complex as his attitude to the natural world. Like Aquinas, he posits the senses as the beginning point in the process by which the intellect achieves abstract knowledge. In his argument with John Crowe Ransom over nominalism, he designates his own philosophical position as the moderate realism of Aristotle and Aquinas. There is no doubt in his mind as to the reality of things nor that their apprehension by the senses is anything but a good. A healthy relationship between "things" and "ideas" is the condition of knowledge itself. And such a relationship presupposes the intermediciy of the body. This position not only affords Winters an escape from nominalism, but also from solipsism, the dilemma that haunted him in his early poetry.

As Douglas Peterson states the situation,

It is only through a conceptual system, Winters would maintain, grounded in scrupulous empirical investigation that the world of particulars can be rendered intelligible. For him idea and thing are interdependant. For the observer, ideas render things intelligible and things confirm the reality of the ideas of which they are instances. Such a system not only affords the observer with a way of understanding the world he experiences as extended to himself; it also enables him to perceive himself as a part of that world rather than as isolated within it in the prison of his own consciousness.
In one of the most affirmative poems Winters ever wrote, "The Marriage," he records actual delight in the body and its sensuous apprehension of the physical world outside it, a delight intensified in that its context is sexual.

Incarnate for our marriage you appeared,
Flesh living in the spirit and endeared
By minor graces and slow sensual change.
Through every nerve we made our spirits range.
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, not to return again.

The sexual union itself is described in the following lines:

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 . . . .

One might describe the spirit behind this poem as that of a gentle, sensual Platonism. Though the delight in the particulars of the physical world is actual and unmistakable, yet those particulars pass away or change, and final supremacy is given the mind and spirit, which are at all times kept distinct from the body. The spirit uses the body by "ranging" along the nerves in the apprehension and accumulation of rich sensory experience,
and the mind is "fed" in the process as the ultimate reality. Even in the sexual union itself, the lovers experience the same extra-physical ecstasy the lovers do in John Donne's famous poem. They so die out of their bodies, to use the Renaissance pun, that they can dispense with their bodies and say "it was the living spirit that I kissed."

In other poems the union of the mind and body does not result in the same sort of felicity as it does in "The Marriage." A philosophical hesitancy, bred ultimately of his theism, sets in and causes the poet to view the body suspiciously as a likely impediment to the life of the mind, even while Winters recognizes that the mind depends upon the body for the material of thought. In "To My Infant Daughter" the poet anticipates with apprehension the dangers and obscurities involved in the flesh and the disasters which "earth" seems deliberately to be preparing for his child:

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

In "Chiron" the "stallion body" of the centaur frustrates and finally defeats the "scholar," so that Chiron is driven at the end of the poem "to express the wise man's preference," as Grosvenor Powell says, "... for death rather than life." The body brings on the death
of the mind, though between the mind's "magnitude inviolate" and "the stallion body" there is an absolute cleavage. The poem acquires further tragic dimensions in that its total context is Chiron's admission of another defeat: his failure to educate Achilles sufficiently so that the hero could have saved himself from the destructive passions of the body. I quote the whole poem:

I, who taught Achilles, saw
Leap beyond me by its law,
By intrinsic law destroyed,
Genius in itself alloyed.

Dying scholar, dim with fact,
By the stallion body racked,
Studying my long defeat,
I have mastered Jove's deceit.

Now my head is bald and dried,
Past division simplified:
On the edge of naught I wait,
Magnitude inviolate.

One of Winters' most complete statements on the subject occurs in "A Prayer for my Son." He recognizes in the poem the sensory origin of knowledge, but he emphasizes the danger of spiritual and intellectual blindness inherent in the mind's union with the body. The epigraph for the poem is a line from "The Earth-Bound," a poem by his wife, Janet Lewis, in which, if I am not mistaken, she gently criticizes her husband's severe position by stating the body's case in more positive terms. The line
is: "Tangled with earth all ways, we move." The significant portion of Winters' own poem follows:

To steep the mind in sense,
Yet never lose the aim,
Will make the world grow dense,
Yet by this way we came.
Earth and mind are not one,
But they are so entwined,
That this, my little son,
May yet one day go blind.

Finally, in "To the Holy Spirit," a poem which will be treated in greater detail in the next chapter, the poet addresses the Deity and contrasts the "simplicity" of God's Pure Mind with the impure "complexity" of his own mind, mixed as it is with a body that eventually and inevitably causes its death. This entanglement is lamented in unmistakably tragic terms as nothing short of a complete intellectual disaster, and the desire for disentanglement is as strong as anything in Plotinus. In fact, the vision might be called gnostic with little or no exaggeration: God is indirectly criticized for the "blemish" of creation, to use Paul Valéry's phrase, especially the creation of the "irregular body," which belongs to the "fallen sons," and the two realms of sense and thought, time and eternity, are radically separated from each other. There is none of the flexible interdependence and interpenetration which we have noted in other poems. The scene of the poem is a deserted graveyard in the Salinas Valley in California:
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.

With the evidence here collected, one can say, I think, that there is a marked tendency on the part of Winters toward "classical puritanism," to use Dodds' term again, and that he deviates rather sharply from the Thomistic position on the matter. He maintains a philosophically tight dichotomy between the mind and the body, and the union of the two in the human composite, according to his vision of things, is a possible source of intellectual confusion and disorder. The body, also, for him is involved with death, which, as we have already seen, inspired in him a sort of metaphysical horror just barely controlled by the rational mind. It is true he feels none of the disgust and contempt with which the extreme Puritan dismisses the body as corruption itself; there is, though, a sense of apprehension, a sort of philosophical hesitancy, which quickly at times erupts into actual suspicion. Man achieves knowledge because of his body and its senses, and yet, because of the potential disorder, even evil,
inherent in the flesh, he can just as well go spiritually and intellectually blind because of that same body.

