

The New Criterion

Features

April 2008

Grammars of a possible world

by [David Yezzi](#)

On the New Critics, then & now.

The New Criticism, like old Marley, is dead as a door-nail. A number of imposing monuments left over from its heyday in the early to mid-twentieth century remain—books with titles like *The Well-Wrought Urn*, *The World's Body*, *The Sacred Wood*, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *The Expense of Greatness*, *The Forlorn Demon*, *Primitivism and Decadence*—but they are seldom visited. One can wander Stanford University's cloistered walks, for example, and imagine Yvor Winters crossing the quad (whaling harpoon in hand!) for his lecture on *Moby-Dick*, but ask an undergrad about Winters and you get a fish-eyed stare. It's the same, I imagine, at Cleanth Brooks's Yale or Allen Tate's Princeton. The poet-critics who crafted these works—Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, R. P. Blackmur, Tate, and Winters—have long passed out of fashion. Who now ...

David Yezzi is the Executive Editor of The New Criterion.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 26 April 2008, on page 27

Copyright © 2008 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/grammars-of-a-possible-world-3807>