

Preliminary Problems Notes:

Problem 1:

Q1: Is it possible to say that one poem is better *in degree* than another?

Q2: Is it possible to say that one poem is better *in kind* than another?

If (No/No): **Then** poetry has no ascertainable value; **therefore**, all poetry is worthless.
Unsound, because contrary to experience.

***Note:** Winters may be taking an unjustified leap with this conclusion—as my fiancée said, “even if every single poem is worth fifty dollars, that’s still fifty dollars.” Winters takes for granted that if we can’t judge individual poems as better or worse than one another, poems must be entirely worthless, but this doesn’t exactly follow—poems, though their relative quality may be indeterminate, may, just by virtue of being poems, serve a valuable function. I’m reminded of your concept of the “poem-shaped void.” However, this is ultimately a small point, as I think it is well-taken that the inability to evaluate poems against one another whatsoever is contrary to experience.

If (No/Yes): **Then** a *class* of poetry has ascertainable value, but within that class, value is indistinguishable. **Unsound**, because incoherent. Ditto for (Yes/No).

If (Yes/Yes): **Then** poetry has ascertainable value; **therefore**, some poetry may be valuable.
Sound, because aligns with experience.

Q3: Given (Yes/Yes), does “better” mean better *subjectively* (S) or *objectively* (O)?

If S: **Then** evaluation is relative; **therefore**, evaluative criticism is worthless, and poetry is amoral and purely hedonic.

***Note:** I have added the “amoral and hedonic” part in order to bring out what is implicit in Winters. If there is nothing objective about the content (hence value) of an artwork—if it is like the shape of a cloud, completely up to interpretation—then there cannot be any tangible, transferrable moral content *in the work itself*. Any moral statement associated with it will be projected by the viewer. As such the only conceivable function the art itself serves is to provide pleasure. The degree of pleasure which the art arouses will determine how “good” or “bad” it is to any given individual.

If O: **Then** evaluation can be factual; **therefore**, there are *universal* laws which govern the poetic experience *and* evaluative criticism may be valuable.

***Note:** Winters does not consider a third possible option: that a poem can be *inter-subjectively* better than another. That is, better according to a consensus among individuals.

If I-S: **Then** evaluation is relative to a group of individuals, but *functionally factual* within those groups. **Therefore**, there are *local* laws which govern the poetic experience, and evaluative criticism may be valuable *within a particular locality*.

Problem 2:

Q: Given (Yes/Yes) above, is the judgement of value informed by *inexplicable* (I) or *explicable* (E) intuition?

If (I): Then judgment is an irrational preference, and we are back to relativism. See “If S” above.

If (E): Then judgement is a (potential) rational argument, and dialectic amidst rational minds becomes possible. **Therefore, judgement can become refined through dialectic, and more accurate judgement can be achieved by all parties.**

Problem 3:

In order to have rational dialectic about a poem, there must be a mutually understood definition of what “poem” refers to.

Q: What is a poem?

A: A poem is a verbal, versified statement made to communicate a synthesis of thought and feeling. It is in verse because verse facilitates the communication of feeling.

***Note:** Winters appears to equate “verse” with metrical composition here but given that he also admired some free verse poetry, I think it would more accurate to say that what he means by “verse” is lineated language that is at least somewhat organized according to intelligible sonic patterns.

Problem 4:

Q: Poems are made of words. What are words?

A: Words are audible sounds, or their visual symbols, invented by humans to communicate their thoughts and feelings. Each word has a conceptual content (a referent), however slight; each word, exclusive, perhaps, of the particles, communicates *vague associations of feeling*.

The feelings evoked by words may be rendered more precise as we render the context of words more precise.

Problem 5:

Q1: Given that poetry is partly distinguished from prose by the fact that it *always* prioritizes the communication of feeling, is rational content in poetry unnecessary?

A: Poetry is made of words; all words carry rational content; **therefore**, rational content cannot be eliminated from poetry. **If** rationality fails, **then** words fail; **if** words fail, **then** the poem fails.

***Note:** As Winters will mention with the Symbolist poets, this does not mean that poets cannot write irrational statements, merely that no statement, provided it is not gibberish, can avoid containing rational concepts (words).

Q2: Is there a relationship between rational content and feeling in a poem?

A: The emotional content of words is generated by our experience with the conceptual (rational) content. **Therefore**, yes, rational content is intimately, necessarily connected to feeling—it is in fact the cause of feeling.

Therefore, **if** the rational content is unconvincing, **then** the feeling in the poem is undermined.

Problem 6:

Q: What is the relationship of concept to feeling in a poem?

A: Words refer to concepts; concepts motivate feelings;

Therefore, by extension, rational statements motivate feelings. Skillful rational statements position concepts in the most effective contexts, thereby motivating feeling most effectively.

***Note:** Problems 5 and 6 illustrate Winters' adoption of Stoic psychology—namely, the notion that feelings are results of beliefs, and that if we change our beliefs, we can change our feelings. In this way, emotions are theoretically subject to reason. This Stoic understanding is also the root of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

Problem 7:

Q: If rational statements, even words themselves, motivate corresponding feelings, what makes any statement a better synthesis of thought and feeling than any other?

A: Statements may be more or less precise depending on the words (and therefore connotations) employed and the words' relationship to one another. A statement wherein the diction of the words are harmonized to produce specific expressive effects and the expression itself is logically motivated will be more effective than a statement which is vaguely phrased and/or unjustified by surrounding context. *Exact* motivation of feeling by concept is not inherent in any rational statement.

