

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Yvor Winters on American poetry—Jews around the world—Aaron Burr and H. G. Wells

IT would be easy to underestimate Yvor Winters's first collection of literary essays* presented as "a study of American experimental poetry." It would be easy to say that any critic who uses the adjective, "great," excessively and recklessly (as Mr. Winters does) is already teetering on the verge of paranoia. It would be easy to say that any man who has the arrogance to quote an undistinguished poem by Robert Bridges's daughter and then compare it favorably with work by Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Gascoigne, and Herbert, all grouped together in fantastic company, presupposes unusual ignorance on the part of his readers. And it would be still easier to say that Mr. Winters's pretensions to literary scholarship are so large, and at every step so ill-supported (note his confusion of early Tudor with Elizabethan verse) that one's pity is aroused.

Yet it would be better, I think, not to pity Mr. Winters, nor get angry at him, nor conclude good-naturedly that he needs treatment in a psychiatric ward. It requires some little patience to read all he has written, to note its abnormal contradictions in full panorama, but at the end, one is rewarded by the exhibition of an American phenomenon.

In 1928, Mr. Winters published an extraordinary book of poems, *The Bare Hills*, which even today remains one of the few examples of Imagist verse well worth remembering. He possessed an excellent, if limited, tactile and visual imagination—and it is his misfortune that few critics recognized its potential value. Then, suddenly, something happened to the verse, something that was neither growth nor retrogression, but violent change, as though the poet's psyche had been torn from its roots and then replaced by an organism that was vastly inferior. Whatever happened (and I am not interested in Mr. Winters's life aside from his published work) resembles the operation of a quack, who poses as a psychiatrist and who "unravels" the mind of his patient only to find himself quite unable to put it together again. The verse became distinctly "literary" in the bad sense of the term, and in it, curiously abstracted imitations of Landor and Bridges began to appear. And after this work was in print, Mr. Winters published an angry satire in heroic couplets (which was at best an unskilled use of Pope's rhetoric)—and the entire poem was as trivial in its object as Wyndham Lewis's *Apes of God* or Roy Campbell's attacks on Bloomsbury. Mr. Winters had neglected to learn that the author of a satire must be as careful in his selection of dramatis personæ as the author of a tragedy, which among other reasons accounts for his failures and W. H.

Auden's successes in the writing of satirical verse. As a reviewer for *Hound & Horn*, Mr. Winters was one of a small group who represented an interesting and important tendency in American criticism—R. P. Blackmur was by far the ablest critic in that magazine, and in *Poetry* (Chicago) Morton D. Zabel wrote and published criticism of like quality. It was a moment when bright young men, instructors as well as graduate students, were no longer eager to leave the colleges: panic in Wall Street had made jobs outside the universities very scarce, and there was less and less incentive to abandon the security of speaking to a class-room audience for livelihood. Meanwhile, there was growing assurance that pioneer bourgeois prejudice against college education had broken down; it had become a social and economic asset to go to college, and for a short time, the young college instructor identified his destiny with the members of the ruling class, subtly confusing intellectual aristocracy with the power derived from great wealth.

It was either Mr. Winters or a member of his clique who praised some remarkably bad verse by Allen Tate because he "floundered like a gentleman." And the learning exhibited by many contributors to *Hound & Horn* was as newly acquired and as awkward as the wealth of a depression millionaire. Yet, thanks chiefly to Mr. Blackmur (who never went to college) and Mr. Zabel (who never contributed to *Hound & Horn*), the standards of academic criticism rose perceptibly—and with Granville Hicks in open attack upon the philosophy of its critics and they upon him, class lines became taut and self-conscious. Dogmatic Mr. Winters and agile Mr. Tate ruled the critical section of the magazine and influenced the selection of some of the most insipid verse I have ever read—which, however, did not exclude certain vivid exceptions to the rule.

The essays in *Primitivism and Decadence* are in one sense a memorial to those days of *Hound & Horn*, many of them, if not all, rewritten and brought up to date for the present emergency of book form. The essays are so arranged as to resemble an ambitious attack upon the Symbolist tradition in modern literature: I say resemble, because the attack is never clearly focused, but is, for the most part, a thinly veiled attempt to discredit the poetry of Hart Crane at its source. The ghost of Crane's poetry rides Mr. Winters's shoulders throughout the course of a loosely organized book, as though he were forced to prove: (1) that Crane's verse tended toward an escapist philosophy and was, therefore, bad; (2) that Crane's verse had bad literary associates, including Rimbaud, Laforgue, Corbiere, T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, James Joyce, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. B. Yeats, Robinson Jeffers, Kenneth Burke, and Walt Whitman; (3) that Crane defied the conventions of Robert Bridges's verse and was, therefore, wrong; and (4) an attempt to prove that T. Sturge Moore's ("that sheep in sheep's clothing," as an English critic happily remarked) "spirituality" is superior to Crane's "mysticism."

Though Mr. Winters's manner is stern and didactic, one encounters such loose statements as the following throughout his book: "The major Greek divinities exist for us chiefly as allegorical embodiments of more or less Platonic ideas." This illustrates clearly enough why Mr. Winters lacks conviction when he attempts to speak of the myth in relation to Crane's verse or to enter into philosophic controversy with Kenneth Burke, for I have yet to hear of any idea that was more or less Platonic, nor can the mythical significance of Greek divinities be dismissed as "embodiments" of something that is more or less an entire system of Greek thought. The same shy manner attends Mr. Winters's references to thirteenth century verse, which is, of course, verse in Middle English, and often admirable, but since it is even more fragmentary, as it is handed down to us in manuscript, than the work of Hart Crane, Mr. Winters does not risk direct quotation.

