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Poetry Program in Buffalo Blends Creativity and Criticism

By Liz McMillen

Buffalo, New York -- As a recent graduate student in the English department at the State University of New York at Buffalo, Elizabeth Willis wrote her dissertation on late-19th-century aesthetics, mainly Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting. Nothing too unusual about that.

What is unusual about Ms. Willis is that she also is a poet. A book of her poems, *The Human Abstract*, won an award from the National Poetry Series and was published last month by Penguin.

"Other people who have gone into graduate school have set aside their creative work or abandoned it entirely," she says. "What attracted me to the program was the fact that creative writing was not dealt with separately from literary study."

Poet-scholars are not uncommon in Buffalo's innovative poetics program, which is devoted to the study of poetry and language and is winning plaudits from scholars and poets.

Taught by faculty members who are poets and novelists themselves, the program tries to bridge the sometimes hostile divide between



creative writing and critical theory. Here, students read their Dickinson and their Derrida side by side, an approach that professors say resonates with the shift to cultural studies.

At Buffalo, poetry -- particularly experimental poetry -- is anything but marginal. Poets and scholars visit the program regularly, giving readings and teaching the work of other poets. Students not only read poetry, they also study poetry as performance.

Although not all students in the program are poets, many are. They work on "visual" and "sound" poetry and publish a chapbook series and a half-dozen literary magazines. An electronic poetry center is now on line. A few students each year also work on materials in the university's extensive collection of 20th-century poetry books and manuscripts, which is curated by Robert Bertholf.

This approach is what Charles Bernstein likes to call "poetry as a second language" -- studying its forms, sounds, and logic. "I'm interested in immersing students in poetry as a vocabulary of possible choices," explains Mr. Bernstein, who directs the program. "In order to see what that is, you have to be saturated with different things. You start to see the immense possibilities that poetry allows in American literature."

The reading workshops at Buffalo allow students a hands-on experience with poetry, he says. "They're like writing workshops, except we don't talk about the students' own writing. We talk about the writing of the poets coming in and the historical tradition. We workshop the poems that way. We respond to them, talk about them, and do exercises based on them. It's a workshop environment, but the context is entirely literary works.



"The reading workshop seems to me a very nice model for how poets can operate in English departments without teaching creative-writing classes, which are problematic partly because students haven't read very many poems. There's an enormous value in reading your contemporaries, but in order for that to make any sense at all, you have to be familiar at least with the 20th century."

The university has assembled faculty members who have often been associated with experimental writing. Mr. Bernstein is the author of several books of essays and more than 20 volumes of poetry, including *Rough Trades* and *The Sophist*. He was co-editor of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, a quarterly that was published from 1978 to 1982. Susan Howe has written two books of criticism, including one on Emily Dickinson, as well as three recent collections of poetry.

Robert Creeley is a founder of the "Black Mountain" school of poetry of the 1950s, which established what it called an "anti-academic" poetic tradition. Three decades of his poems were pulled together in *Collected Poems*, published by the University of California Press, which also issued a volume of his collected prose.

Raymond Federman, a native of France, is the author of several novels and has written on "surfiction" -- "writing that exposes the fictionality of reality" -- and on the work of Samuel Beckett. Dennis Tedlock, an anthropologist, is the translator of *Popul Vuh*, the Mayan sacred book, and of a book of narrative poetry by Zuni Indians. Each of these faculty members except Ms. Howe holds endowed chairs, and a portion of the endowments is used to support visits by poets and other activities.

Marjorie Perloff, a professor of humanities at Stanford University,



says she has talked up the Buffalo program for several years. Recently she spent two days there as a visiting scholar.

"It is the most exciting thing in the country as far as poetry goes. Although all the people are poets, they don't teach the usual writing workshop at all. It's a much more intellectual program. Rather than treating poetry as this genteel craft off to the side, or teaching how to write a good rhyme, they are asking large questions about the role of poetry in society."

Ms. Howe says the program attracts unusual students. "The danger with many creative-writing programs is that there's a self-involvement. The students who come to Buffalo are interested in their own work and someone else's work. You do get a more eccentric scholar."

Buffalo's poetics program has its roots in the 1960s, when novelist John Barth and poet Charles Olson taught on the campus with Mr. Creeley, who later pushed to have the program developed. It began in 1991, shortly after Mr. Bernstein was hired. Poetics was made part of the English department, which Mr. Bernstein and others say helps avoid the antagonisms that can develop between writers and theorists.

Graduate students often are made to feel that they have to choose between being a poet and being a scholar, Mr. Bernstein says. "I felt that you could discuss the way that being a poet contributes to your work as a teacher and a researcher."

In his seminar on "the ordinary," he had students read William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and the



contemporary poets Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino as well as the theorists Raymond Williams, Maurice Blanchot, Theodor Adorno, Henri Lefebvre, and Ferdinand Braudel.

"We looked at the way critics and philosophers have theorized what the everyday is, then we looked at the range of American poets and how they practice the ordinary in their poetry," he says, "the issue being how you represent the ordinary. That is essentially a question about cultural studies."

Mr. Bernstein is often thought of as a "language poet," a term that has been applied to those whose work questions assumptions about language. He is given to saying things like "poetry is a kind of theory, a philosophical approach to language," and he maintains that a broad public is interested in poetry. He does not hold a Ph.D., although his undergraduate thesis at Harvard on Gertrude Stein and Ludwig Wittgenstein -- which read a philosopher in the context of a literary artist -- signaled his general approach.

Mr. Bernstein has hammered away at what he calls "official verse culture," conventional poetry that is produced and reinforced by mainstream publishing houses, literary awards, and literary publications. He names names, including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *American Poetry Review*, the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships. "The bulk of this verse tends to be blandly apolitical and accommodationist, neo-Romantic, and often militantly middle of the road," he says, reading from a paper he gave 10 years ago. The description still applies today, he says.

Not surprisingly, the poetics program is on the Internet. The



Electronic Poetry Center on the World-Wide Web (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/internet/library/e-journals/ub/rift>) is meant to be a working site for active poets. It was created by Mr. Bernstein; Loss Pequeno Glazier, a librarian and graduate student; and Kenneth Sherwood, also a graduate student.

Included are home pages for poets, with texts by and about the author; full text of the university's electronic journal, *Rif/t*; and the archives of the POETICS discussion list, which is owned by Mr. Bernstein. Other electronic journals are archived, and plans are under way to place out-of-print poetry on the site. "It's important for small presses to use this technology -- otherwise they become more marginal," says Mr. Bernstein.

The program's experimental focus attracts students, and so does its collegiality. "The thing I liked the most was the way we were treated by poets as poets," says Peter Gizzi, a recent graduate who begins a tenure-track position at the University of California at Santa Cruz this fall. "The dialogue was between writers as much as between students and teachers."

Mr. Gizzi, who is married to Ms. Willis, has published a book of poems and last year won the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets. Although the program is intellectual, it is generally balanced, he says. "They have poets, and that will always make a difference. There's a lot of theory, but it's always coming out of a tradition. We're still looking at Dickinson, even if we're reading Foucault or Derrida."

As for which is more rewarding -- scholarship or poetry -- it's not hard for Mr. Gizzi to choose: "The poetry. It's always about the



poetry. It would be like going to a dance and not dancing."

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