



CPR Classic Readings: Yvor Winters

As Reviewed By:
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"The Slow Pacific Swell"

"The Slow Pacific Swell" may be found in many volumes of Winters's work, including *Collected Poems* (1960); *The Poetry of Yvor Winters* (1978); and *The Selected Poems of Yvor Winters* (1999).



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In her introduction to one of two recent editions of Yvor Winters' selected poems, Helen Pinkerton Trimpi offers "To the Holy Spirit" as Winters' most mature poetic achievement. Its formal rigor, loosened only slightly by a craftsman who has mastered the laws of his art and may therefore alter them without violation, is undeniable and astounding. Although Winters would have felt ambivalent about the comparison, the poem shares much with W.B. Yeats's mid-career masterpiece, "Easter 1916." In both, a form of trimeter (Winters' is iambic while Yeats's is roughly accentual) grounds irregular but unmistakable rhymes. This preservation of traditional form subjected to modulation or loosening is what most satisfies in those few great poets of the last century (beginning with T.S. Eliot and Yeats, but continuing on to Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill). Eliot was right to suggest on several occasions that modern poetry at its best would allow one to sense the presence of tradition *within* a surprising and unpredictable form. The discovery of order—but also the recognition that such order is hard to come by and is the achievement only of cultivated sensibilities—is what such a poetics celebrates (As Timothy Steele notes, however, when Eliot reduced this broad formal dialectic to the level of metrical feet, he did much more harm than good. Steele has correctly argued that "modulation" does not require the introduction of substitutions in formal verse, but simply the proper manipulation of rhythm across the grid of meter). So Winters' poem deserves our admiration for its observance of the traditional within the innovative in a poem that bears witness to the eternal in the

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evanescent. Standing in a deserted graveyard in the Salinas Valley, his laconic voice prays, momentarily regularizing itself into quatrains:

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.

Trimpi's own poetry testifies to the potential of such modulation. Her brief *Taken in Faith* (the collected poems of a long but little published career) moves between tightly ordered syllogistic lyrics and expansive dramatic monologues that, like "To the Holy Spirit," stand among the best of twentieth-century meditative poetry. The seductive variations of rhyme in Winters' late poem, however, may initially prove an obstacle to appreciating what is his most masterly single work, "The Slow Pacific Swell," to which we shall turn in a moment.

First, we should consider the manner in which "To the Holy Spirit" stands out as one of the best balanced expressions of Winters' constant, in fact limited, theme of the struggle of the human reason for perceived and cognitive order in a chaotic and hostile universe. Most of his poems investigate these two modes of order. Some (those focused on the perceptual) strain to understand how the mind can overcome sensory and psychological limitations to encounter Being and reality in Truth (in the Thomistic sense of those words), while others (those focused on the cognitive) narrate the mind alternately in its romantic, irrational states and in its proper realization into a classical or stoic balance. One virtue of "To the Holy Spirit" is its

representation of a mind adjusting to finitude and resolving for sanity as a relative being caught between the sub-rational change of matter and the absolute form of pure spirit, pure intellect. It offers us the posture of cognitive order.

Theories of lyric poetry do not vary in one central proposition: a lyric poem by definition expresses the psychological (or cognitive) state within the experience of human subjectivity. Those poems will be most admirably lyrical that most vividly represent that interior state relative to, and in terms of, sensory and conceptual propositions. One can say, as many modernists did, that such focus on the subject, on the self, on the *ego*, is merely romantic, personal or narcissistic nonsense, and therefore the mark of a contemporary, isolated and impoverished world (recall, for instance, Auden's condemnation of Wordsworth in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*). While we could attack such a claim for making a general rule out of occasional excesses, I merely wish to say that such criticism is beside the point – unless we are to give up the lyric genre entirely. A lyric poem properly understood *must* place a human self, spirit and mind, at its center. One can read and misread doctrines of impersonality, iterate and reiterate the preposterous notions of “objectivism” or “constructivism” or other such “-isms,” in manifestos for poetry, but what one there encounters is not a rule for a new or reformed direction in the lyric, but the refusal of lyricism *per se*. I offer this digression in order to qualify a claim that needs to be made. “To the Holy Spirit” may be Winters' finest lyric poem. It shines a cold light on the psyche straining to understand its place in the cosmos and gloats quite beautifully in that psyche's achievement of a stoic acceptance of reality after which many other modern poets (including Yeats, Eliot and Ezra Pound) strove but failed to win.

