

Hi there –

This slightly impersonal way of talking to you is my way of getting the crucial information out to you quicker – please excuse the carbon paper. (Anyone out there still know what that is?).

You are getting this because you have asked about UNT's program in poetics. Here is the straight poop.

The English Department here (<http://www.engl.unt.edu/home.html>) only offers one Ph. D. – in Literature and Literary Criticism. The usual time to complete this is four years – the courses you will need to get your doctorate are described in detail at this address:

<http://www.engl.unt.edu/degrees/grad/phd/index.html>

Basically, you will be taking courses in the various centuries, in critical theory, in bibliographic methods, in teaching English – the usual suspects. If you are interested in Technical and Persuasive Writing, you will take a slightly different set of courses, as you also will if you are interested in Creative Writing.

If you want to do poetics, you will do all the standard courses in Literature and Literary Criticism, and then take in addition about one more year of courses in Linguistics. The courses that you will want to take (in case you have not had them already) are Linguistics 5040 (General Linguistics); Linguistics 5300 (Phonology); Linguistics 5310 (Syntax); Linguistics 5330 (Sociolinguistics); Linguistics 5380 (Field Methods); Linguistics 5350 (Language Typology and Universals) and Linguistics 5590 (Linguistics and Literature). This last is central for poéticas and poéticos (a word which will hopefully remind you of the sleaziness and scurrility of *politico*), those who can't help wanting to know how poems in particular (but really any literature of any genre) work their magic. You can take and retake 5590 for credit as many times as you want (the current record is 5, I believe) – plus c'est la même chose, plus ça change.

For dear old 5590 is neither new wine to put in an old bottle, nor vice versa. It is a collective groping towards something felt deeply to be of transcendent ineffability, elusivity, mercuriality. And Value. Something that Gregory Bateson, one of the many patron saintesses and saints of *poetiquice* [poecheeKEEsee] – a word formed from the root *poetic*- plus the snotty and derogatory Brazilian suffix *-ice* – yielding a meaning something like “all that poetics _____ [“stuff” / _____(other)]” – might refer to as “a corner of the eye phenomenon.”

This perhaps necessarily will strike you as flip, unserious. It is in fact unserious, deadly unserious. A bit like a child playing with something just barely graspable, intelligible, gettable. Like walking along a thinnish board without falling off. Like the first sandcastle threatened by the incoming tide. Like writing in block letters for the first time :: Their Own Name. Anyone who has ever interacted with a child on such a mission knows how poor an idea it is to interrupt. We all, if we can but remember, know how awful it was when *we* were interrupted in such a quest when we were much younger than we are today.

What poems, texts, do we look at in 5590? What is The Canon? The canon is determined by the hearts of those present. Any piece of language whatsoever *that matters to someone present* – it may be lyrics of a song, or rap, or a sonnet, or a proverb, a verse from a sacred text, a single sentence written in any language, in any culture, in any century – what we want to sidle up to is this *mattering*. As William Carlos Williams, in the chapter of his *Autobiography* called “The Practice” says (p. 362),

“But one of the characteristics of this rare presence is that it is shy and revengeful. It is not a name that is bandied about in the marketplace, no more than it is something that can be captured and exploited by the academy. Its face is a particular face, it is likely to appear under the most unlikely disguises. You cannot recognize it from past appearances—in fact it is always a new face. It knows all that we are in the habit of describing. It will not use the same appearance for any new materialization. And it is our very life. It is we ourselves, at our rarest moments, but inarticulate for the most part except when in the poem one man, every five or six hundred years, escapes to formulate a few gifted sentences.”

You see the difficulty. This quest for knowledge of that which William Carlos Williams adumbrates is utopian. We cannot know it; with rarest grace, we can perhaps be it. What a terriwonderful fate, to have a monkey like this on one's back!

So. You will take lots of courses in literature and criticism, lots of courses in linguistics, and in your copious free time, you are encouraged to take as many courses in creative writing as you possibly can, because it seems to be the case for many of us that we cannot hope to do something as inconceivable as understanding what a writer is trying to achieve, in the teeth of a pyramid of fear, unless we have looked that often crippling fear in the face in ourselves.

Does it sound as if this course of study is as ineffable as that which is the object of study? Good – that's how it feels to me. When you have taken enough of the courses in the English Department, and of course any of goodness knows how many other courses from related fields (Music? Philosophy? Cognitive science? Journalism? Dance? Any thing your Heart might desire?) so that Something has begun to blossom in you, so that it is time to write a thesis, a thesis you will write. It may be one centered on criticism – on Tennyson, or DeLillo, or Li Bai – or on linguistics (on autosegmental pragmatics, or on a case problem in Mon-Khmer languages), or on a novel or collection of poems that have ripened in you – we will try not to limit you. We will ask you to choose a committee of at least three people – a literature person, a creative writer, a linguist – and to have chosen them early on, so that they can help guide you in the inner listening that you will see is the core of this quixotic endeavor.

This is an awful lot of words which are trying to suggest the perimeter of a largely unexplored area. It seems to us that when you finish such an endless task, you should be very employable – you should be able to teach literature or linguistics, and hopefully creative writing, at introductory levels at least, and then advanced levels of all the fields that your thesis has called you to learn about deeply.

The things that a poético or poética will want to know seem innumerable, there looks like there is nothing like a light at the end of any tunnel (What tunnel? Where is the entrance, even?), who should attempt to enroll in any such agile and two-horned adventure?

"Why write if this too easy activity of pushing a pen across paper is not given a certain bullfighting risk and we do not approach dangerous, agile and two-horned topics?"

José Ortega y Gasset

<http://baylor.chattanooga.net/~jstover/quotations/pastmonths.htm>

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Here it seems that the best counsel is that given by a famous painter (Max Ernst?), who, when asked what advice he gave to a young painter, said (something like),

“I tell them to quit. That way, only those who have to
continue to paint will go on.”

For even more helpful stuff like this, write to Haj Ross at haj@unt.edu,
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