The seriousness of Yvor Winters
by David Yezzi

On the poet-critic’s life & work

Though night is always close, complete negation Ready to drop on wisdom and emotion, Night from the air or the carnivorous breath, Still it is right to know the force of death, And, as you do, persistent, tough in will, Raise from the excellent the better still.
—Thom Gunn, “To Yvor Winters, 1955”

With a few weighty exceptions, the bulk of poetry’s greatest critics in America in this century have also been its practitioners. Such poet-critics, many subjoined with varying degrees of accuracy to the New Criticism, brought to their writings on verse an artisan’s supple hand as well as the fruits of a rigorous apprenticeship in the craft of making poems: the essays of each, like windows at Chartres, display their sponsors’ guild affiliation some way in the corner. As critics, all hove close to the nuances of poetic facture; as poets, to a scholar’s exhaustive knowledge of the progress of poetry in English.

Take as a measure of the relative wealth of first-rate poetry and poetry criticism in the Thirties and Forties the initial volume of John Crowe Ransom’s Kenyon Review (1939), which featured work from Randall Jarrell, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, Yvor Winters, Muriel Rukeyser, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell (who, like Jarrell and Berryman, was still in his twenties). That the ranks of poet-critics today have been attenuated seems inevitable given the breadth of that antecedent outpouring; to be sure, the standard has been borne into the Nineties, in America and elsewhere—not least of all by Seamus Heaney, Donald Hall, and Joseph Brodsky—but the diminution is palpable all the same.

If this falling off constitutes an injury to poetry, the added insult is the unavailability of much of the writing from that fecund earlier period. As a corrective, The Advocates of Poetry, a collection of essays by American poet-critics after T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, has been recently edited by R. S. Gwynn, himself an essayist and poet. In addition to pieces by several poet-critics already mentioned, returned to the spotlight are works by Robert Penn Warren, Louise Bogan, Robert Hayden, Kenneth...
Burke, Elder Olson, Delmore Schwartz, and John Ciardi. As Gwynn points out in his Introduction, a situation no longer exists where the dual role of the poet-critic is seen as a responsibility, where, in Lowell’s words, critics such as “Allan Tate, Eliot, Blackmur, and Winters ... were very much news. You waited for their essays, and when a good critical essay came out it had the excitement of a new imaginative work.”

Of these, Yvor Winters, perhaps, has fallen furthest. This is a great shame, for it is just Winters’s brand of seriousness and his emphasis on logic and reason in poetry that contemporary verse sorely wants. The current neglect may have as much to do with the notorious critic’s crabbed, sometimes contradictory and dogmatic style. Winters’s stern call for a “moral poetry” was provocative, while his more cracked judgments earned him the opprobrium of many who, like Stanley Edgar Hyman in The Armed Vision (1947), saw Winters as “an excessively irritating and bad critic of some importance.” Randall Jarrell was likewise divided in his estimation of Winters. From one side of his mouth he pronounced in The New York Times that “Winters’ clear, independent and serious talent has produced criticism that no cultivated person can afford to leave unread.” And from the other, in an unpublished lecture lately exhumed for an issue of The Georgia Review, Jarrell suggests that Winters’s criticism should be classified, in his own terms, as a startlingly neoprimitive variety of neoclassicism, since in it he pretends to a simplicity, a simple-mindedness, that is not naturally his but that has been imported from another age at the great cost of everyone concerned. Mr. Winters’ critical method reminds me of Blake and his wife sitting naked in their garden, pretending to be Adam and Eve.

Of Winters’s “The Experimental School in American Poetry,” which Jarrell notes has “been praised as the critical feat of the time,” he gripes, “There is a sort of brutal frivolity about it: it is so disorganized, arbitrary, and obviously inadequate as to be unworthy both of the subject and Mr. Winters.”

Hyman, too, picks up on this brutal strain in Winters, whose method he locates in the broad scythe-strokes of the evaluator. Lesser poets (who, for Winters, often had the greatest reputations) were mown down in order that others more in line with Winters’s view of poetry might flourish. When weighing the value of a particular poet, Winters proceeded with the imperiousness of, as Denis Donoghue has euphemistically put it, “a mind assertively made up.” As Hyman notes, Winters’s poetic taxonomies could be perfunctory in the extreme: “He gives only his conclusions, almost never with any evidence approaching adequacy, and in a form in which it is not possible to argue with him or even understand what he is trying to say.” What’s more, the evaluative critic “can be saved from falling into either priggishness or pontifical foolishness only by being invariably right. There should be no need to point out that Winters is hardly that.”

