

YVOR WINTERS, THOM GUNN, AND OTHERS

The other day in the small north shore Long Island town where I live, I ran into a former member of Yvor Winters' Stanford poetry workshop. He is now a retired New York City high school teacher, this chunky, gentle, sad, slow-talking New York Jew who has only just gotten back to writing poems again of some beauty and passion after his encounters with Winters in the workshop thirty-seven years ago.

Oddly, Winters invited this fellow to come all the way from Brooklyn College to Stanford on a full poetry fellowship and then proceeded to savage every poem he ever submitted to the workshop with arguments that ranged from close textual criticism to the ad hominem.

It was a brutal spectacle to watch this Coney Island Keatsian subjected to Winters' unrelenting persiflage. Even though Winters was as often accurate as not, Martin flayed was painful to observe. I have somewhere read of a kind of Oriental demon who gained power over one only as one recognized and feared him. So convinced was Winters of the rightness of his prescriptions that by his overbearing manner he seemed to be trying to discourage my friend from wanting to write anything, even a business letter, ever again; and he almost succeeded. But why? He might just have saved a lot of time and money by sending Martin a letter of rejection when he'd first applied for the fellowship, saying he preferred his Delmore Schwartz sliced thin on rye with a slather of mustard.

At times I was grateful to my Brooklyn friend for being in the class; when he became the target, some of Winters' ire was deflected that might have been directed at me.

Toward my own poetry, "Arthur," as his wife, Janet Lewis, called him, was alternately condescending, with restrained praise for my earnestness and critical of my "Brooklyn ear" and general ignorance of the traditions of English and American poetry, and my absence of reading knowledge in foreign languages, and up to a point he was on the money. If I wanted to be Rimbaud, what was I doing in graduate school?

Trying to stay out of the army, of course. Graduate study gave me a draft deferment. But I also knew I lacked erudition and polish and was often sunk in forlorn reveries. I needed to reach beyond myself through craft and thought and, after reading some of Winter's critical essays and the poems he admired, I believed this powerful and eminent "new critic" could teach me. Winters was not uncharitable: he thought I was probably capable of becoming educated and would make a decent critic, especially whenever I collaborated with him in attacking his pet scapegoats.

It was a small workshop which met in Winters' dingy office, in an atmosphere of fear softened only by his constant production of pipe smoke and methane gas. The walls, as I recall, were empty of decorations except for some old black and white prints, and the atmosphere was gray; Winters wore old gray suits and was heavy, flaccid, sort of grayish. When he was calm, Winters could resemble a large lovable old hound you wished to pet a lot except that you knew he sometimes bit.

He was a great admirer of the poetry of plain speech. He despised mere feckless adornments of language or thought. He maintained that a well-argued shorter lyric of under a hundred lines was superior even to *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, and certainly most novels, as formal expression. He upheld the expository over the dramatic forms, but was himself a bit of a ham, reading even the poets whose works he claimed to despise with a deep vibrato, a monotone.

In the class was a very brilliant young society woman whom Winters much admired; her poems were full of morbidity, religious sentiments, and pain, in latinate blank verse. She later became a nun and to my knowledge stopped writing.

The expatriate British poet Thom Gunn was also a member of that class, and the poet Alan Stephens from Arizona, a tall, dry, extremely reasonable man. Winters admired the writings of both these poets, especially Gunn.

This was Thom's second trip to Stanford. A few years earlier, after military service and study with Leavis at Cambridge, Gunn had been a poetry fellow, like my friend from Brooklyn. (Increasingly sullen most of the time in the workshop, the Brooklyn poet after a while stopped arguing with Winters and stopped producing poems. I bought my first jalopy of a car at a bargain price of seventy dollars from him when he finally had taken all he could bear from Winters and left the university to go back East.)