The connection between this attitude and Winters' theism is not fortuitous. It necessarily develops from it. If God, as well as man's ultimate good, is defined in terms of thought, and evil in terms of an absence of thought, what else can one do but attempt to keep the mind as distinct as possible from the necessarily thoughtless body, if, that is, one wishes to achieve the good? Yet Winters' terms are more tragic than this statement indicates. As we shall see in our later discussion of "To the Holy Spirit," the achievement of the final good, even though man has an intense desire for it, is completely frustrated. Mind and body cannot be kept distinct from each other, and the body finally causes the destruction of the mind.

4. The Giant Movements

We see further consequences of Winters' theism and his definition of evil in his poems dealing with the larger context of society and the State. Taken as a whole, these are the most classical poems Winters wrote, standing out sharply, as they do, from the imagistic and post-Symbolist. Their subject matter is impersonal, the style plain and abstract, the point of view from which
they are written uncompromisingly moral. But certain
Romantic strains can be detected in their classical
texture. The pattern occurring in all of them is that
of an isolated figure protesting, not just against
particular forms of political corruption, but against
the very nature of the State itself in the modern world.
Like the "scientism" of "The Invaders," the State is
seen as a destructive abstraction, sometimes merely de­
void of human values, other times actively immoral:

He served that mathematic thing, the State.
   from "On the Death of Senator Thomas J. Walsh"

And he who having power would serve the State,
   Must now deceive corruption unto good . . . .
   from "The Prince"

Fool and scoundrel guide the State.
   from "Before Disaster"

The destructiveness of the abstraction is intensified
in those poems which have the Second World War as their
immediate background. The individual is caught up and
blindly killed in the "giant movements" of the State:

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

In the long path of lead
   That changes place like light
No shape of hand or head
   Means anything tonight.
   from "Night of Battle"
The private life is small;
And individual men
Are counted not at all.
Now life is general. . . .
from "To a Military Rifle"

The private life of the individual poet or scholar,
working in isolation, would "reembody mind," as Winters
says in "Ode on the Despoilers of Learning," and hold to

... what men had wrung
From struggle to atone
For man's stupidity
In labor and alone.

But such redemptive activity is either ignored or
rejected by the "giant movements" of the State. In one
of the most bitterly disillusioned poems Winters wrote,
"Defense of Empire," he speaks of this rejection and
isolation in personal terms:

The perils of immortal mind,
The core of empire in a word,
The worth of state grown hard to find
Because true meaning is unheard;

The deviation from the strength
Which forms our motion, and the phrase
Which cheapens thought and yet at length
Would simulate more honest ways;

This fine deceit, this perfect rift,
Dissociating thought from sense,
I traced in quiet; and the shift
Of wrath was all my recompense.

The thought and feeling of this poem is echoed in a
moving passage from the Introduction to Forms of Discovery,
written immediately before his death by cancer in 1968,
when the United States was undergoing the tragic dislocations of another war. The passage occurs just before Winters confesses he is pessimistic about the future of the human race.

The practical mind, the mind which conquers, rules, invents, manufactures, and sells, has dominated every civilization and ultimately destroyed every state. The great philosopher, the great poet, the great painter or musician has almost always lived precariously on the fringe of the state, sometimes as the servant or dependant of the "great," sometimes in poverty, sometimes in the priesthood, in our time as one of the most contemned members of the academic profession. But he has created and preserved civilization, often working in the rubble of a collapsing state.\(^{46}\)

There are other poems not on the general nature of the State, but on particular acts of political corruption and injustice which the State has committed. In the concluding section of "Theseus: A Trilogy" the hero in his old age assumes the leadership of Athens and attempts to establish "immitigable good" there, but, instead, is betrayed by the State and exiled to Scyros where Lycomedes, acting as the agent of Athens, pushes him to his death in the sea. In "Socrates" the philosopher, having asked the crucial question, "What is the city?," is executed by the State for having tried to answer his own question in philosophical, moral terms. The best of these poems is "John Sutter," in which the innocent Sutter, on whose land gold was discovered in California in 1848, is destroyed
by an "evil with no human sense" in the form of greed and rapacity. It is true the poem does not have the overt political context of "Theseus" or "Socrates," but instead the inchoate social disorder existing in California at that time; yet its final stanza alludes to the failure of the United States government to perform any judicial act of restitution for what Sutter suffered and lost at the hands of the mob. The State overlooked the evil and made no attempt to assuage the "final drouth of penitential tears."

The three poems on the David Lamson case deserve special treatment in this connection, and I should like to go into that case in some detail. Lamson was the sales manager of the Stanford University Press and was a neighbor of Winters in Palo Alto, although the two men did not become friends until the case was well under way. On Memorial Day, 1933, while Lamson was raking and burning leaves in his backyard, his wife suffered a freakish accident in the bathroom of their house, which resulted in her death. "There is every reason to believe," Winters states in a defense he wrote for Lamson in the October 10, 1934 issue of The New Republic, "that she slipped in the tub while bathing, struck her head on the corner of the washbasin, turned in falling, hung helpless over the edge of the tub, and bled to death." When Lamson discovered her some forty or fifty minutes
afterwards, there was no evidence on her body or in the room itself of any attack or violent struggle on her part. The braids of her hair, intricately pleated, were still in place, though the back of her head was bashed in. The walls of the extremely small bathroom had been evenly and smoothly coated with her blood, which would have been impossible had there occurred the necessarily irregular movements of a violent struggle. And there were no bruises or any kind of marks on the rest of her body apart from the fatal head lesion. Yet when the police, who were immediately summoned to the scene, arrived, they became suspicious of the distraught Lamson, did only a ten-minute investigation of both the house and the yard outside, and, on the basis of a nine-inch length of pipe discovered in the rubbish Lamson had been burning, concluded the husband had bludgeoned his wife to death. He was arrested on the spot for first-degree murder.