The litany of Winters’s more eccentric obiter dicta has been well rehearsed by Hyman and others: he felt, for example, that Charles Churchill, “the greatest poetic talent” of the mid-eighteenth
century, was wrongfully passed over for Collins and Gray; F. G. Tuckerman and Jones Very were, along with Dickinson, two of the three “greatest poets of the nineteenth century” (take that Keats, Wordsworth, et al.); Edith Wharton’s novel *The Age of Innocence* is superior to any one novel by Austen, Melville, or Henry James; Robert Bridges is a better poet than Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, or Marianne Moore; while the poetry of T. Sturge Moore, a correspondent and friend of Yeats, outstrips that of his prominent pen pal.

If Winters exalted some unexpected candidates to his personal pantheon, he regularly barred those generally thought to be of the first water. While by no means exhausting the list, René Wellek has compiled a roster of Winters’s broadest condemnations. A snippet from just those dealing with the nineteenth century argues that “Coleridge … is ‘merely one of the indistinguishably bad poets of an unfortunate period,’”; “Tennyson ‘has nothing to say, and his style is insipid’; Browning is ‘fresh, brisk, shallow, and journalistic’; Arnold ‘sentimental to the point of being lachrymose.’” Here one perceives the glint of genuine insight flashing from those bared teeth, though the uniformity of Winters’s denouncement of the nineteenth century is unlikely to find many wholeheartedly sympathetic readers.

The poet Robert Pinsky, who studied with Winters at Stanford University, recounts the ridicule the “Old Man” faced even from some of his own students. In the twentieth section of Pinsky’s poem “Essay on Psychiatrists,” a defiant, self-aware Winters is ventriloquized through the voice of the professor:

> ... “I know why you are here.

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*You are here to laugh. You have heard of a crazy*  
*Old man who believes that Robert Bridges*  
*Was a great poet; who believes that Fulke*

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*Greville was a great poet, greater than Philip*  
*Syracuse, who believes that Shakespeare’s Sonnets*  
*Are not all that they are cracked up to be… .”

Winters was loyal to his favorite students, however, often crediting them with knitting together the strands of a logical, plain-spoken poetic, which had been frayed so violently by the associative tendencies of the Romantic tradition. Winters makes room at the top of his critical ladder for students and colleagues such as Thom Gunn, J. V. Cunningham, Edgar Bowers, N. Scott Momaday, Donald Stanford, and his wife, Janet Lewis—a few of them excellent poets, but a dubious, nepotistic list. In
turn his students have lauded their mentor in book-length studies and essays, as well as in memoirs by Gunn, Donald Hall, and Turner Cassity. As a tribute, Pinsky dedicated his critical work *The Situation of Poetry* to Winters.

Never wanting for detractors, Winters’s reputation has to a large extent had to rely for its perpetuation on a claque of devoted disciples, increasingly so as the whole generation of critics succumbed to an ebbing of interest in their brand of criticism. Nevertheless, as both a description of its enduring ills and a prescription for regaining much that has been lost to the lyric tradition in English, Winters’s bitter pill is our long-overlooked and strongest medicine.

