

Brandeis University
Spring semester, 2003
ENG 171A: History of Literary Criticism
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STUDY QUESTIONS FOR FINAL EXAMINATION

Twelve questions are given below. The final examination will consist of a selection of eight of these questions, of which you will be required to answer six. It should be possible to answer each question in a paragraph of no more than two hundred words.

Note that the questions presuppose a knowledge of the texts from which the quotations are taken, not just the knowledge of the quotations themselves. Note also that there is no reason to expect any proportion between the length of the quotation and the length of the answer.

The examination is scheduled to take place in our usual classroom on Thursday, May 1, from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. However, I do not expect the completion of the exam to require more than 90 minutes. Exam booklets will be provided.

1. Plato, *Republic*, X; *CT*, 34b–35a:

[Socrates:] The imitative poet will be in a brilliant state of intelligence about the theme of his poetry?

[Glaucon:] Nay, very much the reverse.

And still he will go on imitating without knowing what makes a thing good or bad, and may be expected therefore to imitate only that which appears to be good to the ignorant multitude?

Just so.

Explain how the conclusion that Socrates draws here contributes to his case for banishing imitative poetry from the ideally just city.

2. Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. VI.15; *CT*, 53b:

The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: character holds the second place.

Explain this claim, and what justifies it.

3. Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*; *CT*, 150a:

For see we not valiant Miltiades rot in his fetters: the just Phocion and the accomplished Socrates put to death like traitors; the cruel Severus live prosperously; the excellent Severus miserably murdered; Sylla and Marius dying

in their beds; Pompey and Cicero slain when they would have thought exile a happiness?

Explain how Sidney's claims in this passage support his case for the superior value of poetry to history. (Be aware that all the persons mentioned are historical figures.)

4. Pierre Corneille, *Of the Three Unities of Action, Time, and Place*; CT, 210a:

Many argue against this rule [viz., the rule of the unity of time], which they call tyrannical, and they would be right if it were founded only on the authority of Aristotle; but what should make it acceptable is the fact that common sense supports it.

Explain what the rule of the unity of time is, and how, according to Corneille, it is supported by common sense.

5. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, lines 152–157; CT, 275b:

Great wits sometimes may gloriously offend,
And rise to faults true critics dare not mend;
From vulgar bounds with brave disorder part,
And snatch a grace beyond the reach of art,
Which, without passing through the judgment, gains
The heart, and all its end at once attains.

Pope says here that great poets (or "wits") may sometimes "gloriously offend" and thereby achieve "a grace beyond the reach of art." Explain this paradoxical notion. (N.B., that means also explaining why, in the context of the poem, it is paradoxical.)

6. David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*; CT, 310b:

Though some objects, by the structure of the mind, be naturally calculated to give pleasure, it is not to be expected, that in every individual the pleasure will be equally felt.

According to Hume's conception, how can it be that, given an object "naturally calculated to give pleasure," such as *Don Quixote* or the *Iliad*, everyone does not find pleasure, or find equal pleasure, in the perusal of it? (Note that the word "calculated" here, as in the previous paragraph of Hume's essay, is used figuratively, with roughly the sense of "constituted.")

7. Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare*; CT, 326a:

The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players. [. . .]

A couple of paragraphs after this remark, Johnson notes: "It will be asked, how the drama moves, if it is not credited" (326b). Explain the problem, and Johnson's solution to it.

8. Thomas Love Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*; CT, 513a:

While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age.

Explain Peacock's claim. Does it concern poetry in all ages, or just in one of its four?

9. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*; CT, 520a:

Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. A Poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong which are usually those of his place and time in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign a glory in a participation in the cause.

Explain Shelley's claim here. In particular, what does he mean when he says that the poet who embodies his own conceptions of right and wrong is merely "interpreting the effect" rather than "[participating] in the cause"?

10. John Stuart Mill, *What Is Poetry?*; CT, 553b:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or uttering forth of feeling. But if we may be excused the seeming affectation of the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*.

Explain the contrast that Mill draws between poetry and eloquence in this passage. Given a piece of writing that could be the one or the other, how would one tell the difference?

11. Matthew Arnold, *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*; *CT*, 599a:

[. . .] It is only by remaining collected, and refusing to lend himself to the point of view of the practical man, that the critic can do the practical man any service. [. . .]

Explain Arnold's claim. What service can the critic perform for the "practical man"?

12. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"; *CT*, 761b:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.

Explain how, according to Eliot, the significance of one poet (or perhaps even one poem) depends on its relation to its tradition.