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Abstract\_Title:

"No man can hold existence in his head": Yvor Winters, Stanley Cavell, and the Fate of American Modernism (corrected version)

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Yvor Winters was one of the more interesting of the "artful detractors" of Emerson, a few of whom Stanley Cavell has on occasion taken to task. Cavell's re-readings of Emerson, I would (anachronistically) venture, are the ones that Winters could have profited most from, particularly where they bring to light not only romantic dissatisfaction as it worries at the experiential limits of reason, but show as well the struggle of thought with its medium that opens the way for "a return to the ordinary." Winters evidently had distaste for, as much as a fascination with, the official Emerson. And yet Winters' intuitions — more perhaps than his worked-out tuitions (such as *In Defense of Reason* [1947]) — guided a generation of American poets away not from Emerson, nor from modernist experimentation, but from any poetic enterprise too quick to forsake the possibilities of shared meaning. Fantasies of private language, fear of suffocation by public codes: these opposites had been played out in the remarkable Winters-Hart Crane correspondence. Winters' aversion to the many twentieth century versions of poetic "automatism" led him to a strenuous working through of the "corrosions and distrust" necessary in readers and writers who — as Cavell puts it — may always choose not to subject themselves to intelligibility. I will consider the degree to which scepticism dogs the claims of Winters' sonnet "The Moralists," and ask if Winters' formally conservative work is in fact more engaged with poetic modernism than the subjective expressivism more typical of post-war poetry.

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