

**National Taiwan University**  
**Graduate Institute of Foreign Languages and Literatures**  
**2021 PhD Program Admissions Examination**  
**Subject: Literary Theory and Criticism**

**Instructions.** The test consists of two parts. Answer both parts, but in Part II you get to work on questions of your choice. For each of your answers, write a coherent essay.

**Part I. (40 points)**

In her award-winning book published in 2015, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Caroline Levine intends to bring back the importance of form not only as an aesthetic engagement but also as a socio-political means of arranging elements. She proposes to use the notion of affordance in design theory to revive our considerations of form: “[*Affordance*] allows us to grasp both the specificity and the generality of forms—both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that those patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them as they move across time and space. What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couple *capable* of doing? Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities. Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion. Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time. The sonnet, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or expression, ‘a moment’s monument,’ while the triple-decker novel affords elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts.”

Levine’s work would constitute part of the putative resurgence of formalism in English literary studies since the start of the twenty-first century, where a prominent line of argument revolves around whether or not previous “historicist” approaches were attentive to the question of form.

While the renewed attention to form may point to a changing academic climate, the question of form, to be sure, has always been a concern in subdivisions of literary criticism, be it a nominal formalism or not. Select one literary critical method you are familiar with and elaborate its approach to the question of form. Alternatively, you may select a theoretical field that is not originally meant for literary studies but which you believe can shed important lights on the discussion of form for literary scholars. You can address the strengths and/or limits of the method/field of your choice.

**Part II. (30 points x 2 = 60 points)**

Out of the four passages below, pick TWO and write a response to each: explicate this thinker’s take on literature, and expand on it to discuss and/or critique the implications of his/her approach. Your answers in this part must not be overlapped with what you wrote for Part I. Ellipsis indicates the examiner’s editing of the original unless otherwise noted.

(A) Catherine Malabou, “What Is Neuro-literature?” (2016)

Current neurobiology will be present in my discourse, but not as a possible new foundation for literature. Speaking from the continental philosophical point of view, I am interested in the way neurological research helps both radicalizing and challenging certain major motives of what took place in the second half of the twentieth century under the names of “deconstruction of subjectivity” in Derrida on the one hand, of “archeology of knowledge” in Foucault on the other. These two movements—let us call them movements for want of a better name—as different and sometimes opposed as they might have been, have shared what I will call a common faith in literature. I will limit myself here to exploring the Foucaultian structure or economy of this faith, which might be formulated as a faith in the outside. According to Foucault, literature promises the opening of an outside: outside of philosophy, outside of representation, outside of “discourse,” and, of course and above all, outside science, which has always been identified with power, regulation, normalization, and discipline.

. . . . .

Neuro-literature here helps me name a crack or a flaw, not to mention a contradiction, in the very notion of literature understood as the thought from outside.

What literature was supposed to resist most, namely scientific discourse, paradoxically appears today as revealing the truth of literature, as opening for literature the outside that it was supposed to offer, and that it actually failed to open. If I absolutely agree with Foucault that there is no genuine thought without a passage to the outside, we have to come to the conclusion that literature is not an outside for anybody any longer . . . .

I will radicalize this conclusion and state that neurobiology appears to be this absolute outside of literature that gives the outside in literature its effective meaning. Neurobiology achieves the neutralization of subjectivity. In other words, the deconstruction of subjectivity that is at work in neurobiology today is the material and effective accomplishment of neutrality, the material and effective opening of the “neutral space” (Foucault) which was supposed to be the space of literature . . . .

