A Review of 'Primitivism and Decadence'

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Mr. Yvor Winters has written a book[1] which every serious American writer, and indeed everyone with the least pretense to serious interest in literature, ought to buy and ought to study. This is said by way of qualifying radically many of the difficulties which I wish to point out in his notions about the nature of poetry. And one ought also to say at the start that there are many remarkable insights in this book: Winters seems, for example, to have predicted, indirectly, Crane's death;[2] he has managed, apparently by a deliberate effort, to extend his taste from such writing as Joyce's to such an opposite extreme as Churchill and Gay, and in doing so he has provided us with the means of extending our tastes in like manner; and he is, I think, the first American critic of the present century to concern himself explicitly with meter. He is thus, in a way, more helpful than either of his only rivals in critical significance, for Mr. Tate would seem to be concerned, really, with moral, rather than specifically poetic, problems; and Mr. R. P. Blackmur depends, for the most part, upon the dictionary. Mr. Winters, however, is concerned throughout with the moral implications involved in structures and meters, with structure and meter, and with meaning, Mr. Blackmur's primary concern. Indeed, Winters is the first critic, I should think, who has attempted to show the *specific* ways in which meter, morality, structure, and meaning are related, and in a way, identical.

It would seem ungrateful, then, in view of all this extremely valuable work, to turn about and say that in section after section, Mr. Winters indulges himself in excess and exaggeration, displays prejudices which are wholly arbitrary, and is guilty either of misconstruction or ignorance. But each of these charges can be clearly demonstrated. What happens in each instance can be stated in several ways and it may be profitable to do so. One may use Mr. Tate's rather curious terms in his essay on "The Fallacy of Humanism" and point out how Winters is quantifying Quality before he gets to it (and it is interesting in this connection to note that he accepts the humanism of Babbitt, although with important reservations). Again, to use a concrete instance, when Winters proves to his own contentment that "Gerontion" is not a good poem, he is very much like Johnson when confronted with "Lycidas" (I do not mean to imply that the former is as good as the latter), or like Tolstoy, condemning *War and Peace,* and *Anna Karenina.* But in the most general terms, Winters' error is that of the reductive fallacy, which has many instances in the history of criticism: the critic, that is, decides to define Beauty (or aesthetic value, or worth, or whatever he calls it) and he decides that Beauty is unity in difference, or significant form, or the expression of the class struggle, or pleasure; and having decided this, he rules out all instances which do not conform to his definition or he attempts to reduce unlikely instances to the unique definition. The ruling definition for Winters is regularity of meter. This is a crude way

[1] *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry,* by Yvor Winters, Arrow Editions, $2.50.

[2] In his review of a book by Robinson Jeffers in *Poetry* for February, 1930, a review which is partly reprinted in this book, Winters pointed out that the logical consequence of Crane's and Jeffers' general feelings about nature was suicide.

of stating it; Winters has other criteria, which modify it; but I shall try to give a more adequate statement of this view later on.

II

Primitivism and Decadence divides itself into five parts, each of which reflects backward and forward upon the others; the subjects, in order, are: morality in so far as it is involved in poetry, structural methods of presenting the subject matter, poetic convention (a really illuminating discovery), ways of classifying types of poets, and, finally, meter. All five refer to aspects of any given poem which are, ultimately, identical: the moral insight exhibited in a poem is, for example, the same thing as its firmness and lucidity of structure, "the poet, in striving toward an ideal of poetic form is actually striving to perfect a moral attitude toward that range of experience of which he is aware." The range of his awareness is commensurate with the kind of meters he uses and the type of poet that he is and the way in which he presents his subject.

Beginning with the first and the most fundamental aspect of the poem with which Winters deals, one finds that the writing of a poem is a moral act because it is an attempt to order, control, and understand one's experiences. Each of the constituents of poetry is, in its very nature, an instrument of perception, so that poetry is "the last refinement of contemplation," "the richest and most perfect technique of contemplation."