On the basis of the police report, the State of California committed itself, apparently at all costs, to proving Lamson guilty and obtaining a death sentence, in the face of evidence proving the man's innocence, evidence which the State either tried to suppress or rule inadmissible in court. In the words of a Time magazine report of April 13, 1936, "It (i.e. the State) spent $60,000 to try him, retry him, mistry him, retry him again."
At one time Lamson was found guilty and was sentenced to hang (the trial was later judged a mistrial); during the year spent on death row at San Quentin he wrote his apologia, later published as *We Who Are About to Die*. Winters visited him there and later wrote of his friend

Who, though human thought decayed,  
Yet the dissolution stayed,  
Gracious in that evil shade.

The whole ordeal lasted for three years. When the third trial resulted in a hung jury, the judge finally set Lamson free.

Winters became involved in the case quite early. In fact, a friend of his who knew him quite well at the time has said that he became obsessed with it. He stopped all creative and critical work so that he could concentrate all his time and energy on Lamson's defense. With Frances Theresa Russell of the Stanford English Department, he co-authored a hundred page summary of the case. He helped in raising a defense fund and in organizing expert witness, which he later saw used or not used at the whim of the presiding judge. All in all, the whole affair was a decisive event in his life and exerted an influence that went beyond the three poems he wrote on the subject, poems which are not among his best work. It caused him to become further disillusioned with the academic community, his relations with that community.
being always at best uncertain and suspicious; as he says in "To David Lamson," the "special intellect" of the scholars who failed to come to Lamson's defense blinded them to "virtue in extremity" and brutalized their feelings. It also further confirmed his suspicions of the modern "abstract" state, which here victimized an innocent individual in a case which was described at the time by August Vollmer, professor of Criminology at the University of California, as "the most amazing situation that has ever risen in American jurisprudence--a man sentenced to hang for a crime never committed and the evidence itself proving his innocence." Experiencing at first hand and in concrete terms "the brutal power" of the state, Winters himself came close, as he confesses in one of the three poems, to a complete nervous collapse.

In more general terms, the David Lamson case, along with the suicide of his friend Hart Crane, which occurred immediately before the Lamson affair, furnished Winters with an instance of evil that assumed almost metaphysical proportions in his mind, apart from its specific political, judicial context. "Lamson . . . was the victim of accident," Winters writes in summary at the end of his New Republic article already cited, "and of the irreducible ugliness and irrationality of the human mind." Such a vision of "the irreducible ugliness and irrationality of the human mind" is bound to be extremely
disturbing to one who, like Winters, defines being and the good in exclusive intellectual terms. In fact, a moral system of "intellectualism" will thrust upon one more instances of evil than a system which locates evil, not in a corrupted intellect, but rather in a corrupted will and its intention. Peter Abelard is a good representative of the latter system. He went to extreme limits in the matter, and restricted the area of evil to just the intention, so that an objective evil act can easily be interpreted in his morality as a good if the subjective intention of the agent is good. Now, it is a fairly safe statement to say that most human beings have good intentions, but it is dangerously naive to say they have such good intellects. Winters was acutely sensitive to this fact. "Few men are born with sufficient intelligence to profit by more than a small part of the tradition available," he writes in the Introduction to Forms of Discovery; elsewhere he says life will be painful if one expects more than two or three men to behave rationally in a given century. The conclusion forced upon a moral intellectualist holding such a bleak view of the race is that most human beings are, or can easily become, morally ugly and vicious. Of course, Winters would say that civilization provides the race with habits and inhibitions that somewhat control its evil possibilities, but he also thought this
control was only uncertainly maintained and could easily be dislocated. In so many of his poems he speaks of the rational mind holding on to itself only moment to moment. Nowhere is this dislocation more likely to occur than when men collect themselves together into a mob and become ruled by blind passion, such as we saw in "John Sutter." But what Winters faces in his political poems is a far more frightening dislocation: the dehumanization of the State itself into a morally vicious power. And the David Lamson case furnished him with an historical example in his own backyard, as it were, of how easily the State can become subverted into "brutal power, judicial and sedate," which defiantly refuses to understand the logical deductions of expert witnesses defending an innocent man charged with murder.

When I say that Winters' intellectual concept of being provides him with more examples of moral evil to deal with than does voluntarism, I do not at all mean to imply that he projected evil where it did not exist, nor that his criticism of the State is grounded, not on fact, but on a neurotic imagination. As for the latter, the most cursory glance at twentieth century history will quickly disabuse one of that notion. Never before has more massive evil been committed in the name of the State than in this century; Moloch seems the enlightened one in comparison to the State-god of the purges and
the concentration camps. I mean only to say that, given Winters' principles, one is bound to interpret certain situations as evil, which will receive slightly different interpretations, as the case might be, in a voluntaristic moral system, which is finally based on a more optimistic view of human nature. Doubtless, in most cases "intellectualism" and "voluntarism" will agree on the moral verdict of a given act; the intellect and the will are too intimately connected with each other for one to become cleanly dissociated from the other. And if "intellectualism" provides its followers with more instances of evil, it is because its higher, more rigorous standards demand more from human nature than does the laxer "voluntarism" of someone like Peter Abelard. But even if one ultimately disagrees with Winters' position on the matter, one is forced, I think, to recognize and admire its severe grandeur.

It is also a lonely grandeur. The final consequence of such a position for Winters was isolation. He did not make a gnostic retreat away from philosophical objectivity or personal political involvement--he remained committed to liberal political and social causes to the end of his life; but in the philosophical and artistic realm he felt compelled, on account of his allegiance to the intellect, to maintain himself aloof from the irrationalism of those "giant movements" he saw undermining
and destroying, not only the philosophical and artistic life, but also the political and social life, of the modern world. The figure of the isolated poet confronting, usually late at night, a world on the point of disintegrating into irrational madness, occurs over and over in his poetry. Heracles, who allegorically represents "the artist in hand-to-hand or semi-intuitive combat with experience," finally isolates himself from the imperfect shade of Deianira and by himself "raids eternal silence to eternal ends." The young pilots, whose cause Winters connects with his own, are alone as they "learn to control the earth and air" in "Defense of Empire." There is also the isolation of Theseus, Socrates, John Sutter, John Day, and Winters himself, both early and late, who in various poems are left helpless at the end to confront and deal with, as best they can, the "irreducible ugliness and irrationality of the human mind." In one of his last poems, "To the Moon," Winters addresses in his old age the intellectually severe Muse he had followed all his life and says