Like Winters once had been, Gunn was also, I believe, a motorcyclist. Winters truly admired Thom's intelligence and talent with con-

ventional meters and his immense knowledge of English and American poetry. With his reputation as a poet growing here and in the U.K. through the success of *The Sense of Movement*, Thom was invited back by Winters, and he wrote some very fine syllabic poems, some of which appeared in his collection, *My Sad Captains*.

Winters was very gentle in his criticism of Gunn's work. He sometimes deplored obscurantism and romanticism, but he liked Gunn's classical imitations, his feeling for historical subject matter in his poems, his sense of form, and the clarity of his diction. I admired the contemporaneity of poems about motorcycle gangs, his hipness to the vernacular, his Ray-Bans and black, silverstudded motorcycle jackets, and cowboy boots. Gunn's style was restrained flamboyance.

We were both very masked about such things in those days. I was just married to a beautiful woman and would have been shocked to admit I was attracted in any way to a man; Gunn was still not yet out of the closet. If he presented himself at parties, he usually brought along female dates or came alone. When he introduced me to his roommate, Mike, I was naive enough to think they were just simply roommates, not lovers, as I later discovered.

Gunn was slim and tall, with a sharp, handsome, pockmarked face and inky black hair, long sideburns. He was generous in his criticisms of my work and usually kind, and he participated in the workshop as just another member, never put on airs.

He'd served in the Royal Air Force in the north of England and had earlier been to private grammar schools and was pretty much in exile from the decadent English literary scene, having acquired, at times, an American lingo and an American twist smile. He told me once his father was the editor of the *Daily Sketch*, a lurid and sleazily dishonest London tabloid, and he had a younger brother who was a photographer. He seemed in those days to be interested in a courtly romantic way in the young debutante who became a nun, but, when I asked him if indeed that was the case, Thom quickly changed the subject.

There was little that Thom showed in public you could interpret as swish or faggy. He swaggered a little in his movieland leather togs and boots; so did straight poseurs in their rough trade garments. My wife, Emily, also had a crush on Thom, and he never seemed to give her the time of day, I noticed, while seeming courtly.

Once Emily and I were driving through the Mojave Desert in bloom to L.A. and were hoping to take a tour of the Fox Studio lot. Thom happened to be there that day, too, as a guest of the writer Christopher Isherwood, who was also easy with us and outgoing, and

in public not so very campy, though with the longest auburn eyelashes I've ever observed on a man.

Isherwood had been hired on as a writer for a Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant movie about a shipboard romance, *An Affair to Remember*. We were invited by Isherwood to lunch in the commissary and then to watch some of the takes. Thom and Isherwood seemed very close. They sat side by side. I thought that was because they were both English.

When I left Stanford, Thom gave me an inscribed copy of *Fighting Terms*. At the time of my divorce this disappeared from my collection and later was listed in the catalogue of a well-known dealer for a good sum of money. Needless to say, Gunn was very hurt that I'd been compelled to sell off his gift to me. I'm not sure that I ever did. Though I occasionally would sell off items from my library, including correspondence which wasn't very personal, to dealers in order to make ends meet, I don't ever recall selling any of Thom Gunn's books. In fact, I have always purchased every new book of his when it appears and quickly read the poems from cover to cover, more than once, in part a matter of brand loyalty, and because I really like to own my friends' books.

We write to each other now and then, but live entirely different lives. When he published his collected essays after the AIDS plague began, I was alarmed to read that Thom had participated with apparently great joy in the San Francisco orgy scenes of the sixties and seventies. His most recent poems in a volume called *Night Sweats* memorialize some of his friends who were victims of AIDS, and, inferentially, make reference in the title and elsewhere to the terrible trepidations of one who, luckily, so far has not yet been infected with HIV.