Any rational statement will govern the general possibilities of feeling derivable from it, but *the task of the poet is to adjust feeling to motive precisely*. They must select words containing not only the right relationships within themselves, but the right relationships to each other.

Problem 8:

Q: Is it possible to escape the logico-motivational, connotative relationship of concept to feeling by confining a poetic practice largely to the use of words which explicitly denote emotions?

A: No, because those words still refer to logical concepts, concepts which have their own webs of association and must be substantiated by context.

Romantic poets often fudge the relationship between motivation and feeling in a number of ways:

1. The crudest tactic is to wield explicitly emotional language without any firm motivation behind such language. The cause of the emotion is unknown or vague, and the emotion itself is described vaguely. Therefore, despite the plentitude of emotional language, the communication of actual emotion is attenuated.
2. One tactic to substantiate a vague emotion is to make it the theme of a poem and provide a litany of examples to illustrate it. There is the risk here of losing sight of the general theme by focusing too intensely on the examples, thereby fragmenting the poem, or else, contrariwise, using examples which are half-baked or stereotyped and therefore don't achieve any real relationship of motivation to feeling.
3. Another tactic to substantiate a vague emotion is to explicitly offer a motivation for it, but one that is clearly mismatched to the feeling described.
4. A common tactic of the symbolist/experimental poet is to attempt to extinguish the rational content of language while retaining the content of association.

Problem 9:

Q1: If, to be effective, we have determined that the feeling of a poem must obtain a satisfactory relationship to its motive, to its rational concept, how do we determine whether this relationship is satisfactory?

A: Through an act of moral judgement.

Q2: What is morality?

A: Morality is that theory and conduct which guides us toward the greatest happiness which the accidents of life permit: that is, toward the fullest realization of our nature.

Q3: Are moral judgements possible?

A: It is clear that there is such thing as unfulfilled human nature, as exemplified by the mentally handicapped, the mentally ill, the criminal, the vicious, and the neurotic. In all of these cases, unfulfillment stems from an inability or an unwillingness to calibrate feeling to rational motive. If we can acknowledge that a person can be *maladjusted*, this implies that a person can be perfectly *adjusted* as well. To make judgements which guide us towards adjustment, which exemplify the proper calibration of feeling to rational motivation, is possible and moral. To make such judgements requires a close and subtle study of human nature. In the case of a poem, we must judge its attitudes and claims against the background of logic and our understanding of human nature, and determine thereby how well-adjusted, how moral it is.

***Note:** Winters' conception of morality has been more misunderstood than any other aspect of his thought. When he insists on morality in poetry, he is not insisting that poetry should be *moralizing*—he is saying rather that poetry, regardless of its subject matter, should embody the thought of a well-calibrated, well-adjusted mind, one that is able to properly relate feeling to rational motivation. The poet has a responsibility to the reader to be an exemplar of healthy, reasonable thinking.

Problem 10:

Q: Every moral judgement, given that it takes place in a unique context, is a unique act. Given this fact of uniqueness, can we truly say that any judgement is more or less right according to a universal standard?

A: Yes. In every scenario, there is always an ideal judgement—the judgement which leads to the most profound human flourishing—which in our own judgements we can approximate more or less. The degree to which we approximate the ideal depends on the accuracy of our rational understanding.

Problem 11:

Q: If art is moral, **then** there should be a relationship between art and human action. What is the nature of this relationship?

A: The moral judgement, whether good, bad, or indifferent, is commonly the prelude and instigation to action. One's idea motivates one's feeling; the action results. The speculative judgement reaches its best form and expression in poetry. *Poems themselves do not usually lead to direct action, but they do give us a better way of judging representative acts than we should otherwise have. They are thus a civilizing influence: they train our power of judgment and should affect the quality of daily judgements and actions.*

***Note:** Again, Winters makes clear that he does not see poems in themselves as imperatives to action or packets of moral instruction, but as subtle psychological influences which can, en masse and over time, cultivate the mind to become more discerning in its judgements, and thus ultimately more moral. Winter's theory is in this way surprisingly similar to more contemporary theories of how the media one consumes affects the development of one's worldview (though of course it is also rooted, as so much else, in Plato and Aristotle).

Problem 12:

Q: Given all the above, what is the nature of the critical process?

A: It will consist in:

1. Providing as much historical context as is necessary to understand the mind and method of the writer.
2. Providing as much analysis of the writer's literary theories as is necessary to understand and evaluate what they are attempting to do.
3. Providing a rational critique of the paraphrasable content (the motive) of the poem.
4. Providing a rational critique of the feeling motivated—that is, of the details of style as seen in language and technique.
5. Providing a final, holistic act of judgement, which is ultimately a judgement on the writers' judgement. It is the function of the previous four steps to limit as narrowly as possible the region in which the unique final judgement is to occur.

***Note:** It seems to me that steps 1 and 2 are the domain of the scholar, and steps 3-5 the domain of the critic, who goes beyond the scholar to offer judgement after explanation. It is important to note that Winters equates criticism in general with evaluative criticism, which is not a common view, certainly not common among the aesthete New Critics of his day. Evaluative criticism has not truly been popular since the days of Matthew Arnold, though Irving Babbitt and Winters himself are notable exceptions. Though evaluative criticism in the all-encompassing Wintersian sense remains unpopular, even unthinkable by post-structuralists, we may see in some critical theory today, for example in feminist, post-colonial, or Marxist critique, much more specialized (and thereby limited) examples of evaluative criticism, though these critics generally lack the belief in objective morality claimed by humanist critics like Winters, Babbitt, Arnold, Johnson, etc.