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

In two occasional poems he recommends solitude as the necessary condition of both moral and intellectual excellence:
Take few men to your heart!
Unstable, fierce, unkind
The ways that men impart.
from "To My Infant Daughter"

The angry blood burns low.
Some friend of lesser mind
Discerns you not; but so
Your solitude's defined.
from "To a Young Writer:

The best poem on the subject of this necessary solitude is "The Journey," perhaps because its treatment of solitude is oblique and not immediately obvious. The poet's journey through the raw Western towns is both autobiographical and allegorical. The vision of moral chaos and of an almost formless social order vitiated by the irrational is rendered in detail:

And I remembered with the early sun
That foul-mouthed barber back in Pendleton,
The sprawling streets, the icy station bench,
The Round-up pennants, the latrinal stench.
These towns are cold by day, the flesh of vice
Raw and decisive, and the will precise;
At night the turbulence of drink and mud,
Blue glare of gas, the dances dripping blood,
First thudding murder in the shadowy air,
Exhausted whores, sunk to a changeless stare.

At the end of the journey, after he has dissociated himself from those determined by earth and gravity, the poet finds himself alone, "in naked sunlight on a naked world."
NOTES

1 Allen Tate, "Homage to Yvor Winters," Sequoia, Winter, 1961, p. 3.

2 Winters, Before Disaster (Tryon, North Carolina: The Tryon Pamphlets, 1934), p. iii.

3 Winters, Function, p. 162.


5 See "Notes on Contemporary Criticism," Uncollected, p. 224.

6 Winters, Forms, p. 197.

7 Powell, p. 166.

8 Winters, Defense, p. 214.

9 Winters, Function, p. 164.

10 Winters, Poems (Los Altos: The Gyroscope Press, 1940), third page of unpaginated "Notes."

11 Winters, Uncollected, p. 221.

12 Winters, Uncollected, p. 221.

13 Winters, Uncollected, p. 222.

14 Winters, Poems, first and second page of unpaginated "Notes."


16 Winters, "By Way of Clarification," Twentieth Century Literature, 10 (1964), 133.


20 Winters, Defense, p. 201.
25 Gilson, Spirit, p. 452.
26 Quoted and translated by Gilson, Spirit, p. 452.
28 Gilson, Spirit, p. 244.
32 Marcus Aurelius, p. 64.
35 Etienne Gilson, Being and Some Philosophers (Toronto: Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952), p. 76.
36 St. Anselm, St. Anselm, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle: The Open Court, 1944), p. 177.
38 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 58.


42 Douglas L. Peterson, "Yvor Winters' 'By the Road to the Air-Base,'" *Southern Review*, NS 15 (1979), 573.

43 Powell, p. 127.

44 Lewis, p. 10.


47 My reformation is derived from the following accounts: David Lamson, *We Who Are About to Die* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1935); Yvor Winters, "More Santa Clara Justice," *New Republic*, 80 (1934), 239-41; various accounts in *Time*, especially the one of April 13, 1936. There is also Yvor Winters and Frances Theresa Russell, *The Case of David Lamson: A Summary* (San Francisco: Knight-Counihan Co., 1934), a copy of which I have been unable to locate.


49 *Time*, 13 April 1936.

50 From a private conversation with Donald E. Stanford.


54 Winters, *Defense*, p. 100.


CHAPTER IV
THE UNFLESHED EYE

1. An Explication of "To the Holy Spirit"

"To the Holy Spirit" was first published in Poetry magazine in 1946, just a year before he made his theistic "confession" in the Introduction to In Defense of Reason. It is his most complete statement on the subject, and one that also summarizes a number of other themes that preoccupied him all during his poetic career. Metrically and stylistically, the poem is a complex achievement. Working in the iambic trimeter line, Winters varies the pattern with a number of initial trochaic substitutions that slow down the movement of the line, which in the short trimeter line is apt to become too rapid for the meditative tone the poem aspires to. He also varies the rhyme scheme of each of the four stanzas, with one time as many as four lines intervening between the rhyming words. Stylistically, "To the Holy Spirit" combines elements of both the plain style and the post-Symbolist method which Winters "discovered" and analyzed in the fifth chapter of Forms of Discovery. The plain style is
evidenced by the absence of rhetorical embellishments, by the frequency of abstract statement, particularly in those passages addressing the Holy Spirit directly, and by the tone of disillusionment and resignation which pervades the entire poem. Donald E. Stanford has called it "the impersonal style," with imagery reduced to a minimum; yet the imagery that is there is post-Symbolist in its combination of the sensory and the intellectual. Such imagery is appropriate to a poem like "To the Holy Spirit," since one of its themes is the intertwining in the human being of mind and flesh. As Kenneth Fields has noted, "The descriptive details . . . are as important as the abstractions because the theme requires us to recognize that 'pure mind' is embodied in the flesh; it takes the soul to the brink of the incomprehensible to realize that man's spiritual and mortal natures cannot be separated." The procedure of the poem is also post-Symbolist in that its transitions are effected, not by strict logic as in the plain style poems of the Renaissance, but by controlled association as in such modern poems as Valéry's "Le Cimetière Marin" and Stevens' "Sunday Morning."

Intellectually the poem is no less complex. It deals with the greatest and most inclusive of subjects, the human relation to divinity; yet Winters complicates this basic theme by introducing others that impinge directly or indirectly on it. The relationship between God and
man leads the poet to consider "the relationship between mind and body, between flesh and spirit" in man himself, as Stanford characterizes the theme; the perfection of the divine mind, in turn, suggests as its opposite the imperfection of the mortal mind. The poem also deals with the irreducible elements of illusion and deceit found in human perception, which Winters contrasts to the perfect intellectual vision of God. The shifting and indeterminate universe of modern science, the illusive and error-producing object of human perception, is subtly implied in the first stanza of the poem in much the same way as the pigeons embody that same universe in the concluding stanza of "Sunday Morning." Finally, "To the Holy Spirit" is a meditation on death such as one finds more frequently in seventeenth-century literature than in modern literature; in it the soul is taken "to the brink of the incomprehensible" where it recognizes and accepts what for Winters was the tragic fact of human annihilation. The only consolation it offers the reader is the severe control and moral dignity with which the poet faces such a catastrophe.

