

College of Letters
Wesleyan University

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2010
DAY ONE

Examiners: David Konstan, Brown University
Bernard Reginster, Brown University

Over three days you will have the chance to think and write about the texts you have read dealing with ancient, medieval, and twentieth-century culture. Please pick **two** of the questions listed for each day. Please think both analytically and creatively in your answers, and feel free to use examples that range across the various periods you have studied. The more detailed you can be in your responses when it comes to historical specifics such as names, dates, and places, the better; yet each of your answers should have an overall, coherent argument.

Feel free to consult the specific texts as you write up your responses.

Please refer to the guidelines for specific word limit, deadline, and formatting instructions. Be sure to include your name and the exam day. Write no more than 1800 words on each question, approximately six double-spaced pages. Be sure your word processor numbers the pages.

Examination Day One: *Matters of Form*

1. *Narrative closure*

Aristotle famously argued that a good plot must have a beginning, middle, and end. Aristotle's definitions of these three moments in a composition are notoriously simple: "what does not of necessity come after something else, but another thing naturally exists or comes after it, is a beginning." The well-known writer of fiction, Patricia Highsmith, agrees: "Every story with a beginning, middle, and end has suspense; a suspense story presumably has it more so," although shortly afterwards she mentions a "successful playwright" who "is furious with Aristotle for having said that a story needed a beginning, middle and an end" (*Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*). How do we know that we have reached the end of a narrative? Are there principles of narrative closure? Do they obtain for all periods and genres? Taking examples from the three periods studied, describe the strategies by which stories are rendered complete and satisfying. You might think, in this connection, of Greek tragedy, the letters of Abelard and Heloise, Beckett, or Brecht.

2. *Media effects*

"The medium is the message," declared Marshall MacLuhan. Is it? To what extent does the form—whether literary genre, or media in general, such as film, theater, song, art—contribute to, even determine, the nature of what is communicated? Do we "read"

different media differently? Does it matter that “Triumph of the Will” is a movie, rather than a book? Does Picasso's *Guernica* communicate something about war that is different from what a literary work does? Have we left behind the era of the book, and if so, is this significant? Was there a time before the book—for example, the predominantly oral culture of early Greece or Rome? Use examples from different periods to illustrate your argument.

3. *Character and narrative*

Aristotle famously maintained that events and plot were the essence of tragedy, and that, whereas it was impossible for there to be a tragedy without an action, there could be one without character. Indeed, he held that recent tragedies were mostly characterless, just as some paintings—he specifies those of Zeuxis—do not portray character (Poetics 1450a22-29). Some moderns have agreed, arguing that characters in ancient tragedy are little more than functions of the plot. To Henry James, such a distinction between events and character seemed arbitrary: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” (The Art of Fiction). Is character necessary to a successful story? Does character have the same role in Aeschylus and Sophocles as it does in Beckett or Brecht? Is character different in novels, short stories (e.g. Chaucer), and plays? Use at least three examples, one each from the three periods studied.

4. *Memory and the narrative use of the past*

There are always those who regard the past as an ideal moment—in Livy's phrase, the *laudator temporis acti*. As Raymond Williams pointed out in *The Country and the City*, Hesiod, standing at the very beginning of the western tradition, was already feeling nostalgia for the Golden Age. How do writers—historians and others—construct the past, and identify themselves in relation to it? What is the role of time in narrative? When people write about the past, they look back at earlier events from the perspective of a later time: does this generate a tension between past and present views? As always, choose texts from all three major periods covered; some works you may wish to consider are Virgil, Livy, the Gospel of Matthew, Augustine, Valla, Levi, and Foucault.

5. *The narrative function(s) of women*

It has been argued that, “As women writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century seized authorship of women's stories, they invariably found that conventional elements of narrative structure could not adequately depict women's lives. Heightened awareness of women's lack of agency in society, and even in the conduct of their own affairs, created the need for a new story and a new voice for telling that story.” Do women play—or have they traditionally played—a distinctive role in narratives, different from that of men? Are they less represented, for example, as the motive agents of the plot, or as the repository of the ideological tensions that lie behind the narrative, than men are? Or is the reverse often the case? In your essay, try to indicate how women function in the narrative, and not simply what their status or social position might have been. Again, use texts from the three periods studied; some possible works to consider are Sophocles' *Antigone*, Dante, *El Cid*, de Beauvoir.

College of Letters
Wesleyan University

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2010
DAY TWO

Examiners: David Konstan, Brown University
Bernard Reginster, Brown University

Over three days you will have the chance to think and write about the texts you have read dealing with ancient, medieval, and twentieth-century culture. Please pick **two** of the questions listed for each day. Please think both analytically and creatively in your answers, and feel free to use examples that range across the various periods you have studied. The more detailed you can be in your responses when it comes to historical specifics such as names, dates, and places, the better; yet each of your answers should have an overall, coherent argument.