With the geriatric critics of lyric poetry, however, I would argue that the constant focus on the self can become monotonous—even in Winters, where it never becomes indulgent. Winters himself did not like the term “lyric,” preferring “short poem” as the genre to which he committed his creative efforts and which he held up for highest praise above all other literary forms. This generic categorization is problematic in many ways, but it captures nicely *his* discomfort with the poetic tendency to manifest and exult the ego, even when that ego is represented as finite and accepting of its limitations. Winters did not want to be a lyric poet and was one only when he failed to represent perceptual order and settled for narrating the cognitive ordering of the self. In short, “To the Holy Spirit” and similar poems are primarily manifestations of an attitude *to* reality rather than experiments (which Winters appraised more highly) in the presentation and judgment of reality itself.

For a poem that accomplishes the latter, we may best turn to “The Slow Pacific Swell.” Indeed, those who wish to appreciate Winters’ achievement must turn to this poem in any case, because there—at the date, relatively early in his career, of 1930—many of Winters’ ethical and poetic theories coalesce in a vision of austere beauty. To a degree well beyond any of his other works, this one formally manifests Winters’ nominally classical sensibility and provides, as its content, an allegorical narrative that justifies that sensibility as necessary for the sane human being. The human mind is fragile but can achieve order. The senses themselves make possible the operation of reason, but in their imperfections are also its most persistent danger. Human experience can only reward us with wisdom if, having arrived at the frontier, the margin of reason and irrational nature, we can carefully take one step back from those borderlands to survey them from the modest terrain already mapped by our judgment. As Winters wrote in his first essay on Emily Dickinson, “It is possible to solve any problem of insoluble experience by retreating a step and defining the boundary at which comprehension ceases, and by then making the necessary moral adjustments to that boundary; this in itself is an experience both final and serious.” This experience provides the occasion of the poem.

“The Slow Pacific Swell” is one of eight specimens of heroic couplets that compose Winters’ chapbook *The Journey and Other Poems* (1931). This little volume in turn comprises the “definitions by example” of Winters’ theory of the heroic couplet itself. In an essay later published as the last section of *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), Winters argued that the couplet was the most versatile of poetic forms, capable of achieving a greater variety of tone and style than blank verse. While one may presume that the absence of rhyme and presence of long lines in the latter would guarantee its suitability for myriad poetic performances, Winters insists that the flexibility of the couplet won through the length of pentameter and the discrete, and therefore unobtrusive, nature of its rhyme scheme outdoes that of mere blank verse. The poet’s ability to emphasize and deemphasize the strength or appearance of the ever-present rhymes through enjambment, caesura, syntax and sentence rhythm secures formal integrity in a way blank verse cannot. More obviously, it allows for movement between the long periods for which, say, Milton’s and Wordsworth’s blank verse are variously known, and passages that sound as tightly rhymed as traditional ballads and songs. The openness of possibility facilitated by the constraints of what untrained ears might find the grating repetitions of the couplet (meaning those who cannot envision a couplet less classically compressed than Pope’s) struck Winters as the greatest formal development in English prosody. All the variations of stanzaic form and sentence rhythm could be

exploited without the appearance of fragmentation or disunity in the poem itself. *The Journey and Other Poems* exhibits this variation by offering us narrative, satire, elegy and meditative lyric, as if to prove the couplet's flexibility-within-formal-limitation suitable for any genre of short poem. Despite this extreme formal constraint, none of the poems loads itself up with formal chains so much as "The Slow Pacific Swell," and there the chains appear not merely as constraint but as ornament, foundation, and definition. So the poem begins with a crisp assurance that the couplet will be our form:

Far out of sight forever stands the sea,
Bounding the land with pale tranquility.

Every subsequent line of the stanza is to some extent enjambed; three semi-colons and one colon suggest a brief pause at the end of lines. One additional period forces such a pause, but does so to divide *within* a couplet:

Dark and precise the little steamers ply—
Firm in direction they seem not to stir.
That is illusion. The artificer
Of quiet, distance holds me in a vise
And holds the ocean steady to my eyes.