Before we can begin a discussion of the poem in detail, we must first settle the question of the identity of the Holy Spirit. (It is curious at first that Winters chooses the third person of the Trinity for his title; the most likely reason for his choice is the frequent
synonymy of "spirit" and "mind" and the fact that both the Father and the Son would have been too personal for his philosophical position.) Some readers have inter­preted the Holy Spirit in a rather loose allegorical fashion as a projection or idealization of Winters' own mind, thereby depriving the Spirit of objective existence. In part Howard Kaye commits himself to such a definition:

Although there are nostalgic connections, this Spirit should not be identified with the God of St. Thomas Aquinas. The uncertainties of the fourth stanza seem to rule out the Spirit as a God of redemption and resurrection—or at least to cast these qualities into the area of the undemonstrable. The Holy Spirit is pure mind, the spirit of reason. He is a projection of human reason, a kind of idealization of Winters' own mind; but his existence is independent of Winters.⁴

Kaye is correct in saying that the Spirit is neither the God of Aquinas nor the God of redemption and resurrection; notwithstanding the title, the poem is nowhere Christian. But one may wonder how He can be both a projection of the human mind and independent of it at the same time. It would be more correct, I think, to say that reason itself is an attempted projection of God that fails in the poem because of the mind's entanglement in flesh. The evidence found in the poem itself points to a reality for the Holy Spirit external to the human mind. At no place in it does Winters identify that mind with God, nor does he idealize his own mind into a godhead--
the human mind is always spoken of as mortal and contingent, God's as eternal and self-sufficient. In fact, a cleavage is found to exist between the two, even though the human mind makes periodic and intermittent contact with the divine mind. Besides, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the creator of both man and the universe. Such ascription is implied in the first line of the third stanza, "These are thy fallen sons," and stated explicitly in another poem, "A Prayer for My Son," written a few years before "To the Holy Spirit":

    Eternal Spirit, you
    Whose will maintains the world,
    Who thought and made it true....

For once in modern literature, we are dealing here with a poem written from the point of view of theistic absolutism.

    I should now like to discuss each of the four stanzas of the poem separately, going into them in some detail, and then I would like to draw whatever conclusions seem necessary. We should first note the italicized words with which Winters introduces the poem, from a deserted graveyard in the Salinas Valley. We shall discover that deserted works on more than one level of meaning in the poem. First of all, the graveyard is deserted by human attention because it is located in the uninhabitable area of the Salinas Valley in California, but in
what other symbolic way it may be deserted will become apparent as we discuss the poem. The first stanza follows:

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.

Beside introducing the poem and describing in some detail its location, the first stanza develops through that description one of the central ideas of the poem, namely, the indeterminancy of the physical world, including man's body, and the ambiguity and uncertainty found in the human perception and understanding of that world. In fact, the poet seems to suggest that knowledge of the physical world, in the Platonic sense of the word, is not possible for the human mind. The medium through which that world is seen is "immeasurable haze," which necessarily distorts all objects of human perception. And in the poet's own mind, the illusory persistence of the past, with its "golden river-beds," also interferes with any objective vision of things as they are. (The fragmentation of man's temporal order into time present and past can be contrasted to the eternal present of God's Pure Mind in the third stanza.) The poet's uncertain vision is like the trees, which "rise and thin
away"; if he is only uncertain about the immediate objects of perception, his uncertainty dissolves into total ambiguity when he directs his attention to the vision of the "bare hills" which loom beyond the trees. In the early poems these hills are always associated with death; here they are related to those inhuman elements of the physical world that in the last analysis defy human apprehension and understanding. Because of its innate desire for order, the mind is driven in their presence to impose form and then to obtain some kind of meaning through artifice. As the poet sees the hills in the distance, enveloped in "immeasurable haze," they possess the "pure line" of a definable object. But such a line does not correspond to objective reality; it is an illusion which exists only in the mind of the observing poet. As Kaye says, "The hills . . . are hills only through the imposition of form by the poet's mind," a form which he goes on to say partakes more of the imagination than of reality. The imperfections of our senses render such an imposition inevitable, given the human mind's insistence on form and its aversion to meaninglessness. As Winters states the matter in the Introduction to Forms of Discovery, "We are told also that our senses deceive us, and in some ways this is obviously true, for the physicists and the mathematicians have discovered realms of what appears to be reality beyond the apprehension of
our senses." The "bare hills" of "To the Holy Spirit" are located in this inaccessible realm. They are "deceit" in that the "pure line" which the poet's perception creates and his mind accepts does not correspond to their true shifting and indeterminate nature; yet the hills "stay," mysteriously enough, and form permanently a solid background against which man can test his unsteady will.

That the human mind has no alternative but "to accept the evidence of our senses, to act as if it were true" is indicated by a passage in Forms of Discovery immediately following the one already quoted:

> The realm which we perceive with our unaided senses, the realm which our ancestors took to be real, may be an illusion; but in that illusion we pass our daily lives, including our moral lives; the illusion is quite obviously governed by principles which it is dangerous, often fatal, to violate; that illusion is our reality.

This passage further explains what Winters means when he says that the hills "bear witness to our wills," for to assert that an illusion is a reality requires more of the will than it does of the intellect, just as more of the will is involved in seeing the "pure line" of the hills. We see it, "for we must." Otherwise, our world would literally become senseless, and no moral or intellectual order in it would be possible.