Yvor Winters was a moralist. He liked poets whose work illustrated his critical exhortations, and they were entered into his lists of bests and worsts. He always ranked his students among the other poets who were publishing as though handicapping horses: Don Stanford, Achilles Holt, Ann Stanford—these Wintersian products seemed to have much better bloodlines than my own. You were praised a lot for agreeing with Winters. Nobody I had previously encountered had been so evaluative. It wasn't very long before I began to feel that every impulse that had impelled me to write poems was counterfeit. I had managed to use graduate school to avoid basic infantry training: Now here I was plop in the mud in the middle of the infiltration course with Winters firing live ammo.

He had been a Hart Crane enthusiast until Crane's behavior as a poet and a person became so problematical. Some say his harsh review of Hart Crane's epic poem *The Bridge* drove the poet into that melancholy which culminated in suicide. I've never really believed this, though perhaps Winters did, for, if he knew of Gunn's sexual orientation, he was truly careful never to be ad hominem in criticizing Thom's work.

Once Gunn and my wife and I were invited to the Winters' house in Los Altos for a steak barbecue. There was good food and a lot to drink. Everybody got a little high, and, after the meal, Winters entertained the guests by acting out on his tiptoes some of the great prize-fights of recent years: Louis-Schmelling, Sugar Ray Robinson versus La Motta. He toedanced and swung at imaginary opponents as this contender or that and would stop and thoughtfully indicate just what had been the crucial blow to end the fight and where and with what velocity it had landed on the face or body of his opponent.

I thought he looked a little silly, and so did Winters' wife, Janet, who kept saying, "Arthur, it's getting late. Let's call it a night."

Gunn said very little. He just watched the spectacle of Winters up on his toes with his distending large Johnsonian belly, acting out those bearish fantasies. Were they so very different really from Gunn's gangs of hogbikers riding out into the open countryside in search of speed and grace?

I would have to say I never detected much humor in Winters. He did seem to find it amusing if you made a face after eating one of his home-brined olives or if you had car trouble. He also could be generous in rewarding hardworking students if they accepted certain quid pro quos. Just before I volunteered to do my army service and get it over with, Winters recommended me for the Royal Victor graduate fellowship at Stanford, which was a great honor and quite lucrative, though it meant I would have to take an ordinary Ph.D. in English literature.

Half a year later I wrote Stanford that I wouldn't be coming back. I really didn't want to be one of Winters' epigones. I'd discovered prose and wanted to learn how to write it with vivid efficiency. This was probably a bad error of judgment on my part. If I'd stayed under Winters' protection I might have made a living at some college or university without all the dislocations and stresses I've undergone. But I was always much too frightened of Winters and knew I lacked Gunn's international reputation, which sometimes protected him from the old man's savagery. I didn't think I'd be able to hold my head above the water.

Come back, memory! What did he do and say that was so intimidating? Was it his claim that he'd sparred a couple of rounds with Jack Dempsey? My own father used to boast to me of biting off a man's ear in a street fight.

Winters had lived a solitary existence before coming to Stanford. He'd done exemplary things like teach Navaho school children, and, apparently, driven himself quite mad at one point. When in his cups he would blabber about the corrupt East Coast literary establishment and how he would never teach at Harvard even if he was invited.

His patriarchy often seemed lugubrious; he would often have tears in his eyes when elucidating all my failings. He never quite said he was infallible, but I can't recall him disclaiming otherwise. This made me all the more stubbornly ignorant and ornery; I kept looking for exceptions to his pronouncements, flaws in his reasoning, my constant rejoinders to his critical remarks being "Yes, but . . ." which is how students say, "Go to hell!" politely.

If you constantly disagreed with Winters, he wrote you out of his cabal, his conspiracy against the poetry establishment. You became one of "them." Winters was actually able to make you feel your inept poems were high crimes and misdemeanors, treasonable acts. He would raise his voice in anger and tremble and attack you where he knew you to feel weakest and most insecure. In his thrall we were stripped of the necessary autonomy of error. Hardly the way to encourage creative experimentation, such as one might expect from a workshop.

When I got to know Winters' publisher, Allen Swallow, he seemed brave about riding around on motorcycles but just as fearful of Winters as I was.

