



## Yvor Winters: “The Slow Pacific Swell”

(1931)

- Neil Forsyth (Université de Lausanne )

Genre: Poem. Country: United States.

Yvor Winters’s chosen home was Los Altos, near Stanford University, where he taught. He wrote many poems that take some part of California as their setting, and even sometimes their topic. In “On A View of Pasadena From the Hills” (1931) he recalls that he spent his childhood there in what is now “suburb after suburb”, though the vast ravines of the landscape are still visible. He contrasts the sage brush as it used to break down “to powdered ash, the sift of age” with what he now sees: “Mowed lawn has crept along the granite bench”. But “the naked salty shore” is still visible, “rank with the sea, which crumbles evermore.”

In one of his best-known and most characteristic poems, “The Slow Pacific Swell” (also 1931), Winters thinks through what the presence of the sea has meant to him. The poem opens immediately after the title with a beautiful evocation of the name of this ocean: “Far out of sight for ever stands the sea,/ Bounding the land with pale tranquility”. In the first part of the poem the sea is distant, and he looks at it as he had when a small child. But, in the central part of the poem, the sea becomes fearful. In a semi-allegorical mode the poem expresses the potential loss and slow recapture of intellectual control:

Once when I rounded Flattery, 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.

One senses the deeply felt importance of the critical principles to which he had committed himself. A poem, he thought, is nothing less than “a method for perfecting the understanding and moral discrimination”. It can do that because, as Winters defines a poem, it is “a rational statement about a human experience, made in such a way that the emotion which ought to be motivated by that rational understanding of the experience is communicated simultaneously with the rational understanding: the poem is thus a complete judgment of the experience, a

judgment both rational and emotional” (FC 139). The sea in this poem threatened to “tangle” him and, indeed, he seems almost to drown, “Half drenched in dissolution”, and comes back only gradually, but wilfully, to the rational control he craves. One of his favourite poems was “I started early, took my dog” by Emily Dickinson (FD 267-8), in which the sea is represented as a gentleman seducing the speaker almost to death, and Winters may well have been remembering it as he wrote his own poem. In his own generalizing mode, carefully deploying abstraction, “... one may come / Walking securely till the sea extends / Its limber margin, and precision ends.”

The central passage represents the sea, and especially its grand, enormous inhabitants, as context for the writer’s work, a struggle that is both moral and intellectual.

... From the ship we saw  
Gray whales for miles: the long sweep of the jaw,  
The blunt head plunging clean above the wave.  
And one rose in a tent of sea and gave  
A darkening shudder; water fell away;  
The whale stood shining, and then sank in spray.

The rhymed couplets and the regular rhythm, especially the alternating long and short phrases, help in the recovery of the control threatened by the immensely powerful ocean: we have come a long way from its “bare tranquility” in the opening lines. The passage recalls Winters’s sympathy for Melville, about whom he wrote a perceptive essay (DR 200-233) that includes related remarks about the sea: “The sea is the realm of the half-known, at once of perception and of peril; it is infested by subtle and malignant creatures, bent on destruction...” (212). The dominant emotion evoked by the whales in Winters’s poem, however, is admiration, and so quite different from what Melville’s Ahab feels towards his whale. That is partly because the whales are in the plural, so that the description is generalized: “the jaw” and “the blunt head” belong to all the whales seen from the ship, not to one overwhelming monster. Nonetheless, there is still something threatening about that “darkening shudder”.

“Darkening” or its congeners is a recurring word in Winters, perhaps originating with his perception of the meaning of the opening of Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning”, in which “a calm darkens among water lights”. He was concerned to give both a precise explication of the “unforgettable” image (FD 274), and an account of its meaning. On any of the Great Lakes in winter one could see how a light wind creates ripples on the surface: they glitter in the distance, a calm settles in the midst of the wind, and the glitter disappears. He is concerned to get this right, since “I have met students who thought that Stevens was talking about artificial lights on water at night” (FD 368). For the observer in the poem, a woman in a Sunday morning reverie, “the thought of death may darken suddenly and without warning”. As the discussion continues, one realizes Winters is writing of himself.

The mind perceives, as by a kind of metaphysical sense, the approach of invading impersonality; yet knowing the invasion to be inevitable and its own identity... the only source of any good whatever, maintains that identity in its full calm and clarity, that nothing may be sacrificed without need... The calm clarity of tone enables the poet to deal with a variety of kinds of feeling which would be impossible were the terror emphasized for a moment at any given point, were the complete and controlled unity of the experiencing mind for a moment disordered by its own perceptions. (DR 447-8)

One may question whether Stevens' woman is experiencing anything like terror, but that is certainly what Winters feels, and in "The Slow Pacific Swell" we see what that experience was for him.

The last image that now follows in the poem is both brilliantly descriptive and richly allusive:

The slow Pacific swell stirs on the sand,  
Sleeping to sink away, withdrawing land,  
Heaving and wrinkled in the moon, and blind;  
Or gathers seaward, ebbing out of mind.

The passage recalls the images of the sea on the sand in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach", of which Winters was imperiously dismissive except for a passage in the first stanza which reads:

Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow.

Winters called this "one of the finest passages in the century" (FD 184). Winters's own poem also echoes a Gerard Manley Hopkins sonnet, "The Sea and the Skylark", whom Winters both admired and attacked for his rhythmic experimentation (FC: the above definition of poetry as "a rational statement" comes from his essay on Hopkins). In Hopkins's poem we find the sound of "the tide that ramps against the shore;/ With a flood or a fall, low lull-off or all roar,/ Frequenting there while moon shall wear and wend".

The personal struggle depicted in this poem explains, as Schreiber perceptively puts it, Winters's impatience with writers like Stevens, Frost, and Yeats, who in their different ways appeared to him to indulge aspects of their natures, the physical and the sensual, that he had ruthlessly suppressed in his own.

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