Now the first difficulty is Mr. Winters' singular view of morality in general. Not only does he say that religion may be and philosophy can be a *preliminary* to poetry, but his whole view of what constitutes a moral act seems to be based upon a very narrow view of what the poet is involved in when he writes a poem. He thinks, for example, that social conditions and modern thought do not change the mode which moral responsibility will take and the mode which style and meter can take. Those who think these matters make the task of the modern poet different and more difficult suffer from "group hypochondria." This accusation when added to the different charges against various modern poets—Mr. Eliot's "spiritual limpness," for example—and when added to a good deal else which cannot be mentioned in a review, imply that Winters sees the poet operating in some kind of vacuum in which not only his act but the circumstances in which he acts depend upon his own choice. Winters, believing that he is "traditionalist" and concerned with the traditional wisdom, ought to remember that Aristotle, not Marx, asserted, in his *Ethics,* as well as his *Politics,* that man is a political animal (literally, of course, an animal living in cities, in groups). Leaving this point in the air for a moment, it is worthwhile considering the moral preeminence which Winters gives to the act of writing a poem. He says that it is no substitute for action "in the face of a particular situation," but merely "a way of enriching one's awareness" and thus becoming more intelligent about the future; yet the emphasis betrays him: religion and philosophy are merely preliminary and the *richest* way of knowing is the

act of writing a poem and the great poet has triumphed (in the terms of Mr. Richards' rhetoric) over life itself.

Thus an act of contemplation and a moral act are assumed to be in no way different, although Winters has seen that in particular situations they must be distinct. The consequences of blurring the distinction between what we know and what we do are well known: ignorance and evil-doing become identical, and thus responsibility disappears, which is, one would suppose, the last thing which Winters would want to happen. This is also relevant to Winters' difficulty in explaining the sad and ugly lives of the poets, who, in his view, must nevertheless have been men of great character, since they wrote great poems. His explanation is that they were sometimes men of great character, sometimes and in relation to certain types of experience only, a view which can be entitled that of the intermissions of virtue. One would suppose, on the contrary, that the mastery of experience involved in a poem is a matter of perception, the mastery of language, and the poet's ability to bring to bear upon perception and within language his sense of values. The effort of the poet is thus representative, critical, and evaluative, but it is not a moral act, except in an indirect sense. The distinction becomes quite clear when we see that we regard certain writers as good poets, although their values, as operative in their poetry, are directly opposed to our own. The fact that perceptions, attitudes, and values have been adequately represented is enough. We do not, however, accept the thief because he himself regards his theft as justifiable.

As I will try to show in a moment, Winters is involved in the same difficulty when it is a question of the beliefs of the poet. But it is worthwhile considering, before going on, what seems to be the root of Winters critical method. This is to be found, I think, mainly in the little book by I. A. Richards called *Science and Poetry,* and also in his *Principles of Literary Criticism* and certain pages on the "sincerity ritual" in *Practical Criticism.* The ideas of Richards are well known and may be rapidly summed up. He thinks that the poet is, in the poem, engaged in organizing his impulses—his appetencies and aversions: the good poem is the one in which a psychological balance or harmony—synaesthesis is Richards term—has been achieved. And this view flows from the belief that nature has been "neutralized," that most of the values of the past have been unmasked and repudiated, and that poetry alone is left to the human being as a means of integrating his life. Richards attacks Yeats, De la Mare and Lawrence as poets who refuse to face the modern situation, the neutrality and meaninglessness of nature, and who attempt to provide elaborate fictions to belie the truth. Winters duplicates this attack in some of his statements about Yeats and Crane. The difficulty here is that Winters has obviously changed his mind: he no longer accepts the crude naturalism of Richards—which Richards in *Coleridge on the Imagination* turns upside down into a kind of subjective idealism, and which was initially derived from doctrines which Lord Russell has long since abandoned—and Winters has taken upon himself beliefs and values of a neo-humanist variety. One is permitted to change one's mind, but a certain thoroughness is preferable. Winters, however, still drags along Richards' psychologicalmoral notion of the substance of a poem. The mixture is indeed curious.

Winters is perhaps as sensitive as anyone could be to the concrete poem, and he must know that a poem is not primarily a balance of appetencies and aversions, but an effort at perception and evaluation. But the former belief remains, transformed into the idea that the creative act itself, with all the absorption and effort it necessitates, makes the writing of the poem a moral act. One can only observe that the criminal may also exhibit a like devotion and concentration.

