

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2011
DAY ONE

Examiners: Michael Mack, The Catholic University of America
Peter Pouncey, Columbia 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 think both analytically and creatively in your answers to the following questions, and we encourage you to use examples that range across the various periods you have studied. Each of your answers should have an overall, coherent argument, and your general claims should be supported by specific evidence.

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

Please refer to the guidelines for deadline and formatting instructions. Be sure to include your name and the exam day, and to number your pages. Do your best to observe specified page limitations.

Examination Day One:

Part 1. Comment on three of the following passages in detail. If you wish, follow up your commentaries by exploring linkages between two (or, if you are so bold, all three) of the passages in relation to one another. Limit yourself to 1800 words (about six double-spaced pages).

- 1) Eurykleia washes Odysseus' feet (*Od* 19.350-90).
- 2) Socrates relates his initiation into the mysteries of love (*Symposium* 209e-204c)
- 3) Francesca chats up Dante (*Inferno* 5).
- 4) Vladimir and Estragon are first visited by Pozzo and Lucky (*Waiting for Godot*, Act 1).

Part 2. Choose one of the following and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length.

- 1) Aristotle famously defined tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" and of "events inspiring fear or pity." Nietzsche—also famously—defined great tragedy as the synthesis of the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian," of dream-like clarity and disorienting ecstasy: "every artist is an 'imitator,' and, in fact, is an artist either of Apollonian dream or Dionysian intoxication or, finally—as in Greek tragedy, for example—simultaneously an artist of intoxication and of dreams." Using at least two Greek tragedies, discuss whether Aristotle or Nietzsche understood tragedy better and why.
- 2) Herodotus may be the father of history and the heir of Homer in prose; but Thucydides discomfited scholars for centuries: discuss the *ethic* of history, with reference to Herodotus' Thermopylae narrative (7.175-end), and the three acts of Thucydides' drama of Plataea (2.71-78, 3.20-24, 3.52-68).
- 3) Both creation accounts, the flood narrative, the story of Abraham's call, the story of Joseph in Egypt, and many other passages are ordered by narrative and thematic structures that significantly shape the Biblical account. Pick two or more passages in *Genesis* and explain how each one's structure contributes to its meaning.

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Examination Day Two:

Part 1. Choose either A or B. Comment on three of the following passages in detail. If you wish, follow up your commentaries by exploring linkages between two (or, if you are so bold, all three) of the passages in relation to one another. Limit yourself to 1800 words (about six double-spaced pages).

A.

- 1) Genesis 22 (Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac)
- 2) Herodotus 2.34, and 3.19-38 (the cosmos, and social norms to live in it)
- 3) Augustine, *City of God* I.1-7 (or Augustine, *Confessions* V, where Augustine meets Ambrose)
- 4) Camus, passages from *The Plague* conveying the character of Fr. Paneloux.

B.

- 1) Genesis 2 and/or 3 (the second creation narrative; the Fall and the expulsion from the Eden)
- 2) John 11 (the raising of Lazarus and the test of faith)
- 3) Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot* c. 975-2022 (Lancelot's encounter with the damsel who offers him hospitality, on one condition) (or Vives, *A Fable about Man*, where man is welcomed to the banquet of the gods)
- 4) "Burial of the Dead" (Part I of *The Waste Land*)

Part 2. Choose one of the following and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length.

- 1) Compare and contrast either a) the poetry of Rilke or Yeats and T. S. Eliot, b) the writings of Freud and Foucault, or c) the philosophical insights of Heidegger and Sartre (or Dostoyevsky's underground man and Kafka's hunger artist, or the writings of Sartre and De Beauvoir [or Arendt]). Refer only to the works you have read, and cite specific passages from those texts to support your argument.
- 2) Discuss the relationship of Dante to Virgil within the *Divine Comedy*, and the relationship of the *Divine Comedy* to the *Aeneid*.

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Examination Day Three:

The examination for Day 3 calls for a single well-written essay on one of the following topics. The strongest essays will draw on works from all three historical periods covered in the colloquia. Try not to repeat what you have written in Days 1 and 2, and try to limit yourself to 3000 words (about 10 pages).

Beginnings. Working from several examples of your own choosing, analyze the opening section of each (paragraph, hundred lines, chapter, or whatever) and show how it relates to the work as a whole. How does the opening anticipate what is to follow? How is what follows shaped by the opening? Examples of significant beginnings might include Dante's mid-life dark wood, Vergil's statement of his theme and invocation to the muse, and Eliot's epigraph, dedication, and Part 1 ("Burial of the Dead") in *The Waste Land*. Support all claims with specific textual evidence. Conclude your essay by comparing and contrasting the examples you have chosen and by drawing logical inferences about beginnings in general.

Art and Ambiguity. In ordinary speech, ambiguity is typically considered a fault, an impediment to communication. In art, however, ambiguity is often deployed intentionally and is considered a virtue; for example, see Woolf's shifting, morally ambiguous perspectives in *To the Lighthouse* or Valery and Rilke's poetic use of ambiguity. Using works of your own choosing, explore the ways that ambiguity can be used to convey complex and otherwise inexpressible meaning.

Memory and the Burden of the Past. How is history a burden? How do we respond to this burden? Can it be alleviated? Can it be transformed from a burden into something else? Draw from several works to consider these questions. (Some possible works to consider are the histories of Herodotus, Livy, and Thucydides; Augustine's *Confessions*; Beauvoir's writings; Proust's "Overture.")

History, Philosophy, and Fiction. Using works you have read to illustrate, distinguish these three kinds of writing. Then explain the relationships between them. Then go on to explore their interplay in great works throughout history.

Society in Literature, Literature in Society. Discuss the social function of literature, giving special attention to works in which society is represented directly or indirectly; for example, society at war with itself in the *Lysistrata* or the absurd society portrayed in *Waiting for Godot*. How does function vary with genre? With changes in time and place?