Born on October 17, in Chicago, (Arthur) Yvor Winters (1900–1968) grew up in Eagle Rock, California, with his parents and maternal grandmother, who taught him to read, at the age of four, out of the works of Macaulay. In 1917 he became a founding member of the University of Chicago Poetry Club, though his undergraduate studies were interrupted in the fall of 1918 by the onset of tuberculosis. A fair-weather cure brought him eventually to St. Vincent’s Sanatorium (and later to Sunmount Sanatorium) in Sante Fe, where, despite the distance, Winters maintained contact with his Chicago circle, including Janet Lewis, his future wife. Lewis, herself a poet of considerable accomplishment, had joined the Poetry Club in 1919. When she, too, was diagnosed with tuberculosis, Winters arranged for her to tutor at Sunmount in exchange for her residence there in 1922. He took a B.A. and an M.A. in Romance languages and Latin from the University of Colorado—the place again dictated by his health. In 1935 Winters received his Ph.D. from Stanford, where he would remain as a teacher until 1966. His seven major critical works were from these years: *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry* (1937); *Maule’s Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* (1938); *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943) — these first three gathered in 1947 as *In Defense of Reason; Edwin Arlington Robinson* (1946); *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (1957); *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English* (1967); and the posthumous *Uncollected Essays and Reviews* (1976).
Winters began, however, as a poet. During his years in sanatoriums, he wrote the majority of the poems that would compose his first two collections, *The Immobile Wind* (1921) and *The Magpie’s Shadow* (1922). In these books, Winters followed the Imagist tradition of Pound and had, by the time of his first book, “definitely given up rhymed verse except for short excursions.”[2] For the young poet, free verse was “more interesting and more challenging. I truly believe that it can be used for practically anything for which one can use rhymed.” It was at this time that he characterized poetry as escapism: “a permanent gateway to walking oblivion.” As the poet and critic Dick Davis has pointed out, though, Winters quickly repented such youthful vagaries and turned “from oblivion to definition,” adding that his work had “also taken on a moral dimension”: “the verse he admired and wrote in his early twenties was arational, minimal, and concrete; his later work is rational, discursive, and to a large degree abstract.”

This extreme about-face was not only galvanizing, it was permanent; Winters would remain on this tack through his last published works of poetry and criticism. The shift toward the rational, while worked out over some years, was relatively abrupt, given how thoroughly it pervaded every aspect of his thought and practice. If Winters’s newly won opinions put readers on their guard in the Thirties, they would fairly provoke riots in classrooms today. When asked by Stanford professors at his orals if he was an absolutist, Winters replied, “Yes, I am, relatively speaking,” which was to say that compared to his adjudicators he certainly was. In the Introduction to *Primitivism and Decadence*, he mapped his territory as an anti-Romantic and a combatant of relativism:

> The Romantic theory of human nature teaches that if man will rely upon his impulses, he will achieve the good life. When this notion is combined, as it frequently is, with a pantheistic philosophy or religion, it commonly teaches that through surrender to impulse man will not only achieve the good life but will achieve a kind of mystical union with the Divinity: this for example is the doctrine of Emerson. Literature thus becomes a form of self-expression… .

> The theory of literature I defend … is absolutist. I believe that the work of literature, in so far as it is valuable, approximates a real apprehension and communication of a particular kind of objective truth.
Emerson was Winters’s long-standing *bête noire*, a propounder of such untenable notions as “no man, no matter how ignorant of books, need be perplexed in his speculations.” Winters characterized Emerson’s view of art as resting “on the assumption that man should express what he is at any given moment.” The dangers to poetry from self-expression of this kind are both technical and thematic: the poet is caught between the rocks of a first-thought-best-thought brand of automatism, where every word is judged worthy that reflects a “spontaneous impression,” and the whirlpool of ideas linked only by loose association, where “extemporary performances” overbear the desire to deepen one’s understanding through carefully reasoned contemplation.

Emerson receives such exhaustive attention from Winters in part because he is American, and thereby a localizer of Romanticism, but Emerson is not the watershed of such views, merely a tributary onto native soil. Winters traces the antirational tradition—the genesis of which he places in the early 1700s—to two basic doctrines:

- the sentimentalism of the third Earl of Shaftesbury (later summarized by Pope, along with other ideas, in the *Essay on Man*), and the doctrine of the association of ideas, a psychological doctrine having its beginnings in Hobbes and formulated by Locke, a doctrine translated into literary theory by Addison and discussed interminably in the eighteenth century.

To say nothing of the nineteenth, where, for Winters, such ideas undermined an entire school of poets who had turned away from the study of experience through reason. The rise of the subjective view of art in the eighteenth century was radicalized in the nineteenth as Romanticism, of which Emerson’s is an extreme American version. As far as Winters was concerned, of the Romantic poets the less said the better—unless, of course, one spoke up to denigrate them.

Perhaps haunted by the madness and death of his friend Hart Crane (whom he called “a saint of the wrong religion”), Winters identified the psychic destruction at work on three centuries of poets:

- From the eighteenth century onward, and not, so far as I can recollect, before, we have had a high incidence of madness among poets of more or less recognized talent: Collins, Gray, Chatterton, Smart, Blake, and others later; the same thing happens in other languages. A psychological theory which justifies the freeing of emotions and which holds rational understanding in contempt appears to be sufficient to break the minds of a good many men with sufficient talent to take the theory seriously.