It would be worthwhile, in another context, to consider fully the other consequences of Winters' views of morality. In passing, one can note that once poetry involves the moral act to so full an extent there is no answer to the demand that poetry aid directly in the transformation of society.

Before continuing, it may be useful also to refer to the philosophymongering in which Winters and so many other poets and critics indulge. It is of course partly unavoidable in a time like the present. But there is also the possibility of availing oneself to a greater extent of the discipline of philosophical method. Winters refers repeatedly to such matters as the nature of definition, the nature of the moral intelligence, etc., and his remarks are unfailingly inexact. Mr. Eliot is, as usual, to the point about this practice: "My objection is to Mr. Foerster for playing the games of philosophy and theology without knowing the rules. One may consider the study of philosophy vain, but then one should not philosophise." One ought to add, in justice to Mr. Winters, that Mr. Eliot is himself not without sin in this respect, nor is R. P Blackmur (with his fantastic comparison of Charles S. Peirce and Kenneth Burke), nor is Allen Tate (who considers Mr. Blackmur a master of ideas), nor Kenneth Burke, Howard Baker, Edmund Wilson, and James T. Farrell. The only writer of this kind who does not, at one time or another, seem foolish and half educated when touching on these things is John Crowe Ransom, and even he has taken the name of Plato in vain and forced a metaphysical interpretation of the nature of meter. The pity is obviously that Winters and these other writers are sometimes trying to formulate intuitions of no mean value.

Mr. Winters makes a good many of his judgments on the basis of the metrical character of a poem. From the meter of the poem he infers the spiritual or moral character of the poem.

There is, to begin with, the statement that "the limp versification of Mr. Eliot is inseparable from the spiritual limpness that one feels behind the poems." What spiritual limpness is, one can only guess, and even limp versification is a term which is fairly vague; the statement is made, morever, rather tentatively ("one feels"). Still, it will serve as an example of Mr. Winters' method. Suppose, however, two instances are used to test this method. Quoting from Bridges, one of Mr. Winters' touchstones.

> Though thou, I know not why,
> Didst kill my childish trust,
> That breach with toil did I
> Repair because I must:
>
> And spite of frighting schemes,

With which the fiends of Hell
Blaspheme thee in my dreams,
So far I have hoped well.

Suppose I say that this is spiritually stiff, or frivolous, or superficial (I do not believe that it is), and that one of Mr. Eliot's magi—

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death?—

is far more aware of spiritual reality. Mr. Winters would justify his praise of the one and contempt of the other by reference to his theory of meter, for meter turns out to be the same thing as spiritual awareness. The poem of Bridges is according to Winters (in *The American Review* for January, 1937) the "experience of the intellectual who has progressed beyond the disillusionment of 'Dover Beach.' " So, I think, is the poem by Eliot.

The point here is not merely a difference in taste. Mr. Winters exhibits prejudice and a lack of tact and exactness in judging the meters of Eliot, although elsewhere in the book, in writing of "The Subway," by Allen Tate, he has provided a brilliant elucidation of the relationship of meter and feeling, meter and attitude, meter and meaning. If you abstract the meter of the poem from its statements and base your judgment upon the meter alone, then you conclude that Mr. Eliot is spiritually limp, or that Bridges is spiritually stiff, frivolous, and superficial. But there is a different situation in the concrete poem. One does not start with the meter, nor with the explicit statements, but with both, taken together. Their relationship is one of reciprocal modification; each "characterizes" the other, and they cannot be separated, a fact upon which Winters himself insists. This fact is often forgotten. One is offered examples of sublime verse and nonsense rhymes with the same vowels or in the same meter, in order to show that meter is not expressive. This is the error correlative to that of Winters. Mr. Eliot himself was once guilty of it, in a lecture. He read several verses of Tennyson, and then lines with the same meter and rhyme-scheme from a nonsense ballad by Lear. The audience giggled; Mr. Eliot concluded that here was indeed a problem, and then passed hurriedly on to another subject.