Winters flexes the couplet in similar manner throughout the poem so that, to speak imprecisely, one may periodically think it a poem in blank verse, at others one in neo-Augustan couplets. Occasional internal rhyme ("The vision still / Lies in the eye") hints of monometer or other short, song-based stanzas. My point is not to praise Winters for avoiding the appearance of rhyme; that this virtue in other poets has come in for praise among many contemporary metrical poets is a sign of their embarrassment of the craft in which they nonetheless persist. Subtle use of rhyme is a virtue, no doubt. But it is not a virtue whose opposing vice is obvious rhyme. Rather rhyme *per se* is an attribute that contributes to the virtue of poetic order (or "good making"), and its opposite is the chaos of unmaking that verges on prolific non-existence. Winters' poem deserves our admiration for the virtuosity and variety of its couplets, not their partial concealment.

Formally, the poem does much more than demonstrate the viability of the couplet for modern verse. "The Slow Pacific Swell" is not just divisible into pairs of

lines. It consists of three stanzas of fourteen lines each. That is to say that, within the more obvious structure of the unlimited couplet poem, which could in theory extend to any length, the poem is also a sequence of three sonnets. Winters is well known for his claim that poems should be short because, when extended overlong, they break down into their constitutive parts and begin to appear fragmented. He admired Pound's *Cantos*, for instance, but believed that *within* each Canto Pound had written and jumbled together several poems of varying merit. The unevenness was a failure of judgment; the fragmentation a failure of craft. Writers on Winters have observed this absolute preference for the short poem and therefore assumed Winters condemned the sonnet sequence as but a slightly more ordered cluster of poetic fragments (He was not, for instance, taken in by speculations on the meaning of Shakespeare's sonnets *as a whole*; he admired and interpreted some, he dismissed others).

"Pacific Swell" serves as a qualification—by no means a rejection—of that assumption. Importantly, the poem is more disjunctive than any of his later works. It is united from start to finish by, first, a single narrative "I"; second, the tripartite relation of that self to the sea; third, a narrative progression of that protagonist and relation as it changes (from enamored childhood, to dramatic adulthood, on to stoic maturity) and, forth, a logical progress of reflection on the senses of sight, touch and hearing as they inform the reason. And yet, when we hear at the start of the second stanza, "Once when I rounded Flattery, the sea / Hove its loose weight like sand to tangle me / Upon the washing deck," we have good reason, with Christopher Ricks, to hear the kind of fragmentation and disjunctive procedure of literary allusion that Winters also saw as a poetic imperfection, i.e. "pseudo-reference." The "I" of the poem is *not* the continuous self speaking from a single dramatic viewpoint necessary for a lyric, but rather the generic or universal "I" of an allegorical Everyman journeying through life. Ricks claims to hear the waves of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" in Winters' poem, but it might be more appropriate to say that "Pacific Swell" wishes to serve as an advisory for any attempt to interpret sensory experience, literary or otherwise. So at least I would like to argue by giving an account of the poem.

The first stanza or sonnet describes the experience of seeing the ocean from afar, "At thirty miles or more." Distance primarily allows for clarity of vision and the calm, reflective observation of a disinterested narrator. In Winters' essay "The Function of Criticism," he advocated a terse, disinterested prose for the novel that he, with no success, exemplified in his short story "The Brink of Darkness," and

which his wife, Janet Lewis, developed through many stories, novellas and novels. Winters recognized that clear vision was difficult to attain, but believed the novelist's style should be formed in honest aspiration to it. The language of the poem also exemplifies (with one gorgeous exception) the plain, clear narrative speech he considered the sign of plain, clear rational vision. But while distance offers a certain static lucidity, it also conceals motion. The poem is Aristotelian to its core, and so we should confidently use motion and change interchangeably here as the Philosopher does in his *Physics*. Aristotle also declared sight the first of all senses, a status confirmed by an analogy, which borders on the univocal, of physical sight and the interior vision of the reason. The first stanza (from which I quoted above), then, links physical distance of vision—seeing the big picture—with the act of abstraction. By abstraction the reason distinguishes conceptually what it nonetheless knows is one and inseparable in reality in order to attain piecemeal a knowledge of essences. Just as the naive realist, for Aristotle, is mistaken to attribute substantial reality to a separate essence, so the voice in Winters' poem acknowledges the utility of his vision, but also corrects its error, recognizing that the broad strokes of sky, horizon and water in the distance, the ostensibly stationary steamers, are held "steady to my eyes." The senses provide all material of thought to the reason, so that the mind can become virtually or, in scholastic language, *intentionally* one with the thing observed. But the senses are finite and imperfect, and the reason must measure and correct them if one is not to enter disastrously into a world of illusion of the sort Kant and his idealist successors posited as the realm of mere phenomena.