According to Winters, Crane was a genius who “ruined his life and his talent by living and writing” in the shadow of “the two great religious teachers of our nation,” Emerson and Whitman. In 1932, the same year Crane ordered a large breakfast before slipping over the side of an ocean liner, Winters published his only short story, “The Brink of Darkness,” which has taken on the resonance of a spiritual manifesto. In it he describes a “hostile supernatural world,” at once pernicious and
unknowable, in which darkness hovers just beyond the illumination of the rational: “It was as if there were darkness evenly underlying the brightness of the air.” This darkness he would later relate to such practices as hedonism, obscurantism, associationism, and incontinent emotionalism. In “Notes on Contemporary Criticism” (1929) from *Uncollected Essays*, Winters puts a diamond point on these “insidious” forces:

The basis of evil is in emotion; Good rests in the power of rational selection in action, as a preliminary to which *the emotion in any situation must be as far as possible eliminated, and, in so far as it cannot be eliminated, understood… . the end is a controlled and harmonious life* [italics mine].

It is important to note that what Winters called for was not the complete eradication of emotion (an impossibility) but the elucidation of it. As his chief weapon against corrosive emotionalism, reason became a tenet of faith for Winters. What skulked outside the purview of the rational, the obscuring darkness at the margins of experience, held the supreme threat. His was not, however, a denial of such murky realms; in fact, far from being an innocent with regard to the deleterious darkness outlying reason, Winters keeps the watch on just that verge of benightedness.

Winters’s view of poetry, “the art of saying something about something in verse,” can be condensed to one often-quoted statement: “The poem is a statement in words about a human experience.” Even this simple aphorism, he realizes, draws a distinct line in the sand when “most of the philosophers of this century have been nominalists of one kind or another; they have written extensively to prove that nothing can be said in words, because words are conceptual and do not correspond to reality.” Winters points out, however, that if reality or “the realm that our ancestors took to be real” is an illusion, it nonetheless follows certain set laws that we violate at our peril. It is in this realm that “we pass our daily lives, including our moral lives… . this illusion is our reality. I will hereafter refer to it as reality.”

For Winters, poetry—and, in its concision, lyric, especially—is the highest linguistic expression because, in addition to the denotative aspects of words emphasized in other forms of writing, poetry makes particular use of the connotative ones, the two together composing the “total content” of language. For Winters, the purpose of poetry is to describe experience as precisely as possible. Connotation in poetry, then, acquires a “moral” dimension—to preserve clarity, connotation or “feeling” must be carefully controlled:

The artistic process is one of moral evaluation of human experience, by means of a technique which renders possible an evaluation more precise than any other. The poet tries to understand his experience in rational terms, to state his understanding, and simultaneously to state, by means of the feelings we attach to words, the kind and degree of emotion that should properly be motivated by this understanding.
Though Winters used the term “morality” in various ways, this passage illustrates his reigning principle for how a poem should convey human experience. Here, the term “morality” refers to a fairly technical process of choosing the appropriate words for evaluating a given subject. Romantic poetry often employed associative logic, fuzzy revery, and words emotionally in excess of their subjects. The “moral” Wintersian poet controls emotion, releasing it through restraint. He aims to match the argument of the poem to the proper degree of emotion.

The critic’s detractors who feel that Winters, through his adherence to logic, has squelched emotion have lost the gist. The connotations inherent in language are expressive of emotion; to this extent emotion is a great part of the point. The “morality” of poetry as Winters understood it lay in how emotion was not obliterated but managed. Emotion in excess of the motivating argument was contrary to the purpose of poetry, as it obscured the experience under consideration: “In so far as the rational statement is understandable and acceptable, and in so far as the feeling is properly motivated by the rational statement, the poem will be good.”