But there is a good deal more than a metrical basis for Winters' dislike of Eliot's poetry, which recently, he says, has been a kind of "psychic impressionism, a formless curiosity concerning queer feelings related to odds and ends of more or less profound thought." Here again Winters' beliefs are intruded upon his literary judgment. Ultimately Winters would have to say that he just does not like Mr. Eliot's religion. Winters thinks that such poems as "Ash Wednesday," "Animula," and "Journey of the

Magi," from which I have just quoted, are the products of psychic impressionism and a formless curiosity only because of his own beliefs, which, so far as they are available, seem to relate mainly to a conception of nature as full of sensuous temptation, which must be resisted—and perhaps also to a view of rationality and consciousness as the supreme goods. One would scarcely wish to deny the importance of these concerns, but the point at issue is the way in which they distort his literary judgments. As a literary critic, Winters is justified in judging the *representation* of a belief, not the belief itself. This does not imply a purely formal approach to literature because the representation in question is a matter of understanding and evaluation as well as the use of language. It is difficult in literary criticism to avoid moral, political, and even theological judgments, not to speak of the tendency to praise our friends' poems, but one can with effort separate literary judgment from all these and thus avoid confusion. A model for such separation is to be found in F. O. Matthiessen's book on Eliot, and precisely in the example of Eliot's religious and political beliefs.

We have to insist that the poem is not a mere prolongation of experience upon the verbal level, but experience grasped, understood, and evaluated. Yet we cannot, as literary critics, dictate the terms of such understanding and evaluation. We cannot reject Homer because his deities are mythical. The criterion is thus the simple truth of representation, or if Mr. Winters prefers the classical word, *verisimilitude.* Such truth is self-sufficient; and it may also serve the moral purposes which Winters requires of a poem. But I will have to deal with this more explicitly later on.

The more general point which follows from this one refers us again to the void in which Mr. Winters' poet is writing. Mr. Eliot wrote his poem in a definite period in history; he was trying, as he says of others in his essay on Swinburne, to use language which would have something to do with his *whole* experience: "the language which is more important to us is that which is struggling to digest and express new objects, new groups of objects, new feelings, new aspects, as, for instance, the prose of Mr. James Joyce." The emphasis on newness is unfortunate but the point remains. It can be reinforced by Mr. Tate's remark, "It is probable that there is an intimate relation between a generally accepted 'picture of the world' and the general acceptance of a metrical system." Mr. Winters may regard this merely as a confirmation of his own view; if he does, let him ask himself if it is merely arbitrary whim on the part of individual poets that good dramatic blank verse, *in a play performed in a theater,* has not been written since 1640 or so.[3] In general, then, it seems much more likely that the faults of modern poetry result at least partly from an effort to take up, reflect, record, and represent experiences of unheard-of complexity and difficulty, occurring in a world in which the rate of social change has accelerated to an unprecedented degree.

[3] Mr. Winters might consider the following statistical contrast as another and more brutal fact bearing upon the relation of society to what the individual can do and cannot do: there have been more good female poets in the last one hundred years than in the previous five thousand. Mr. Winters cannot say that the whole sex was affected with "group hypochondria."

But Mr. Winters will say that this involves the "fallacy of imitative form," a notion which will have to be dealt with in due course.

III

Mr. Winters' next subject is structural methods of presenting the subject matter and we are presented with what is, for the most part, an extremely valuable analysis of different forms, repetitive, narrative, and logical; pseudo-reference, of which seven varieties are elucidated; qualitative progression; alternation of method; double mood. Some of these structures, Mr. Winters claims, are better than others, and it would be foolish to deny it. But they are used as weapons in the continuous polemic which Winters is carrying on throughout the book against Laforgue, Eliot, Crane, Pound, and others; and in his application of these structures, Mr. Winters seems to force himself to misconstrue specific quotations. He illustrates one type of what he calls pseudo-reference, the type which he explains as "Grammatical coherence in excess of, or in absence of, rational coherence," by quoting the following lines of Hart Crane

> The mind is brushed by sparrow wings;
> Numbers, rebuffed by asphalt, crowd
> The margins of the day, accent the curbs,
> Conveying divers dawns on every corner
> To druggist, barber and tobacconist,
> Until the graduate opacities of evening
> Take them away as suddenly to somewhere
> Virginal, perhaps, less fragmentary, cool.

