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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 ...

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