What Winters considers the moral or “ethical” nature of poetry, though, has opened him up to misinterpretation. In The New Criticism (1941), John Crowe Ransom bobbles Winters’s argument, suggesting that “if there is a poem without visible ethical content, as a merely descriptive poem for example, I believe he thinks it is negligible and off the line of real poetry.” Winters fired back in his essay on Ransom from The Anatomy of Nonsense—he rarely missed an opportunity to rebut his detractors in print —that, yes, ethical interest is the sole poetic concern, but a descriptive poem in its contemplation of some small nook of human experience perforce contains a moral element that it is the poet’s job to evaluate. “Morality” in poetry, as Winters intends it, then, is a slippery beast. The morality of a poem is not confined to any ostensible ethical subject matter, but is found in the degree to which the poem adds to our accurate apprehension of experience.

This point may be clarified by looking at Winters’s estimation of the infamously randy John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647–80). For Winters, it is not the lascivious earl’s subject matter that determines his poems’ moral qualities. Execution is all. Poetic “morality” lies in the propriety of emotion and the logical precision with which the poem is rendered. Even when Rochester writes of his debauchery in “Upon Drinking in a Bowl,” there is grace and wit enough for Winters to recommend it as fine poetry —though one might hesitate to recount its rather louche topics. Opposed to this, Winters indicts other poems by Rochester on similar themes which “have a grossness of feeling comparable to his worst actions.” The bad poems are not reprehensible for their content, but for their slipshod rendering of experience. Here Winters displays a distinct lack of squeamishness. In a similar vein, he counters Ransom’s surprise that Winters should approve of Baudelaire given that his flowers are, after all, “flowers of evil”: “The ‘logical materials’ of much of Baudelaire are no more evil than the materials of Shakespeare. The topics of both men are bad enough, for both explore human experience
rather far; both depict evil as evil and make us know it as evil.”

In the course of a reading life, one often stumbles on excellent prose writers never before encountered; such discoveries, however, are less likely in poetry. First-rate poetry is a more manageable quantity. Unlike with prose, it is possible to read all, or virtually all, of the decent verse in the language. Winters had done just that, and, having developed a basis for evaluation, proceeded in his last book, *Forms of Discovery*, through the entire history of poetry in English. The best section from this book, perhaps Winters’s greatest single essay, began as a piece on sixteenth-century verse for *Poetry* and was expanded to chapter length and retitled “Aspects of the Short Poem in the English Renaissance.” Save the “post-Symbolist” poetry of Wallace Stevens, which Winters deems the most versatile in the language, the poems of the Renaissance were for Winters unequaled, the peak from which he perceived a long decline.

True to form, Winters’s critique of the poetry of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries flouts convention and has the distinction of reclaiming an entire strain of early lyric poetry, namely that of the plain style. C. S. Lewis, in his Oxford *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, rightly identifies the two major movements of the sixteenth century, the “Drab” and the “Golden.” Winters recognizes in Lewis’s choice of terms, however, the standard prejudice, which favors the “sugared” Petrarchanism of Sidney and Spenser over the native plain style of Barnabe Googe, George Gascoigne, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Ben Jonson. Lewis, he says, “blames modern scholars for approaching the period with Romantic prejudices, but he sees the entire poetry of the period in terms of a Romantic prejudice: he likes the pretty so profoundly that he overlooks the serious.”

Winters’s seriousness is his abiding characteristic. With regard to Horace’s two-fold description of the purpose of poetry, edification and pleasure, Winters’s preference seems clear. Take as an example of the plain-style seriousness that Winters championed this sixteenth-century lyric by Googe, “Of Money”:

Give money me, take friendship whoso list,  
For friends are gone come once adversity,  
When money yet remaineth safe in chest,  
That quickly can thee bring from misery.  
Fair face show friends, when riches do abound;  
Come time of proof, fare well they must away.  
Believe me well, they are not to be found  
If God but send thee once a lowering day.  
Gold never starts aside, but in distress,  
Finds ways enough to ease thine heavyness.

While very good, this is not among the greatest poems of the plain style (better would be Jonson’s
“To His Son” or Gascoigne’s “Woodmanship”), yet it is typical in certain appealing respects. Such poems, for Winters, are good because they display themes “broad, simple, and obvious, even tending toward the proverbial, but usually a theme of some importance; a feeling restrained to the minimum required by the subject; a rhetoric restrained to a similar minimum” as opposed to the Petrarchan use of “rhetoric for its own sake.” The argument of the poem is painstakingly logical and precise. The rhythm is restrained in its careful adherence to the metrical norm, a heavily stopped line, and a strong caesura.