Mr. Winters comments as follows: "The activities of the 'numbers,' if the entire sentence is surveyed, appear wholly obscure . If one suppose the numbers to be the mathematical abstractions of modern life, structural, temporal, financial, and others similar, there is greater clarity; but the first five lines are so precious and indirect as to be somewhat obscure, and the last three lines are perfectly obscure." If, however, the whole poem had been quoted, or at least a few of the preceding lines, Winters' accusation would clearly have no basis. The first stanza of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" reads:

> The mind has shown itself at times
> Too much the baked and labeled dough
> Divided by accepted multitudes.
> Across the stacked partitions of the day—
> Across the memoranda, baseball scores,
> The stenographic smiles and stock quotations
> Smutty wings flash out equivocations.

Obviously, the numbers in question are the baseball scores and stock quotations, especially the latter, as conveying divers dawns of success and money. As to the somewhere which is virginal, etc., this is partly defined by the later mention of aspiration to Helen—"suppose some evening I got by that way then I might find your eyes across an aisle"—and it is partly vague, as in the minds of barber, druggist, etc.; but the vagueness is fixed, deliberate, and controlled, a device which Winters justifies in the case of a poem by Williams when he is thinking of something else: "more feeling is *assumed,* or *claimed,* by the poet than is justified by his language But the strain is deliberately sought and exactly rendered."

> Again, Eliot is accused of pseudo-reference in the following lines:
> Burbank crossed a little bridge,
> Descending at a small hotel;
> Princess Volupine arrived,
> They were together, and he fell.

"What is the significance of the facts in the first two lines? They have no real value as perception no bearing on what follows." To this we need only answer with Winters' own words: "When I speak of *conventional language,* I shall mean language in which the perceptual content is slight. A conventional passage is poetic, however, in so far as it is necessary to the entire poetic intention." The reader need only examine the poem in question, "Burbank with a Baedeker; Bleistein with a Cigar," to see whether the tone and attitude, as well as the location, of the poem are not set off by the lines in question.

There are several other passages which are also treated in this way; but the crux of our objection turns out to be the same as when Winters' morality was in question. He is using his own views of God, freedom, and immortality when he attacks a passage of Crane in "The Bridge" by saying, "What myths have we in mind here? None. Or none unless it be the myth of Pocahontas, which, as we have seen is irreducible to any idea." Winters has other objections to this passage also. The point involved here, however, is the exclusion of Crane's beliefs because Winters cannot accept them. If it were mainly a matter of not being able to find the poet's assertions in his actual words, the canon which R. P. Blackmur uses so ably, then the objection would be just. But this is not the objection and Winters a little later accepts the "reference to a purely private symbolic value," which is what this is. If, however, we begin to reject the poetry based upon beliefs which are different from our own (despite the fact that such poetry presents most objectively what-it-is-to-hold-such-beliefs in actual experience), then Winters knows very well that few great poets will be left to us.

And again, Winters objects to what he calls qualitative progression, a setting forth of the subject matter in which the "sole principle of unity is mood" so that one "proceeds from image to image wholly through a coherence of feeling." The trouble with such a method is that "the principle of selection being less definite, the selection of details is

presumably less rigid the symbolic range is reduced the movement is proportionately slow and wavering." None of these qualitative adjectives are made very much more exact in the context and in the illustrations, but Winters does not mean that such "poetry cannot refer to a great many types of actions and persons"—"but it can find in them little variety of value," a remark elucidated in what Winters says about the perceptual and expressive value of meter. But in passing, Winters has pointed out the reason why the method of qualitative progression is used: it can refer to a great deal. And at the end of the book, Winters, in discussing a carryall form, compares a poem by Mr. Tate with one by Churchill and admits that the former "is in a sense more serious . has wider implications ... rests upon wider and more careful thought." The question is once more, then, one of finding forms and structures which will be adequate to very difficult types of experience. Mr. Winters answers this in advance and by oversimplification when he says: "To say that a poet is justified in employing a disintegrated form in order to express a feeling of disintegration, is merely a sophistical justification of bad poetry." This is what Winters means by the fallacy of imitative form. But no claim is made for a disintegrating form; merely, I think, a form which will digest the subject matter without annihilating it is what is required, and this will be a different problem in every case. And thus when Winters accuses Joyce in *Ulysses* of being guilty of imitative form, he reduces his fallacy to absurdity.