Mr. Winters reaches the climax of his argument by declaring that Mr. Joyce must be dismissed because he endangers "the literature of our time by rendering decay attractive," and he then replies with a hierarchy of values which places Robert Bridges at the very top, and the inept satire of Allen Tate in "Causerie" as superior to *The Waste Land*. It should be admitted at once that Robert Bridges possessed a sensitive ear, but it was attuned solely to the sterile remains of Eliza-



Jo Gans

* PRIMITIVISM AND DECADENCE, by Yvor Winters. Arrow Editions. \$2.50.



Microphonics

John Mackey

bethan music as it was transmuted through the verse of the later nineteenth century. Both his intellect and emotional understanding of human forces at work in his generation were mole-like in character: witness his refusal to answer Hopkins's letter concerning the Paris Commune. It is characteristic of Mr. Winters's method to offer us as touchstone, Robert Bridges's "Eros," in which clichés of meaning, rhyme, cadence, and language are uppermost:

Why hast thou nothing in thy face?
Thou idol of the human race,
Thou tyrant of the human heart
The flower of lovely youth that art . . .
With thy exuberant flesh so fair
That only Pheidias might compare,
Ere from his chaste marmoreal form
Time had decayed the colors warm

which has precisely the same æsthetic qualities that one encounters in a canvas signed by Bouguereau. In short, if one were to apply Paul Valéry's standards of use in literature, the poetry of Robert Bridges tends toward a complete and final nullity; its convention was already bankrupt at the close of the nineteenth century, and since Mr. Winters would agree with me that there can be no divorce between the content of a poem and its convention of language and imagery, let me repeat that its convention for our time is dead, and that its usefulness is zero—and further that it is irrational to speak of a convention that is already dead and overthrown by a Symbolist tradition as containing "moral" or "spiritual" purpose. It is like cohabitation with a corpse.

But, as I was saying a short time ago, Mr. Winters is an American phenomenon, not English—though some of this deficiency might have been repaired earlier in his career by a short term at Oxford or Cambridge. Like Bayard Taylor or Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who admired the shallowest sources of a tradition they conceived to be "English," it is, I suppose, natural that he should mistake the pallid sunset of Victorian romanticism for the classic dawn of early morning in English poetry. And, I believe, it is a significant fact that Robert Bridges wasted the last years of his life in amateur and sterile literary experiment.

These days, the cry of "decadence," accompanied by irrational thinking, didactic mannerisms, high talk of moral purpose, as well as the attempted revival of outworn conventions, has a familiar sound. Perhaps Mr. Winters is merely unfortunate in his use of terms, which seem to echo so plainly the voice of Goebbels ordering the "decadent" literature of Thomas Mann to the Nazi bonfires. Perhaps not, but read his quotation of "great" verse written by Robert Bridges's daughter, the verse that Mr. Winters admires above all other examples of her work:

Anger lay by me all night long,
His breath was hot upon my brow,
He told me of my burning wrong,
All night he talked and would not go.

And can I cast him from my couch?
And can I lock him from my room?

Ah no, his honest words are such
 That he's my true lord and my doom.

It is not bad, and I believe that Mr. Winters could scan its lines with greater ease than his attempts to scan Miss Moore's verse, or to rewrite Hart Crane's poetry, or to show that it is nearly impossible to paraphrase the least fortunate of Allen Tate's satires. It merely lacks what R. P. Blackmur would call knowledge of craft, and if one would measure its quality to find its equal, there are reproductions of Adolph Hitler's paintings in a recent issue of *Life*. They are not "decadent," they are mediocre.

HORACE GREGORY.

The Jew in the Modern World

SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS ARE JEWS, *by*
Robert Gessner. Farrar and Rinehart. \$3.

THIS is an immensely important book. Coming, as it does, at a time when Jewish issues are of prime interest because of the conduct of the Nazis, the confused situation in Palestine, the program for the ending of Jewish life in Poland, and the general rise of anti-Semitism throughout the world, what Mr. Gessner reports of his recent trip through these areas takes on added significance. In this reader's opinion, this is one of the most helpful books that have been written about Jews. To be sure, this last is faint praise, because books on Jewish life, with the exception of the exaggerated falsehoods of anti-Semitic literature, are generally of such a vulgar, cheap, and sentimental nature that they serve neither to aid the Jews nor to clarify the issues for non-Jews. In contrast, this book is virile and strong and honest. It is full of deep sympathy for the Jews because that sympathy is born out of a deep sympathy for all people who suffer; it is scrupulously exacting in its research and careful in its analysis and conclusion. Whatever judgments are proposed are so amply supported by proof and so convincingly documented, that their truth cannot be contradicted by any fair means.

That does not mean that the author will find a welcoming listener everywhere. So much truth hurts, and those that are hurt do not hesitate to strike back. No one expects this more than Mr. Gessner. His journeyings abroad, and his conversations with both Jews and non-Jews at home and elsewhere, have taught him that there are sharp issues here, and it is no thankful task to expose the weakness, duplicity, cunning, and stupidity for which prejudice is created and by which it is capitalized and supported. To unmask the class interests, chauvinist propaganda, and national imperialism that lie behind the high-sounding phrases and philanthropic deeds is not considered sporting by those who exploit and profit by exploitation. It is to be expected that Mr. Gessner will receive no hearing among the royal dispensers of Jewish salvation; it is to be hoped that he will gain many readers among those Jewish and non-