(B) Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (2016)

To be sure, some contemporary authors continue to hold fast to the representational language of critique, believing that their descriptions and claims are somehow immune to neoliberal appropriation. More interesting to me, however, are those authors who replace representational forms of meaning-making, which use referential language to depict, reflect, or say something about the world, with more ontological forms of meaning-making, which derive value from the configuration and interrelation of beings, human or otherwise. (If representations are meaningful because of the way language refers to the world, then ontology is meaningful because of the way beings exist in relation to each other and to larger assemblages of beings, which obviously requires a new understanding of what it means to mean.) Ontological forms of value production allow these authors to evade neoliberalism’s totalizing capture of contemporary political discourse; in turn, they can engage neoliberalism on its own ontological grounds, as a unique configuration of being rather than as a set of ideological beliefs. Rather than pointing to and revealing what’s wrong with neoliberalism (that would be the critical approach that relies on representation

to show us the world in a specific way), these authors inhabit the world neoliberalism has produced in an effort to reconfigure the positions, relations, and connections that it establishes among the beings and objects of the world (that would be the ontological approach that still produces value, but only as a function of being and relation, not through representation). There is no single way this occurs, and no text abandons standard representational modes altogether. But in general we will see an array of contemporary works that favor presence over absence, being over meaning, and connection over reference. *After Critique* not only avers that this ontological turn in contemporary US fiction is crucial to thinking about literature after postmodernism, but it also holds that this literature's commitment to ontological value production marks a positive, post-critique response to the representational challenges neoliberalism poses for thinking about politics today.

(C) Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (2005)

The title of this short book deserves a few words of explanation. To begin with, this is an essay on literary history: literature, the old territory (more or less), unlike the drift towards other discourses so typical of recent years. But within that old territory, a new object of study: instead of concrete, individual works, a trio of artificial constructs—graphs, maps, and trees—in which the reality of the text undergoes a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction. “Distant reading,” I have once called this type of approach; where distance is however not an obstacle, but *a specific form of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection. Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models.

From texts to models, then; and models drawn from three disciplines with which literary studies have had little or no interaction: graphs from quantitative history, maps from geography, and trees from evolutionary theory.

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All questions that occurred to me some years ago, when the study of national bibliographies made me realize what a minimal fraction of the literary field we all work on: a canon of two hundred novels, for instance, sounds very large for nineteenth-century Britain (and is much larger than the current one), but is still less than one per cent of the novels that were actually published: twenty thousand, thirty, more, no one really knows—and close reading won't help here, a novel a day every day of the year would take a century or so . . . [note: ellipsis in the original] And it's not even a matter of time, but of method: a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it *isn't* a sum of individual cases: it's a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole—and the graphs that follow are one way to begin doing this.

(D) Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (French 2003; English translation 2007)

[note: In this passage Rancière begins by citing the Jewish writer's account of his experience in the concentration camp.]

. . . the beginning of Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*:

I went outside to take a piss. It wasn't yet daylight. Beside me others were pissing too; nobody spoke. Behind the place where we pissed was the trench to shit in; other guys were sitting on the little wall above it, their pants down. The trench was covered by a small roof, but not the urinal. Behind us there were sounds of galoshes, of coughing; that came from the others who were arriving. The latrines were never deserted. A steam floated above the urinals at all hours . . . [note: ellipsis in the original] Nights were calm at Buchenwald. The huge machine of the camp would go to sleep. From time to time, searchlights came on on the watchtowers: the eyes of the SS would open, would close. In the woods that hemmed in the camp patrols made their rounds. Their dogs did not bark. For the sentinels time went quietly by.

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Thus Robert Antelme's experience is not "unrepresentable" in the sense that the language for conveying it does not exist. The language exists and the syntax exists. Not as an exceptional language and syntax, but, on the contrary, as a mode of expression peculiar to the aesthetic regime in the arts in general. The problem is in fact rather the reverse. The language that conveys this experience is in no way specific to it. The experience of a programmed de-humanization quite naturally finds itself expressed in the same way as the Flaubertian identity between the human and the inhuman, between the emergence of an emotion uniting two beings and a little dust stirred up by a draught in a farm kitchen. Antelme wants to convey a lived, incomparable experience of the parceling out of experience. Yet the language he selects for its appropriateness to this experience is the common language of literature in which the absolute freedom of art has, for a century, been identified with the absolute passivity of physical matter. This extreme experience of the inhuman confronts no impossibility of representation; nor is there a language peculiar to it. There is no appropriate language for witnessing. Where testimony has to express the experience of the inhuman, it naturally finds an already constituted language of becoming-inhuman, of an identity between human sentiments and non-human movements.