Such an example as *Ulysses* betrays the mechanical way in which Mr. Winters uses his criterion of form. There is perhaps a page and a half in Joyce's novel—pages 252 and 253, beginning "Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing"—where the form is actually broken down to express a breakdown, or rather, relaxation, of consciousness. Elsewhere in the book the most daring modulations occur, but the narrative framework is merely extended and strengthened by them. Mr. Winters' fallacy applies to Studs Lonigan, not to Stephen Daedalus. It is limited in its application to writing in which the effort is merely to reproduce experience —in the case of James T. Farrell it is a heroic effort—and to exclude most of the elements by means of which the writer penetrates the experience in question with understanding and judgment. What Winters seems to forget, especially with regard to Joyce, is that such understanding and judgment is very often not explicit, but is given in the quality of the style. In a short story by Ring Lardner, for example, the irony of the writer, his almost absolute disgust with human beings, is never expressed through any character, or any explicit judgment, but it is there sometimes in the form of a grammatical error and pun, such as "the world serious," sometimes in a brief exaggeration of tone.

But there is a further modern complication which Winters neglects. We know that in order to tell a story, in order to join one perception to another, ideas, beliefs and values are necessary as a means of ordering, if nothing else. If one's heroine commits adultery, or if one is describing the sea, it is necessary to bring some attitude to bear on the situation in order to go on with the story or the poem and bring it to a genuine conclusion. Indeed, it seems as if this fusion of value and perception were a primary motive of writing. But the predicament of the modern writer is exactly the fact that

there is a gap, a distance, between the writer's perceptions and his beliefs or values. This is, I think, at least in part what Allen Tate meant in saying (in his introduction to Hart Crane's *White Buildings)* that Crane could not find a theme adequate to his vision. Crane's obscurity was explained by this, and Tate pointed out previous examples of it in the history of poetry, beginning with Blake. It is thus sometimes this gulf between what the writer sees and what he believes which accounts for a certain disorder, strain, and obscurity in his work. It is not the most fortunate of situations, but in order to escape from it, it would be necessary to sacrifice either one's perceptions or one's beliefs.

The fallacy of imitative form is relevant to the documentary novelist on the one hand and to the *transition* group on the other, but most of the writers whom Winters is considering fall outside of both groups. Since these writers are struggling to express the complexities of modern life, and their discontinuous values, their efforts tend to exert a pressure on normal modes of syntax and arrangement: there is an omission of transition and explanation. In time, of course, the new method of presentation becomes as familiar as the old. It is difficult in 1937 to understand why *Ulysses* seemed obscure in 1921; and the obscurity of Keats is almost inconceivable. But Winters tends to regard an omission of punctuation as an abandonment of rationality. How else are his strictures on Joyce, Eliot, and Perse, to be understood when it is a question of their literary method? ^'inters thinks that a "classicist" cannot "with perfect taste" admire these writers. Mr. Eliot has said that if there were a classical writer in our time, one would not recognize him, so monstrous would he seem. Mr. Winters, however, has no trouble in recognizing classicists. Amid these extremists, there is no need to restrain oneself: it seems perfectly obvious to me that in *Ulysses* James Joyce has produced a work of which Aristotle and Dante would approve.

