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"I Shall, with the Greatest of Ease and Friendliness, Scour You from the Earth": Yvor Winters on Kenneth Burke

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Winters, Yvor. *In Defense of Reason*. Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1987.

———. *Selected Letters of Yvor Winters*. Ed. R. L. Barth. Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 2000.

Introduction

It was Fredric Jameson who introduced Yvor Winters into the study of Burke in a serious way, precisely because he believed that Winters corrected a serious deficiency in Burke's work. In "The Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis," Jameson articulated what he believed to be a central purpose of criticism: to tell and to analyze "the narrative of that implacable yet also emancipatory logic whereby the human community has evolved into its present form and developed the sign systems by which we live and explain our lives to ourselves." In Jameson's view, Burke was innovative in that he saw the centrality of symbol systems but failed insofar as he "did not want to teach us history" (523). The Burke that Jameson here refers to, primarily, is dramatism. Dramatism left, in Jameson's view, no place for the negative hermeneutic, for the subconscious and for the ideological analysis of the subconscious.

We can argue whether Jameson's reading of Burke is incomplete. Certainly, if Burke himself faced these deficiencies or limits in his own work, the work of three generations of Burkeans since then has corrected this lack. That said, however, Jameson himself offered a corrective to this tendency in Burke in the writings of Yvor Winters. He called Winters' "Experimental School in American Poetry" a corrective to Burke's "Lexicon Rhetoricae" in that it historicized Burke's conceptual scheme – it historicized those terms that Burke had located primarily in psychology.

Jameson was not the first person to see connection between Burke and Winters. Alan Stephens used Burke (among other critical frames) to evaluate "The Collected Poems of Yvor Winters" more than 40 years ago. And any assessment of the New Criticism from 1939 forward regarded Burke and Winters as stars within that night sky (Wellek, Kazin, de Mordaunt, Robertson, Calhoun, Krieger, and so many more). In those analyses, Winters is often praised for his synthesis of "formal analysis with a study of American ethical traditions," where Burke is celebrated for his "analysis of psychological and political forms" (Zabel 424). The distinction between Burke and Winters in terms of the historicizing impulse is reiterated in those assessments, but without Jameson's Marxist turn.

Yet a full exploration of Burke and Winters beyond their status as contemporaries affiliated with the same literary critical movement has yet to be engaged. This review essay takes a brief look at two resources on Winters (*In Defense of Reason* and the *Selected Letters*) for some greater intimation of Burke and Winters as interlocutors. Further, it opens a door to a critically understudied part of Burke's intellectual work.

In Defense of Reason

Winters' most sustained grappling with Burke can be found in the 1937 book *Primitivism and Decadence*, reprinted in the 1987 volume *In Defense of Reason*. The chapter titled "Experimental School in American Thought" is a sustained engagement both with *Counter-Statement* and with *Towards a Better Life*. Winters chides Burke for insisting upon a rupture between the psychology of the characters and the psychology of the audience in fiction. For Winters, the psychology of the characters is a vehicle for "controlling the attitude of the audience" (*Defense* 36) and so is intimately tied to what Burke calls the psychology of the audience. This is an important theoretical move.

Winters criticizes Burke's interpretation of other literature. For example, he finds Burke's reading of *Hamlet* rooted in "qualitative progression," limited precisely because it ignores the psychology of the hero – what Winters believes is essential to understanding "narrative logic" (*Defense* 59).

Winters' rereading of Burke's lexicon is not only a theoretical contribution; it is—in part, at least—invective. Winters cuts to the bone by using Burke's novel, *Towards a Better Life*, to make his point: he declares *TBL* "duller than Thackeray" and dismisses the novel because he believes that Burke's primary goal in writing *Life* is to become "quotable" (*Defense* 37). He finds Burke's novel to be weak precisely because it avoids concern with the psychology of character. Instead, Winters claims that Burke "expends his entire rhetorical energy on his sentences, but lets his story run loose through the mind of his hero" – as a result, Winters declares "the form careless and confused" ("Experimental School" 64). *Towards a Better Life* was, at best, a minor work of Modern literature. It is not exactly clear how it warranted serving as a foil for Winters' critical statements on narrative logic. But examining the recently published volume of Winters' letters may help.

Selected Letters

Winters' *Selected Letters* (2000) reveals that Winters was a careful reader of the journals that advanced Modernism. For example, in a 1923 letter to Monroe Wheeler, he calls William Carlos Williams' prose in *Broom* "beautiful" but calls a story by Burke in *Broom* "marred by a certain Wyndham Lewis swash" (*Letters* 62). It was through these journals that he became aware of Burke's writings.

Winters comments on Burke's critical writings as well. In a letter to Tate, he admits that *Counter-Statement* "is a tremendously brilliant book, but basically a vicious one" and enumerates a half-dozen reasons for its defects. In a later letter to Lincoln Kirstein, he offers systematic elaboration of his criticisms. For example, he dislikes the prose style: he feels that Burke should "repress his personality a little ... and reduce his book by fifty pages and thereby render it incomparably more clear." He questions Burke's grammar, noting awkward constructions like "I found I must eat rather than drinking." More biting, Winters finds that, in *Counter-Statement*, "his clearest ideas are slight; his attempts at handling serious ideas are confused" (*Letters* 199–200).

Winters also comments in his letters on Burke's creative writings. He tells Allen Tate that "Burke's novel is as feeble a mess as Cowley's poetry. It really is contemptible" (*Letters* 185). He tells Lincoln Kirstein that "the plot in Burke's novel is perfectly meaningless, a thin excuse for calling it a novel" (*Letters* 198).

All of this is fine and good, largely because it reiterates what we see of Burke in Winters' published writings. In these letters, we can see his criticisms of *Towards a Better Life* coalesce; we see his response to *Counter-Statement* in its early formations.

What the letters add that the published writings do not is a sense of his bile, rising against Burke as an editor. In 1923, while Burke was an editor at the *Dial*, Burke rejected some of Winters' poems, so Winters wrote to Burke with a rebuttal. In that letter, dated 5 June 1923, Winters claims that Burke "outrageously fail[ed] to appreciate [the poems] at their just and rather considerable value." He accuses Burke of incompletely reading or failing to understand Winters' own *Notes on the Mechanics of the Poetic Image* (*Letters* 64). He then proceeds to educate Burke on what he should have learned from the monograph, closing the letter with a back-handed compliment: "You are undoubtedly a man of remarkable mentality, but I feel that you are, at times, misguided; and unless you mend your ways, and that at an early date, I shall, with the greatest of ease and the greatest of friendliness, scour you from the earth" (*Letters* 66). The anger is clear.

Winters' anger against Burke becomes more vitriolic, and in his letters, his disdain for Burke becomes a trope for criticizing others. When dismissing Thayer's skills as an editor, Winters' claims that "when Burke was stealing Thayer's ideas, he must have cleaned him out" (letter to Allen Tate, *Letters* 104). Can we separate this level of anger against Burke from Winters' criticisms of *Towards a Better Life*?

Conclusion

This brief essay is by no means an exhaustive look at Burke and Winters as contemporaries. It does, however, build upon the work begun by Jack Selzer and Ann George (and others) to more fully contextualize Burke among the Moderns. And it points to a part of that interaction that is as yet invisible: the role that Burke's work as editor played not only in shaping his own critical thought but in shaping responses to his work. It is as yet unclear whether Winters' vehement criticisms of Burke were rooted, in part, in his declared intent to "scour" Burke from the Earth. But a closer look at the *Selected Letters* and at *In Defense of Reason* raises that question, and potentially others, for Burke criticism.

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