The theme of perception and the indeterminacy of
the perceived object is put aside in the second stanza for a fact about which there can be no ambiguity:

High noon returns the mind
Upon its local fact:
Dry grass and sand; we find
No vision to distract.
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 "local fact" to which the mind returns is the commonplace one of death and moral chaos in the human realm. The poet knows the fact at high noon, the shadowless point of clearest sight, and no vision, such as the "immeasurable haze" produces, distracts him from its immediacy and clarity. As I have said, the fact is twofold; physical death suggests spiritual death. The confusion of the dislocated gravestones, "pushed here and there," recalls to the poet's mind the aimlessness and moral irregularity of the men buried somewhere beneath them. These men are the same as those who figure in "John Sutter" and "A Journey," and their historical background is the raw towns and bleak Western landscape of the turn of the century and afterwards. The men were exclusively determined by the earth, as Winters says in his note to "A Journey," and in the absence of any rational principle to regulate their lives they were
spiritually and intellectually dead before they were physically so. That no hope of resurrection is offered them is indicated by the fact that the stones are now "the seat of nothing." Death is annihilation of the human being. There is consequently an element of compassion in Winters' judgement of them. "Relics of lonely men" he calls their scattered bones, as if the loneliness of the men in both life and death were a mitigating factor in the consideration of the brutality of their existence. As he says in "The Journey" about the towns which these men, or others like them, once inhabited,

Nothing one can say
Names the compassion they stir in the heart.
Obscure men shift and cry.

Their loneliness extended beyond the social to the philosophical and the theological. Because of their thoughtlessness, the Holy Spirit, the God of Pure Mind, could not participate in their severely limited existence; consequently, they were as spiritually deserted in life as they are now in death. The dry grass and summer heat are their inferno where they suffer the final loss of being. Existence provided them with not the barest trace of similitude to God. Between the mindlessness of their existence and the perfection of His Pure Mind there had to be the absolute cleavage which Winters' vision dictates, even though God is credited with their creation. And in
the deserted graveyard they only fall into the radical divorce from God that in their lives they had already prefigured. It is in this sense other than the literal that we are to understand the deserted graveyard of the title.

In the third stanza Winters turns abruptly and addresses the Deity Himself, at first as if in accusation:

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 are mind alone,
And I, alas, am bound
Pure mind to flesh and bone,
And flesh and bone to ground.

It is as if God had failed the fallen sons, for whom He was morally responsible, or else as if He had failed Himself and compromised the purity of His own unity and essence by creating such multiplicity and moral irregularity. The question is indirectly related to the oldest of all philosophical problems, that of the one and the many, and directly to the gnostic rejection of the Christian idea of creation. If I am not mistaken, Winters is here being influenced by Valéry's "Ebauche d'un serpent," which revolves around the old gnostic belief that creation is a blemish on the purity of non-being. Winters considered the poem the single greatest one ever written, and his
analysis of it in the first chapter of The Function of Criticism contains passages that clarify a great deal of "To the Holy Spirit." The relevance of "Ebauche d'un serpent" to Winters' poem is apparent in the following stanza, which contains the poem's thematic core. The speaker is Satan who is addressing God and criticizing Him for what Valéry's intellectual angel regards as the tragic folly of creating something other than Himself, which necessarily will be imperfect:

Ô Vanité! Cause Première!  
Celui qui règne dans les Cieux,  
D'une voix qui fut le lumière  
Ouvrit l'univers spacieux.  
Comme las de son pur spectacle,  
Dieu lui-même a rompu l'obstacle  
De sa parfaite éternité;  
Il se fit Celui qui dissipe  
En conséquences, 'son Principle,  
En étioles, son Unité.'

By the act of creation God broke the barrier of perfect eternity, dissipated the Primal Cause into consequences, and fragmented Unity into the multiplicity of stars. The result is divine despair; the universe becomes the Cieux, son erreur! Temps, sa ruine!; and creation bears within its core "un soupir de despoir," as the superior intelligence of the angel most acutely realizes:

Devant votre image funèbre,  
Orgueil de mon sombre miroir,  
Si profond fut votre malaise  
Que votre souffle la glaise  
Fut un soupir de déspoir.'

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Strictly speaking, Valéry's gnosticism applies only to the third stanza of "To the Holy Spirit"; Winters mentions it only in passing, as it were; but it is an important concept for him, and one intimately connected with his idea of God as Pure Mind. If being is intellectual, and if God is perfect intellect and perfect being, then it is philosophically appropriate to accuse Him of causing the "fallen sons" and to wonder how such thoughtlessness could come out of perfect thought.

The rest of this stanza is devoted to the nature of God's essence and the poet's relationship to that essence. We have here fully realized the second of the two approaches to theism we discussed at the end of the second chapter. Instead of the essence taken out of God and set up as concept, we have here God defined exclusively in terms of His essence, which in this case is pure intellect. "But thou art mind alone," the poet states quite simply and straightforwardly. Existence as such is disregarded as philosophically irrelevant to the "mind alone." As far as the poet's relationship with the Spirit goes, Winters describes Him as bafflingly remote, even almost inaccessible, for the human intellect which painstakingly attempts to reach Him. There is no possibility that such a meeting can be accomplished through the senses, to which the intellectual essence of God is absolute foreignness. There are no philosophical traces of Him left, but still operating,
in the physical universe He created, which might reveal to the human mind studying them some limited, even negative, knowledge about His nature. In the terms we used in the second chapter, none of the cause is to be found in any of the effects of the created world, even though these effects are admitted as coming out of the cause. The Thomistic position that man possesses a "natural" knowledge of God, and that it is rooted in his sensory experience, is thus rejected. The mind is the divine element in man, and it is only in that element, as like in like, that the Pure Mind can be traced down, met, and known as He ought to be known. The implication, if I am not mistaken, is that in this union the two minds become equated with each other, though Winters leaves undiscussed the exact nature of the equation.