Feel free to consult the specific texts as you write up your responses.

Please refer to the guidelines for specific word limit, deadline, and formatting instructions. Be sure to include your name and the exam day. Write no more than 1800 words on each question, approximately six double-spaced pages. Be sure your word processor numbers the pages.

Examination Day Two: *Trauma, Justice, Disobedience*

1. *War: trauma and recovery*

Herodotus reports in his *History* the following “strange prodigy,” which was observed at the battle of Marathon: “Epizelus, the son of Cuphagoras, an Athenian, was in the thick of the fray, and behaving himself as a brave man should, when suddenly he was stricken with blindness, without blow of sword or dart; and this blindness continued thenceforth during the whole his after life. The following is an account which he himself, as I have heard, gave of the matter: he said that a gigantic warrior, with a huge beard, which shaded all his shield, stood over against him; but the ghostly semblance passed him by and slew the man at his side. Such, as I understand, was the tale which Epizelus told.”

What is that “strange prodigy” Herodotus speaks of? What might its distinctive causes and effects have been? Did the ancients have a conception of war trauma? What sorts of responses have such war phenomena inspired? Develop answers to these questions by making use of at least one source from each of the three periods you studied. These might include, for example, besides Herodotus, Plato’s Myth of Er in the *Republic*, the *Song of the Cid*, Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto*, or Picasso’s *Guernica*, Goytisolo.

2. *Utopias*

The messy, often violently conflicted character of social and political realities has inspired, throughout human history, dreams of social and political systems in which the

forces of envy, resentment, and aggression would be tamed, and justice and harmony would prevail. These elaborate conceptions came to be known as *utopias*. Some of the most famous are to be found in Plato's *Republic* and in the writings of Lenin and Trotsky; but similar aspirations, though perhaps articulated in less concrete forms, may be found in more unexpected places, such as Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto* or Marsilius (Marsilius) of Padua's *Defensor Pacis*. Choosing at least one source from each of the three periods you studied, describe and compare the diagnoses of the main sources of social and political chaos and the remedies proposed in each utopia; and give a brief assessment of the practical realism of these proposals.

3. *What Justice?*

Making use of at least one source from each of the three periods you studied, describe and compare at least three different conceptions of justice. Note that in "conceptions of justice," we mean not only normative definitions of justice, which aim to demonstrate its rational authority, but also representations of what passes as justice, such as the view that justice is an ideological contrivance designed to benefit the dominant classes, bereft of true legitimacy. Examples of sources from the three periods might include Plato's *Republic*, Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, Lenin's writings, or Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.

4. *The Foundations of Morality*

The history of moral philosophy is first and foremost the history of inquiries into the foundations of morality—of attempts to answer the question of its normative authority. However, the motivations for such inquiries have varied greatly. For some, for example, the salient fact is that moral conduct often requires sacrifices, which call for a justification—we would presumably not care about the justification of moral obligations if they were in harmony with our inclinations. For others, the salient fact is that the authority of morality is taken for granted and, as such, often invoked to advance particular ideological interests—we care about the justification of morality because we are concerned about its use as an instrument of ideological indoctrination.

Making use of at least one source from each of the three periods you studied, describe and compare at least three different views about the foundations of morality; and speculate briefly about what sorts of motivations might have animated the inquiries that resulted in the elaboration of these views. Examples of sources from the three periods might include Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, or Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

5. *Legitimate Disobedience*

As soon as laws, whether moral or political, were set up, and their authority established, the question arose of whether there could be circumstances in which it would nevertheless be *legitimate* to disobey them. The concept of legitimate disobedience has assumed at least two forms. In one obvious form, disobedience is motivated by, and aims to convey, the view that the laws are unjust. In this case (such as the practice of "civil disobedience" by the Civil Rights Movement, or the Feminist challenge to sexist labor laws), disobedience is a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the law. It is legitimate disobedience since, as Augustine pointed out, an unjust law is no law at all. In another,

more paradoxical form, disobedience is not based on a challenge to the legitimacy of the laws, which are considered, in some sense, just laws. Thus, Antigone does not challenge the legitimacy of the political laws of the city even when she contemplates disobeying them; and Jesus's famous declaration "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (*Matthew 22:21*) indicates that he does not question the legitimacy of Roman law even as he advocates a kind of resistance to, or transcendence of, it. The crucial question raised by this form of disobedience is the sense in which it could be legitimate.