IV

There are according to Mr. Winters four different systems of measuring rhythm in a poem, the quantitative, the syllabic, the accentual, and the accentual-syllabic. The first two, except for Bridges' experiments, have almost no relevance to verse in English. Winters is mainly interested in showing how free verse can be analyzed out into accentual verse, and how accentual-syllabic verse is superior to it. The analysis of both types of verse will probably be very useful to poets, and the whole theory of meter is elucidated with both lucidity and subtlety. A concise summary of the theory is to be had by quoting Winters' own words in the foreword to his pamphlet of verse, *Before Disaster:*

> There has been a marked tendency of late years, a tendency fostered by the purely accentual systems of free verse and neo-Websterian movements, and of the verse of Hopkins, to extremely free substitution within accentual-syllabic forms, and particularly to the very free use of extra-syllabic feet. I

> believe accentual-syllabic verse superior in principle to accentual, since it provides a norm which accounts for the conformity or deviation of every syllable, renders it possible to perceive every detail in relation to a perfect norm, and hence makes for the greatest precision of movement, the most sensitive shades of perception, that is, of variation. The finest sensitivity is the product of the clearest form; the abandonment or weakening of form in the interests of greater fluidity can lead only in the direction of imperception. Accentual verse, on the other hand, as distinct from accentual-syllabic, tends to substitute perpetual variety for exact variation; change exists for its own sake and is only imperfectly a form of perception. Furthermore, the vogue of accentual verse, as I have already suggested, has broken down the vogue of minimum variation in accentual-syllabic forms; namely, that the source of variation to be most extensively employed is quantity, that (in iambic verse) substitution should be restricted as far as possible to inversion of accent, and that in tri-syllabic feet the two light syllables should be as light and as short as possible.

To generalize crudely, what Winters wants in any meter is strict regularity, so that every divergence from regularity can be used to express or imitate the feelings or perceptions which are being referred to by the words. Now the requirement of a norm, strict regularity, cannot be denied. But from this, Winters' argument makes two rapid jumps. The best norm, it is claimed then, is the accentual-syllabic one just mentioned. And then the nature of this norm is generalized from the practice (but certainly not the theory) of Bridges, T. Sturge Moore, Pope, and Dryden. What would happen, however, if Winters looked for the norm in *The Winter's Tale,* or *Samson Agonistes?* What, furthermore, would happen if Winters examined the free verse in the English Bible? In passing, Mr. Winters refers to the meters of *Samson Agonistes* as in part a failure, in part a *tour de force,* but he mentions neither the *Psalms* nor Shakespearean blank verse. If these types of writing were examined, it would be clear that several norms are possible, and each type of subject matter would imply a special modification of existing meters. I cannot here illustrate this fact at length, but 1 can refer to the Bible[4] (which Winters will not be able to cry down, like the free verse of William Carlos Williams, as limited in its possibilities), and I can offer one example of a metrical device which Winters ignores and which illustrates the fact that the rhythm of verse can be expressive in ways other than the variation of accentual or accentual-syllabic norm. This is the familiar device of foreshortening the length of a line. Shakespeare uses it again and again, Milton uses it in "Lycidas" and *Samson*

> O Jehovah our Lord, how wondrous great

[4] If he wishes, the reader may compare Milton's translations of the Psalms to the King James' versions in order to see whether or not the accentual-syllabic norm is not, for some purposes, inadequate, or at least replaceable. Milton's translation of Psalm VIII reads in part:

And glorious is thy name through all the earth?
So as above the Heavens thy praise to set
Out of the tender mouths of latest bearth,

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou
Hast founded strength because of all thy foes
To stint th'enemy and slack th'avengers brow
That bends his rage thy providence to oppose.

while the free verse of the King James' version reads:

O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!
who hast set thy glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings ha^t thou ordained
strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the
enemy and the avenger.

Agonistes, and it is used by Collins with obvious expressiveness in "Ode to Evening"

If aught of oaten stop or pastoral song,
May hope, chaste eve, to soothe thy modest ear
Like thy own solemn springs,
Thy springs and solemn gales,

Now air is hushed, save where the weak-eyed bat
With short, shrill shriek, flits by on leathern wing;
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn,

or, to use another instance to show the variety of effect possible:

Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning
Death
Those who glitter with the glory of the humming bird, meaning
Death
Those who sit in the stye of contentment, meaning
Death
Those who suffer the ecstasy of animals, meaning
Death

And a dozen other like usages, which not only have nothing to do with an accentual-syllabic norm, but which make it impossible, could be elaborated, if there were sufficient room in a review.