How such a meeting is possible, if the Holy Spirit is to keep the transcendence which Winters gives Him in the poem, is not clear; nor any clearer is how the Pure Mind can both elude the "speech" of the poet, and yet be effectively traced down in his "thought." One might ask, if He is ineffably beyond any of the categories of language, how then can He be apprehended by the very intellect which produces these categories and which operates only in them? Perhaps Winters means no more than that the subject is the most difficult of all and that language becomes inadequate in attempting to express its complexity. For once,
though, Winters does not treat divinity as undermining the human realm but as supporting it and grounding it in truth in a manner that finally defies human analysis. More simply put, Winters admits the reality, as well as the validity, of a thought inexpressible in language, which somehow makes possible for him a moral and intellectual life lived primarily through language. "The poem acknowledges mystery," as Howard Kaye says in his concluding remarks on "To the Holy Spirit."

But the union of the divine and human is brief and uncertain. God as Pure Mind enjoys a simplicity and self-sufficiency which the poet finds tragically missing in his own complex and deprived existence. His mind is entangled with flesh, the breeding ground of error and imperception; the body is the impediment that interferes with and eventually frustrates the attempt of the human mind to reach and apprehend God. The no uncertain terms with which Winters here laments the possession of a body are almost gnostic in their quiet intensity. Furthermore, it is the body's allegiance to the ground, its leaning toward nothingness, as St. Augustine somewhere expresses it, that drags the mind back to time and causes its annihilation in death. The only alternative to an indeterminate universe rotten with change and death is a transcendent intelligence to which man is mysteriously related but from which he is at the same time excluded.
because he is trapped in that universe from which he would escape. Man is literally caught between two infinities, one below him, one above him, and he experiences, as in Pascal, the "grandeur et misère de l'homme."

The final stanza summarizes all previous themes and draws the conclusions that given the poet's position are inevitable:

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.

He returns to the men buried in the graveyard, considers their separation from the Pure Mind in "blinding earth" and concludes against immortality for them. Their ghosts, enlightened at best by only a "dark faith," are trammeled inextricably in matter. The poet does not say specifically that his fate will be the same as theirs, but the implication of the last part is that it is: all this stir of age, which would include his own, falls into the irrelevance and meaninglessness of death. His mind, pushed to the brink of the incomprehensible, returns with three certainties: the perfect intellectual vision of
God's "unfleshed eye," the fact of moral choice between good and evil for man, and the concluding fact of death as annihilation. (I take the "spectral tree" to refer to Genesis's Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, whose "mortal taste" ended man's innocence and awakened his consciousness to moral and intellectual activity, death being somehow the inevitable by-product of such consciousness. Winters is following here, I think, Valery's version of the Fall in "Ebauche d'un serpent.")

But the first two certainties are "beside" the last one in its overwhelming emotional effect on the human being facing it. To know that God exists as Pure Mind, to desire to reach Him and partake of His perfection, to be able to do so, even if briefly and uncertainly, but finally to be forced by the body to turn back from that vision to where annihilation awaits the mind, all this explains the sense of tragedy working beneath Winters' tight lines. As he says in "At the San Francisco Airport,"

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

The terms of the tragedy are stated just as unrelentingly in his analysis of "Ebauche d'un serpent" in The Function of Criticism. As Winters interprets the poem, Satan is the embodiment of the human intellect. Of him
he says, "He is so created that he desires infinite knowledge, and he is so created that he cannot have it. The desire is his nature, his greatness, his sin, and his torture, and it is inescapable."12

2. Conclusion

"To the Holy Spirit" is a summary of Winters' entire poetic career, one which began in free-verse, imagism, and atheistic relativism and which ended in traditional meter, classicism, and theistic absolutism. The universe of the early poems, seething with constant change and intellectually ungraspable by the human mind, is the same as the one which appears in the "immeasurable haze" of "To the Holy Spirit." The "bare hills" of the free-verse are transformed into the later "pure line and shade of dust," but they both refer to the same reality for Winters, the presence of what we might call a death-principle in the physical world, which is either indifferent or hostile to the human attempt to create and then maintain moral and intellectual cohesion. The aimless and brutal men buried somewhere beneath the irregular stones of "To the Holy Spirit" summarizes a theme that remains constant throughout all Winters' criticism and poetry, the sense that human life is threatened inside itself by what he calls in The Bare Hills some horror "spined with rigid
age,"¹³ and that life will end in tragedy and the annihilation of the human being.

The difference separating "To the Holy Spirit" and the rest of Winters' traditional poetry from his earlier free-verse is not subject matter, as we have just seen, but the kind of poetic treatment and intellectual understanding he was able to give that subject matter after his conversion in his late twenties to a peculiarly modern version of classicism. As we have noted in the second chapter, the substance of the change resides in Winters' theory of poetry based on the power of the human mind to apprehend some degree of truth about human experience and then to express that truth in poetic language which permits "extraction from every unit of language of its maximum content, both of connotation and denotation."¹⁴ The poem then becomes, as Donald E. Stanford has characterized the theory, "an act of contemplation rather than an expression of personal feeling."¹⁵ As a result, Winters' understanding of his subject matter becomes rational, and his treatment of it governed by the principles of traditional meter, which he saw as a more flexible and complex instrument than free-verse for handling subjects now complicated by the introduction of reason into the poetic process.

On account of such a theory, he was thus enabled to achieve some degree of spiritual control over his subject
matter, the moral and psychological benefits of which were inestimable when the subject was as stark and tragic as that of a poem like "To the Holy Spirit." The bare ability just to know and to name has anciently been a part of every victory man has achieved over the chaotic and the irrational.

"To the Holy Spirit" illustrates such control. The ultimate vision of the poem, which is also the ultimate vision of Winters' poetry, is nihilistic, the one significant fact which makes him, I think, modern to his core. (Irving Howe has said that the inner demon at the heart of modern literature is nihilism.\(^{16}\)) The definition of life, as he gives it in "The Grave," is

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To stand, precarious, near the utter end;
Betrayed, deserted, and alone descend,
Blackness before, and on the road above
The crowded terror that is human love;
To still the spirit till the flesh may lock
Its final cession in eternal rock.
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To face this vision and to write about it with the calm seriousness and stoic restraint with which he does so in poems like "The Grave" and "To the Holy Spirit" require a degree of moral and intellectual control that only a few men are capable of. The chief value Winters' life in poetry possesses, I think, is the example it affords us of such a control in an age and literature noted for excessive self-pity and a pervasive tone of almost cosmic
complaint. This is true even if one disagrees with his ultimate philosophical position.