The unreliability of the senses and the need for the reason to serve as cautious corrective now established, the second sonnet throws us into another tableau. The speaker may be the same, indeed is the same so long as we appreciate that his identity and experience is intended to be generic and allegorical. He describes traveling by ship round "Flattery," when the sea

Hove its loose weight like sand to tangle me
 Upon the washing deck, to crush the hull;
 Subsiding, dragged flesh at the bone. The skull
 Felt the retreating wash of dreaming hair.
 Half drenched in dissolution, I lay bare.
 I scarcely pulled myself erect; I came

Back slowly, slowly knew myself the same.

The stiffness of Winters' language, intended of course to effect a classical austerity ("Laurel, archaic, rude") does not always work well for him, as it does not in the first two lines quoted here, with the repetition of infinitives in the forth feet. When we arrive at "to crush the hull" it reads like a clunky and overabundant sub-clause merely because of the position of the verb: the sentence itself is otherwise of fine length and form. The repetition of "I" in the six and seventh lines of the stanza, in contrast, work brilliantly to imitate the de-familiarization of the self, the alienation of the ego as the reason stares reflexively upon it, that occurs in the narrative. The repetition of "slowly" as adverbs for two different verbs has a similar effect: it does not "intensify" the moment as a vulgarly imagined lover might say "softly, softly" or "faster, faster." It rather suggests the slow return of the self and the slow discovery that the speaker is still alive and has not been swallowed by the sea as distinct, gradual actions like the return from double to single vision. The magnificent phrase of the whole passage, of course, is "wash of dreaming hair." Not only is it the most figurative and emotive language in the poem, but it signals the supra-rational danger of the sense of touch—the ecstasy of nerves humming and firing without any comprehension in the mind.

Winters wrote repeatedly that Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism advocated human beings' renunciation of the intellect and becoming enormous nerves of pure impulse. In the middle of the ocean, in the realm of pure nature where the individual is at greatest remove from the terra firma of knowledge and rational experience, the beauty, temptation and danger of this possibility literally washes over the speaker. Romanticism both celebrates and alienates the *ego*, in Winters' thinking, because it suggests that we reach our truest self only when we put aside our most distinctive function (the reason). The stanza continues with the distant image of "Gray whales for miles: the long sweep of the jaw, / The blunt head plunging clean above the wave." People *do* go whale watching, just as some few of them read Emerson. Winters understands such things appear beautiful and, indeed, can be beautiful *in fact* so long as sufficient distance is acquired to allow the reason to mediate between the sensation and the self. The touch—in Aristotle's conception the least rational of the senses because the nerves seem almost to act on their own—always threatens to drag us undersea. Nature always promises to ravish and destroy us, because its beauty is in fact sublimity – the imposing and almost infinite form of that which is beyond simple comprehension. The form that reaches beyond form itself into the abyss.

The final sonnet has always perplexed me precisely because it *does* sound so discontinuous from the previous two. It begins “A landsman, I. The sea is but a sound.” The second stanza contradicts this, the narrator having sounded too much a veteran sailor to be also a mere tourist out for whale watching. Again, this is a sonnet *sequence* and allegory, not a lyric, and the discontinuity prepares us, much as do the movements of Dante from circle to circle in Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, for a *conceptual* change. Narrative discontinuity lets us know that the idea or perspective now to be explored is distinct from the previous two. From sight and touch, we come to sound, to the sense of hearing. Aristotle believed vision more important than a good ear, but he also said that the blind will be more intelligent than the deaf (hence one permutation of “and dumb”), because they will learn the names of things and be able to speak them. Speech, sound, is primarily what enables one person to divulge the entire contents of his mind to another (as Jacques Derrida may have been the first to appreciate, the Greeks gave only secondary attention to reading and to texts, which they understood as secondary, eviscerated speech). It is the sense most identified then with the mediating and actuating function of the reason. Language, especially the “mental word” of thought, is the medium that allows us to comprehend and manipulate the data of the senses, but it also has the power to make reality manifest in the reason by compensating conceptually for the frequent inadequacies of our raw vision (an inadequacy, we have seen, the first stanza explores). The stanza begins by describing the experience of pure hearing—one which is a kind of torment, because it lacks the completion of the other senses:

A landsman, I. The sea is but a sound.
I would be near it on a sandy mound,
And hear the steady rushing of the deep
While I lay stinging in the sand with sleep.