Making use of at least one source from each of the three periods you studied, identify, describe, discuss, and contrast, instances of each of these two forms of legitimate disobedience. Examples of sources from the three periods might include Sophocles' *Antigone*, the *Gospel of Matthew*, St Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, Marcilius of Padua's *Defensor Pacis*, De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, or Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.

College of Letters
Wesleyan University

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2010
DAY THREE

Examiners: David Konstan, Brown University
Bernard Reginster, Brown University

Over three days you will have the chance to think and write about the texts you have read dealing with ancient, medieval, and twentieth-century culture. Please pick **two** of the questions listed for each day. Please think both analytically and creatively in your answers, and feel free to use examples that range across the various periods you have studied. The more detailed you can be in your responses when it comes to historical specifics such as names, dates, and places, the better; yet each of your answers should have an overall, coherent argument.

Feel free to consult the specific texts as you write up your responses.

Please refer to the guidelines for specific word limit, deadline, and formatting instructions. Be sure to include your name and the exam day. Write no more than 1800 words on each question, approximately six double-spaced pages. Be sure your word processor numbers the pages.

Examination Day Three: *Self and Other*

1. *Identity and alienation*

Frantz Fanon once declared: "I belong irreducibly to my time, a Negro who is driven to discover the meaning of black identity. White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro. I shall demonstrate elsewhere that what is often called the black soul is white man's artifact." (*Black Skin, White Masks*) This passage poignantly describes the experience of *alienation*. Alienation is the experience in which a person feels estranged from his native culture, and therefore from his own (native) self, brought on, for example, by immersion in a foreign culture or colonization by it. It is a complex experience: the colonized or Europeanized Negro has lost his original "black identity," but he does not simply become a white European: he retains a "black soul" but this is, and is experienced by him to be, an artifact of the foreign culture in which he has become immersed. He can no longer identify with his native self and culture, but he cannot identify either with the new identity he is assigned in the foreign culture he now inhabits (he experiences it only as a "mask").

Making use of sources from the three periods you studied, describe different forms of alienation, and different strategies for managing it. Possible sources might include Homer, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Genesis 37-50, Vives, Eliot, Césaire, Camus, Beckett, and Goytisolo.

2. Love

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels wrote that “no such thing as individual sex love existed before the Middle Ages.” For this reason, he argued, the appearance and poetic glorification of individual love in the Middle Ages was a step forward compared to antiquity. Moreover, the medieval love poems influenced the following generations and prepared the ground for the flowering of poetry in the modern age. Does love, then, have a history? Is romantic love specific to the modern, perhaps even the post-romantic era? Discuss the varieties of love in works from the several periods you have studied. Possible texts to consider are Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, the *Gospel of Matthew*, Augustine, Dante, Abélard and Héloïse, and Virginia Woolf.

3. Desire and transcendence

It is sometimes supposed that human beings are in a radical sense incomplete, and have a longing for something beyond this world, an urge to transcendence. A variation on this theme is the modernist view that God is dead, and has left a void in the place that He had previously occupied. Schiller, however, affirmed: “When the gods were more human, humans were more divine.” In very different ways, Plato, the Book of Job, the Gospel of Matthew, Augustine, Dante, Petrarch, and Beckett reveal, as it were, an inner emptiness in human beings, that can only be filled—if at all—by something beyond ourselves. Discuss, using texts from the several periods studied, the variations and permutations on the desire for transcendence.

4. Making citizens

The Greek word *idiotes*, from which is derived the modern English “idiot,” meant simply a private person, as opposed to a public official (from *idios*, meaning “particular” or “individual”; cf. “idiolect,” “idiosyncrasy”); we may compare the etymology of “private,” meaning “separated from the state” (cf. “deprived”). Today, we are inclined to think of the individual as the ontologically prior entity, and to view participation in the community—citizenship in the large sense—as something to be achieved or inculcated. What is the relationship between individual and community? Has it changed over the course of the history you have studied? What are the practices by which citizenship is sustained and valorized? Are they invariably positive, or are they also, or even mainly, repressive? You may wish to consider works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Livy, Vives, Luxembourg, Grass, and Foucault.

5. Making nations

The term “nationalism” was coined by Johann Gottfried Herder at the end of the eighteenth century, but the formation of nations began much earlier—how much earlier is debated. It might conceivably be applied to the Greek city-states, and with more justice to the Roman Empire; but a case can be made that the earliest nations arose in the Renaissance, in particular in Spain, England, and France. What goes into the making of a nation? How are national identities forged and sustained? Are there differences in the form of national consciousness over time, or in different cultures? Among the works you might wish to consider Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, the *Donation of Constantine*, *El Cid*, documents from *The First Crusade*, Marsilius, Lenin, Trotsky, Riefenstahl, Erice, and Grass.