Once, some years later, I reviewed a book of poems by Winters' protégé, J. V. Cunningham, the epigramist and scholar. Cunningham was a big drinker and an avid horseplayer, and he came to New York and made an appointment to see me because he was very pleased with what I had written about his poignant book of poems *To What Strangers, What Welcome?*

Cunningham seemed very friendly and agreeable, although he was not pleased to drink slivovitz, which was all I had to serve him. I'd read the essays Winters had written about his former student, and it was hard to recognize him in person or in his latest poems as the scholar-poet-wit celebrated by Winters' hyperboles. He seemed quite modest about himself, and observant, and careful. I inquired if he thought his old friend's hyping of his poems accurate.

"Oh, that's just Arthur," Cunningham said. "That's not really the

way it was. When Arthur would get an idea about you, you more or less were stuck with being like that. I never thought of myself as a Wintersian. I've always been in too much personal disarray."

When Malcolm Cowley was at Stanford, Winters refused to hear him read his poems because of some antique literary quarrel of forty years' provenance. He was perhaps justifiably frightened of Robert Lowell when he came to visit and threatened to pitch a tent on Winters' property in Los Altos.

(I bumped into Gunn on the streets of New York about ten years ago. He was leaving the offices of Farrar Straus off Union Square at lunchtime. I don't think Thom recognized me at first, which was appropriate, since I had never really recognized who he was when we were at Stanford together. Then, after a moment, he acknowledged in the presence of his companions that we did indeed know each other and greeted me with shy warmth. Some weeks later I wrote to his Cole Street address in San Francisco that it made me happy to know he was alive and well.)

When he was old and sick, Winters wrote to tell me he thought I was a fool for not having continued in graduate school. I never sent him any of my novels to read because he told me he no longer cared to read novels. He lacked the time. Once I asked him if he admired Dostoyevsky. Winters said he would not read any more translations, so he didn't really know what he thought of such books.

Some years ago I found some early Winters poems in a quarterly in a used bookstore. These were the poems he later said were "associative twaddle" and repudiated, as he came to write contemporary imitations of Ben Jonson and Fulke Greville. They seemed to me very beautiful and very original evocations of certain mental states in fluent vers libre, similar to Cunningham's procedures in *To What Strangers, What Welcome?*

When the poet Louise Bogan came to Stanford, Winters and Janet Lewis were her generous hosts. He confided to the class that he felt sorry for the life she was compelled to live as an exploited single woman in New York, but thought her poems "beautiful and not overly emotional."

Yvor Winters seemed even more afraid of his emotions than I was, and he wrote himself out of the contemporary canon. This took courage at the start of a career and enabled him to survive as an academic. He seemed to wish the same for any student whom he could influence. He was often intimidating, usually insightful, and occasionally lucid, astute, intuitive, brilliant, and imposing. But who was he trying to persuade? Ignoramuses like me? Himself? Others? We were

all enlisted in his campaign against the false coinages of modernism and literary madness, his tight quatrains sometimes arguing against his own moral exhortations:

A poem is what stands
when imperceptive hands,
feeling, have gone astray;
it is what one must say.

I now know how dismaying it can be when what one must say leads one away from reasonable statements. "What one *must say*" has also influenced my writing, though I avoid quatrains and still admire what I think of as Dostoyevsky in translation.

Here is a poem produced by my "Brooklyn ear" I call "Day-break":

In the morning under certain
trees the light is orange
and the smooth channel pinks the
marsh in places where it is the lightest shade of blue,
or purple. You
sleeping on have never seen this just as I, perhaps, never
have known how to sew the seam
in my trousers when others could, or
where to look for a grammar of nuances;
if one can say in Old French
I open the window in order to see
the forest. But contradictories
exist when, as it happens,
we are both so very frail to judge
what we cannot fail to know, but lovingly.
But in the mornings trees also
thread their lights on the grass and the
channel warms under sunfires slowly
like a ribbon of wet glass.