The last of these lines long has troubled me, primarily because I like it so much even though it feels hyperbolic. Or rather, it would seem Winters’ desires to convey the desert suffering of depravation, which is conceptually apt within the poem as a whole, in a particular tableau—that of sun bathing on a beach—where it hardly seems appropriate. The logic of the poem drives us to this crossed image of a sightless, prone body sensing the world with a kind of agony because nature itself is cruel and unforgiving, even though the narrative situation naturally connotes something considerably more pleasant. This is a frequent fault in Winters’ poetry, as his portrayal of eating home-grown carrots as an almost Bacchic murder proves

beyond a reasonable doubt.

Immediately following this experience of nature's elemental threat, the notion of hearing moves from its sensory associations to the rational ones Aristotle assigned it. As the means to language and therefore to concepts and ideas, the sense of hearing evokes the intellectual act of defining and ordering the chaos around us. Winters therefore proceeds along the littoral to establish a clear distinction between the ocean and land:

I have lived inland long. The land is numb.
It stands beneath the feet, and one may come
Walking securely, till the sea extends
Its limber margin, and precision ends.
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 wrinkling in the moon, and blind;
Or gathers seaward, ebbing out of mind.

The previous stanzas function symbolically; the literal details should be understood first literally, and then one may investigate the connotations I have educated. In these last lines, the movement between that which is perceived and the concepts they help us to explore blurs. The symbolic becomes a parable, and by the last line we are no longer so certainly speaking of a literal ocean, but perhaps of the effects of a malevolent nature upon the tragic intellect of mankind. To hear a word, to formulate a concept, constructs an intellectual foundation on which reason may operate with increasing confidence; hence the awkward but apt notion of the land "standing" beneath the feet. A life's experience is insufficient to chart and order the limitless chaos of change and possibility, however. In fact, the collective experience of mankind, as Winters' understands it, teaches us that the margin where "precision ends" only retreats so far before our efforts.

The distrust of metaphysics, the collapse of theology, in the minds of modern empiricists and positivists (including those who have never heard those two terms

before) would even suggest that, for many, the sea of natural chaos, of the deadly unknown, surges inward and encroaches ever more on what had been terra firma. This increasing skepticism, the increasing sense of man's limits and the need to observe them, carries a distinct valence in Winters' poetry precisely because that same poetry is so deeply informed by Aristotelian and Thomist thought. In their tradition, the reason may proceed from the most evident sense data to undeniable conceptual laws, and upon this dual foundation one may build a steely structure of rational argument all the way up to a natural knowledge of God. The philosophy they proposed was, as Winters frequently claimed, unique for its sanity and firm, humble grasp of reason. But in virtue of this sanity, it also felt justified in proceeding with deductive arguments to what Winters would have thought vertiginous heights, well beyond the "limits" of human judgment. The stoic reserve, the classical austerity, Winters praised and exemplified in his verse and criticism captures the balance he struck between the confident conceptual realism of these two philosophers (whom he respected and followed) and his own empiricist skepticism which affirmed the reason, but only so long as it stayed in fairly close proximity to the senses and what the senses could affirm: "A landsman, I." For this reason, "The Slow Pacific Swell" imagistically charts the terrain all of his poetry routinely traversed. Attentive to the senses, Winters justly distrusted them. Reliant on reason as man's defining attribute and sole stay against chaos, he distrusted its advanced movements through the complexities of deduction.

His poem leaves us with an image of the dark consuming waters of the sea, but only to imply that the narrator himself has wisely turned away from its temptations. Faith and sacred theology are off limits, though natural theology is essential in establishing those limits and so introduces the possibility of their violation. Winters' finest achievement is *not* in carving out a modern humanist verse that can forego the immensities of emotion and intellect that remind us that we do not entirely belong to ourselves and that the universe is itself the creation of a God we can but narrowly understand. Rather, it is in his recognition that reason, wherever it may take us, is our chief resource and cannot be set aside *even* when we come to those watery margins that challenge it, not only to correct and validate, but to move beyond the physical senses. "The Slow Pacific Swell," perhaps surprisingly, succeeds not at adapting the couplet to the modern lyric (it is not a lyric), but rather stands alongside other modernist allegories, whether those of W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and C. Day Lewis, or Winters' own "The Castle of Thorns," "Hercules," "Midas," and especially "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Its careful deployment of allegory and controlled formal structure, which recovers the sonnet

sequence and the expansive building-block of the heroic couplet, makes it a poem of almost unsurpassed mastery and beauty precisely because it is also a poem about the observance of constraints and limitations in form and in mind.

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