Googe’s tone expresses, here, a good degree of worldly melancholy which one suspects Winters valued, though it is for the poems of spiritual melancholy that he reserves his highest praise—Jonson’s “To Heaven,” George Herbert’s “Church Monuments,” and Fulke Greville’s “Down in the depth of mine iniquity.” For Winters, Greville in particular endeavored “with some consistency to employ the Petrarchan refinements, or such of them as he needed, on matter worthy of them.” It is telling, I think, of Winters’s own sensibility that he quotes the following passage from Greville, who wrote of himself in a life of his close friend Sir Philip Sidney:

> For my own part I found my creeping genius more fixed upon the images of life, than the images of wit, and therefore chose not to write to them on whose foot the black ox had not already trod, as the proverb is, but to those that are weather-beaten in the sea of this world, such as having lost sight of their gardens and groves, study to sail on a right course among rocks and quicksands.

The black ox of melancholy that had trod on Winters’s critical writing finds in his poems its fullest and most affecting expression, yet his poetry, even more than his criticism, has fallen off the literary radar. In his review of Winters’s *Collected Poems* (1960), Robert Lowell calls him “an immortal poet, a poet of great kindness and stamina.” Lowell is perspicacious in naming many of Winters’s finest efforts: “Time and the Garden,” “John Sutter,” “To a Military Rifle 1942,” “A Dream Vision,” “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” “Hercules,” and to my mind his best, “The Marriage.” Denis Donoghue assents to this list and offers several more: “Inscription for a Graveyard,” “A Prayer for My Son,” “A Fragment,” and “A Testament.”

To these fine poems one might add others such as “A Grave,” included in *Collected Poems*. The poem begins, as does Herbert’s “Church Monuments,” with the contemplation of a grave, where the deceased waits alone “Under a little plaque”: “There is no faintest tremor in that urn./ Each flake of ash is sure in its return” (“How tame these ashes are, how free from lust,” Herbert writes). And, as with Herbert, the certainty of death prompts thoughts of mending one’s life:

> What has he found there? Life it seems is this:  
> To learn to shorten what has moved amiss;  
> To temper motion till a mean is hit,  
> Though the wild meaning would
unbalance it;
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.

Anyone skeptical as to Winters’s access to emotional power need only reread the passage beginning “Betrayed… .” He continues:

Then let me pause in this symbolic air,
Each fiery grain immobile as despair,
Fixed at a rigid distance from the earth,
Absorbed each motion that arose from birth.
Here let me contemplate eternal peace,
Eternal station, which annuls release.
Here may I read its meaning, through the eye
Sear with effort, ere the body die.
For what one is, one sees not; ’tis the lot
Of him at peace to contemplate it not.

The poem hinges on movement. The “motion” of life in the earlier stanza suggested by the words moved, motion, unbalance, precarious, and To still, is countered with the stasis of death in pause, immobile, fixed, rigid. The contemplation of death affects a deathlike stillness in the speaker, from which vantage point he may look on life. The final couplet relates a bitter paradox: when one is in the throes of life, one cannot see life; when one is dead, the “wild meaning” is no longer a concern.

Winters’s poems never hesitate to swing for the outfield wall. They do everything poems these days ought not to do: they tackle subjects other than the self, grapple with universals, follow strict prosodic norms, command a bold rhetorical tone, eschew imagery for abstraction, favor edification over pleasure. They are, in Winters’s phrase, “Laurel, archaic, rude.” If Winters’s poems are forgotten, they have themselves to blame. They are extreme measures for poetry’s present ills. Likewise, while its often unorthodox judgments can be hard to swallow whole, Winter’s criticism reclams for poetry a passionate control, and a spareness suited to our perennial concerns. After Winters, every line and every word may be held responsible to standards of emotional clarity. As with Rilke’s archaic torso, or Winters’s own “A Grave,” when each of today’s more fashionable, self-expressive, and wildly emotive poets looks on Winters’s work, there is but one heartfelt message: you must change your life.
Notes
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2. For this and for further biographical material, see the exhibition catalogue *The Strength of Art: Poets and Poetry in the Lives of Yvor Winters and Janet Lewis*, prepared by Brigitte Hoy Carnochan (Stanford University, 1984). Go back to the text.

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