

with a small bucket of terror, and a slight case of eyestrain. *Death Kit* is a book you can even hate with profit. There is a self-indulgent nihilism about it, as there is about her criticism of America in general: a New Yorker's smug abandonment of the People Out There. But it was worth doing, and she has done it well.

The Early Poems of Yvor Winters

Alan Swallow, \$3.75

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These first poems, which the critic and poet, Yvor Winters, allows to be reprinted here for the first time, are composed in the free verse, imagist, associational styles he was later to rail against:

Leal was dead

And still his wife

Carried in pinelogs

Split and yellow like a man's hair. . .

Not only do they bear the burdens of aesthetic and personal assumptions which he later found insupportable, but they would seem to convict him of the very sensibility which he was to insist was so limiting and, if pursued, self destructive:

My very breath

Disowned

In nights of study,

And page by page

I came on Spring.

Some of the poems are also quite sensual and beautiful, queer little gems of the eye and ear set in the dry landscapes of the Southwest:

The harvest falls

Throughout the valleys

With a sound

Of fire in leaves.

The harsh trees

Heavy with light,

Beneath the flame, and aging,

Have risen higher and higher.

Apricots,

The clustered

Fur of bees,

Above the gray rocks of the upland. . .

To those who have read either the

later poetry or the criticism with any sensitivity, none of this should come as a surprise. Intellectually, Winters may take pride in his "reactionary" position in letters, but his sensibility remains that of the modernist. His otherwise caustic polemic against Hart Crane, for example, contained a loving appreciation of the poet's best work; to hear him reading from Crane was to hear him surrendering to the very demons he was seeking to rout. It is also true of some of Winters' printed confrontations with Hopkins or Frost, Rimbaud or Donne or Shakespeare, that the earnestness of the argument and the passion of the pronouncements are sometimes a better indication of Winters' entire response to the man's work than his efforts to put him in his place through learned, often brilliant, critical analyses and judgments.

Allen Tate once described the subject of much of Winters' impressive later poetry as "the dignity of man's commitment to his limitations." This is certainly the commitment of Winters' Socrates—"to formulate forever what is wrong"—and it is the force to be found in Winters' meditational poetry in which, though it be asserted time and again that "the mind" is not "in vain," the poet is all-too-aware of contingency, of the "precarious," of being "betrayed, deserted," with "blackness before, and on the road above/The crowded terror that is human love."

But the Winters of these early poems was not quite yet so convinced of finality. Sometimes he would merely invoke the world about him through an abrupt yoking together of unassimilated sensations so that Los Angeles' sleazyness emerged as "Rosyfingered cocklehouses/burst from burning/rockred plaster hollyhocks/spit crackling mamas/tickled pink. . ." and the trunk of an orange tree could seem a "black serpent/struggling/with your weight of gold." Quite often, too, it was as if the weight of the yoke strongly anticipated the presumed force of the sensations; and the result was an inspired mechanical breakdown.

Thus, it is possible to read these poems, with all their flawed striving after effects, as simply the youthful work of a man of talent and to take delight

in minor felicities of image and movement, casting aside all else; but it is also possible to find in them certain stray unassimilated tones which here appear almost as disturbances but which will eventually be harmonized to form some of the great fully orchestrated later compositions in rhymed couplets, tetrameter, or blank verse.

"It was the dumb decision of the/madness of my youth that left me with/this cold eye for the fact," the young poet remarks with a stinging determination in a free verse poem (one of the very few he was later to include in his *Collected Poems*, 1952) which moves as Dr. Williams' early free verse moves but which is closer in spirit to the conventional Wintersian tone of moral acerbity, to the lines I quoted earlier from "The Grave," for example; and the Los Angeles poem, interestingly enough, was cited anonymously by Winters in one of his numerous polemics against the associational reveries of the modernist in *In Defense of Reason*.

In "A Service For All The Dead" entitled "The Deep" much of the familiar Wintersian diction even emerges in free verse form. He uses phrases such as "Old concentrate of thought" or "the fine cry of Time" but without any of the rhetorical control and meaning which is a hallmark of the later poetry. Here, for example, are some opening lines of a similar character from Winters' master-

ful "California Oaks": "Spreading and low, unwatered, concentrate/Of years of growth that thickens, not expands,/With leaves like mica and with roots that grate/Upon the deep foundations of these lands. . ."

"From first to last, most of my favorite poets have been relatively modern, and my methods have been modern," Winters—in a characteristically terse but nevertheless charming biographical note affixed to this collection—declares: ". . . My aim from the first poem . . . was a clean and accurate diction and movement . . . free of clichés . . ." The result, as Tate once described it, was a poetry of "clarity, elegance, and power."

But the experimentalism was not always so controlled, as the reader may here deduce from the evidence of some of Winters' early one-line limitations of American Indian poetry, or of Adelaide Crapsy,⁴ Emily Dickinson, and the early Williams. Although the eventual "refinement" of his "style" was to diverge considerably from the propensities exhibited here through the searching out of scholarly precedents, the seeking out of new masters, and the attempt to make a fascinating reevaluation of literary taste and literary history based upon the dominant inclinations of his early work, it is in this early work that one can find the motivation for all this in a fierce love of poetry, a talent which, like the kildee in one of his own poems, "rises/dazed and rolled amid the sudden blur of sleep/above the dayglare of the fields/goes screaming/off toward darker hills."