When Winters comes to illustrate specifically what he means by an expressive variation of a norm, he betrays a literalism which is hard to fathom and which reflects back upon the so-called fallacy of imitative form. He quotes the following lines by Williams

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees

and says that the beat in these lines "has perceptual value, as indicating the 'twiggy' appearance of the landscape." On the other hand, one would suppose that Winters would condemn the following lines from *The Waste Land* (since he rejects Eliot almost wholly):

when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting

The expressive effect is gained by the participles, rather than by the variation of an accentual-syllabic norm. Indeed the whole of *The Waste Land* is full of imitative or expressive form which is not in the least as faint as the one which Winters finds in the lines from Williams. And the absence of the norm which Winters thinks is best does not involve the author of *The Waste Land* in any abandonment of rationality, in any attempt to submerge himself in his experience, rather than the attempt to grasp it, represent it, and evaluate it.

At times Winters writes of the use of the accentual-syllabic norm in a way so extreme that the use which Winters most emphasizes seems a fiction. It is as if the poet deliberately ticked off deviations from the norm on suitable occasions. Perhaps some poets do. But it is obvious that taken in metrical abstraction such deviations are more or less limited in number, unequal to the variety of perception, and insufficiently precise. One may substitute a trochee for an iamb at the beginning of a line in order to have a perceptive variation for anger: "Scoundrel!"—or the same substitution to express affection: "Darling!" The substitution as merely metrical is largely indeterminate.

But if we take meter and meaning together, as I suggested above, the way in which meter is expressive becomes a much more complicated matter than the deviation from a metrical norm. In the great sonnets of Milton. as Mr. Winters must be perfectly aware, the expressive effect of firmness of character and indomitable spirit is gained by the latinity of the diction as it conflicts with the meter, with the sonnet-form, and with the normal sentence-order of English. This results in certain metrical variations, but none equal to the expressive effect: the primary means of expressiveness is Milton's diction. And in general one must suppose that the meter plays a passive, although essential, role in the poem. It provides a kind of substratum whose evenness and regularity are, so to speak, cut into by the modulations of style and diction and meaning. The fusion of style and meter, meaning and meter, provides the expressiveness of the poem, and carries its tone and attitude. The deviations from the norm are for the most part minor aspects or consequences of this fusion. And it seems to me that one can say that the style *is* the poem. The quality of the style is the verbal and aural realization of the poet's sensibility. The style is, in fact, the poet's values, focused upon his perceptions

and revealed in all their purity. No poet can escape from his style, although he may change his meters. The poem apart from its style is not a poem but something which belongs to psychology or biography or politics or history. Meter is a necessary element in style, but it is far from being the only one.

One concludes, then, by supposing that the nature of structure and meter is not as simple, nor as exclusive as Mr. Winters has made it out to be; nor are their *specific* modes established for future experience and future writing (although the *principles* involved are so established: such a principle as Mr. Blackmur uses, that the poem be *contained* in the words, or such another one as Mr. Winters makes us more aware of, that there be a norm of regularity in the rhythm). One must be grateful, too, for the extension of taste to such poets as Churchill, Gay, Rochester, and T. Sturge Moore. If there is no meaning, on the one hand, in making this extension of taste, for the purposes of convincing others or oneself, negative to the extent that T. S. Eliot becomes a bad poet, on the other hand Mr. Winters' judgments are sometimes illuminating even when his reasons are unacceptable. The defects in Pound and MacLeish, for example, are not a mere willful departure from accentual-syllabic verse, nor merely a deliberate blindness to experience. Pound can see only surfaces and his favorite periods in history, and MacLeish can get no further, at any time, than a catalogue of objects and a reverie, but the reasons for this, whatever they may be, are not simple, as we see more clearly in the instance of Crane, a poet in search of objects of devotion in an age when there were no devotional objects. If, then, we permit religion and philosophy and the society in which we live to be somewhat more than preliminary to the act of writing poetry, perhaps "the clear understanding of motive, and a just evaluation of feeling," which Mr. Winters asks for on his last page, will be less difficult and rare. This much, however, is certain: when good poetry is written, Mr. Winters will recognize it (although he may later change his mind because of some preconception), and meanwhile he will be writing his own extremely fine verse.

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