Such rational control finally rests on a theistic base. The whole theory that regulates and governs his traditional poetry depends, as we have seen, on the objective existence of truth. What Winters saw as philosophical necessity drove him to admit the existence of God in order, first of all, to account for, and then, to safeguard the existence of truth. But he admitted his theism most reluctantly. A deeply rooted distrust and suspicion of the transcendent remained with him from the beginning to the end of his career; for reasons of his own, he saw the transcendent as necessarily blurring moral distinctions and generating intellectual confusion. Consequently, when he was forced by his "hard argument" to deal with God, he defined Him in those terms which would be most congenial with his rationalism and which would reflect his belief that ultimate reality, in the philosophical sense, is intellectual in nature.

Only "thought" had real meaning for Winters. As Howard Kaye has noted, "Change, or motion, is for him antithetical to human significance. We can find meaning only if we stop moving."¹⁷ Wisdom is always associated for him with a perfectly static and silent realm outside time and change, which he most frequently characterizes as "eternal." Heracles is one of his symbols of the
poet "in hand-to-hand or semi-intuitive combat with experience." That hero achieves victory over that experience only through intellectual mastery of it in a timeless realm where he raids "eternal silence to eternal ends." Death and wisdom, then, are intimately connected with each other in Winters' thought. If we give "life" a strict philosophical definition denoting, and involving, phenomenological change, and thus contrast it to "being" such as one finds in "essentialism," we then find Valéry's gnomic remark in *Monsieur Teste* peculiarly applicable to Winters: "The essential is against life." Consequently, God is defined as "pure mind alone," with "existence" as such being ruled out as philosophically negligible. The "unfleshed eye" of Winters' God is thus more like Aristotle's Unmoved Mover than He is like St. Thomas Aquinas' God of Pure Existence.

"To the Holy Spirit" contains this definition of God in its most complete form. The poem also recapitulates all the crucial consequences of such a definition, consequences which we discussed and illustrated in the third chapter. With "pure mind" as one's absolute by which one is enabled to judge whether or not something is real and good, these consequences immediately follow, all of which we see working, either directly or indirectly, in "To the Holy Spirit." First of all, evil will be defined, not as the deprivation of existence, but as the
deprivation of mind; it will be seen as a kind of "thoughtlessness." From this the second consequence follows. The natural world, mindless as it necessarily is, will be looked upon as source of evil and disorder; Winters at times even suggests it is demonic; since it exists only in a phenomenological sense, not in an intellectual one, there will always be an element of unreality about it, because of which an absolute cleavage exists between the natural world, on the one hand, and, on the other, the human and the divine realms; while recognizing its beauties, even at times responding to its temptations, the intellect will separate itself from the natural as far as it is able to do so in order to realize its own end. What has just been said about the natural world applies also to man's own body; the thoughtless principle in flesh is capable of unbalancing moral control and causing spiritual blindness; consequently, the relationship of mind and body is one that is fraught for Winters with ambiguity and peril; in fact, it is the source of tragedy, since the body's death, as we have seen in "To the Holy Spirit," causes the annihilation of the mind. Finally, since the principle of evil found in the human realm will be located, according to Winters' vision, not in a corrupt will, but in an imperfect mind, and since only a few men achieve intellectual excellence, one will tend to view, as Winters does, the mass of men,
whether collected together in a state or a mob, as capable of erupting into irrational destructiveness; a form of intellectual isolation will inevitably be the result.

As I have said, Winters' vision of life is as tragic as anything one can find in the Greeks. He thought at one time in his late forties of mitigating the rigors of that vision by embracing Christianity, but he just as quickly decided against it. The whole experience is recorded in an epigram titled "A Fragment," which was written immediately after "To the Holy Spirit":

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.

His comments on Edgar Bowers in The Uncollected Essays and Reviews are particularly applicable to himself; speaking of Bowers' religious position, Winters says that Bowers had "an inability, both temperamental and intellectual, to delude himself. . . . The words guile and deceit recur several times as indicative of attitudes which turn one from one's real beliefs toward something one would like to believe, and hence toward spiritual corruption."20

He held on to his own "real beliefs" to the end and never compromised them. After "To the Holy Spirit" was written, his poetic career was all but finished; he had only three more short poems to write. The real work
which remained for him to do was two books of criticism, *The Function of Criticism* and *Forms of Discovery*, and the anthology of short poems which he co-edited with Kenneth Fields, *Quest for Reality*. A great deal of *Forms of Discovery* was written while he was suffering from terminal cancer; in fact, close to the very end, he postponed an operation in order to finish the book. Donald Stanford has the best epitaph for him, which succinctly captures his peculiar combination of dignity and stubbornness. In the obituary notice which Stanford wrote for Winters in the *Southern Review*, Stanford quotes from a letter he received after Winters' death from a friend who had known him since his youth: "There never was anyone like Arthur [his name among his friends]. He got his work done and he died."
NOTES

1 Stanford, "A Note on Yvor Winters," 46.


3 Stanford, "A Note on Yvor Winters," 45.

4 Kaye, pp. 120-21.

5 Kaye, p. 119.

6 Winters, Forms, pp. xii-xiii.

7 Kaye, p. 119.

8 Winters, Forms, p. xiii.

9 Valéry, Poems, p. 186-88.

10 Valéry, Poems, p. 188.

11 Kaye, p. 122.

12 Winters, Function, pp. 64-65.


14 Winters, Defense, p. 83.


16 See Kaye, p. 157.

17 Kaye, p. 114.

18 Winters, Collected Poems, p. 189.

19 Valéry, Monsieur Teste, p. 78.

20 Winters, Uncollected, p. 183.


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Candidate: John Martin Finlay

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Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

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