

National Taiwan University
Graduate Institute of Foreign Languages and Literatures
2023 PhD Program Admissions Examination
Subject: Literary Theory and Criticism

Question I (50 points; length 400 words minimum)

In a recent special issue put out by *Critical Inquiry* titled “Surplus Data,” the guest editors account for the rationale as follows:

It is no longer enough to say that data is big. Data is now in a state of surplus. As we have progressed from the megabyte to the terabyte, the petabyte, and now in 2022 debatably to the zettabyte era—all within the span of a mere two decades—we have witnessed a quantitative increase manifesting itself as a qualitative change. In a well-known 2008 provocation, the editor in chief of *Wired*, Chris Anderson, announced that the ability to produce and analyze enormous data sets using artificial intelligence (AI) was rendering the bedrock of human knowledge systems—the scientific method itself—obsolete. For the first time in history, correlation began to supersede causation and science advanced “without coherent models, unified theories, or really any mechanistic explanation at all.” It supposedly spelled the end of theory. But theory has faked its own death many times.

While this thesis statement may seem to focus its attention on the current century, the editorial collective is in effect looking at what they call the “traces of a historical change in governmentality, epistemology, and political economy” manifest since the late nineteenth century with data playing an ever-important part in the governance of populations.

Taking a cue from this special issue, ponder on at least one (but preferably more than one) of the following sets of questions.

- (1) The editors also suggest that while *big* refers to quantitative parameters of data, the category *surplus* is “the quality of the social after the quantitative surge.” Discuss a thinker or creative writer you have read who has also addressed the impact of material conditions on the cultural sphere in terms of a transformation from quantity to quality.
- (2) These editors are apparently arguing that advances in technology can bring about a new episteme or mode of thinking. Do you agree? Is there any blind spot or danger in their claim?
- (3) Cite a strand of critical theory you are familiar with and evaluate its premises vis-à-vis the rationale of the above-mentioned special issue as summarized in (2). Does the critical theory in question concern conditions of possibility external to the human mind and/or the human body?

Question II (50 points; length 400 words minimum)

The following are excerpts of introductions to special issues recently published by two prominent literary journals. Take them as calls for submissions instead. Pick EITHER one and imagine yourself planning to contribute a research article to the special issue. Write a

proposal of your article to the editor in which you explain how you will approach the said topic and what your argument will be. Your proposal must integrate analysis of at least one literary text. The proposal has to show your take on the subject matter raised in the special issue, and your textual analysis should be specific and attentive to the context. (Ellipsis without square brackets means omission in the original; editing of the quoted material by this examiner is indicated by square brackets.)

(A) *SubStance* special issue “In/habitable” (vol. 51, no. 1, 2022)

L'inhabitable—the *uninhabitable*—was the bass note sounding through all of the work of Georges Perec, less a category than what categories failed to insure against: the depersonalizing, devitalizing, dark matter of modern histories and geographies, as scandalous as it was ubiquitous. At the end of *Espèces d'espaces* (1974), Perec would parse “the uninhabitable” into a litany of alienating spaces produced by the very processes of (techno-scientific-military-) industrial advancement and urban growth:

The uninhabitable: seas used as a dump, coastlines bristling with barbed wire, earth bare of vegetation, mass graves, piles of carcasses, boggy rivers, towns that smell bad . . .

The uninhabitable: the skimmed, the airless, the small, the mean, the shrunken, the very precisely calculated

The uninhabitable: the confined, the out-of-bounds, the encaged, the bolted, walls jagged with broken glass, judas windows, reinforced doors

The uninhabitable: shanty towns, dumptowns

The hostile, the grey, the anonymous, the ugly, the corridors of the Métro, public baths, hangars, car parks, marshalling yards, ticket windows, hotel bedrooms

Factories, barracks, prisons, asylums, old people's homes, lycées, law courts, school playgrounds . . .

(*Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* 89-90; translation modified)

Such lists in Perec's writing were inspired, as we know, by Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*. But while Shonagon certainly collected “Annoying Things” and “Very Tiresome Things” alongside “Elegant Things” and “Things that Should be Short,” Perec's list of the *uninhabitable*, even while it respected rigorously and eloquently the list as form, threatened to ruin it “philosophically” from the inside as principle. For what kind of aggregation or “commonplace” is this, of *topoi* so aversive to habitation? Each of the sites, motifs or predicaments listed by Perec is a place where the human lives on only by hardening or withering, self-dividing or turning away. In a sense, each is a place where, rather than saying *here is another thing that is known by me and makes my/the world*, a self posits the hypothesis of its own constriction and dysphoria, the reduction of its knowledge to endurance. These are scenes no “I” cares to recall or gather but only forbears or flees. They may be noticeably disparate in their scale, gravity, objectivity [. . .], nonetheless they form [. . .] an inventory of sites of stress, confinement and hardship. Here is a portrait of the world through all the zones and modes through which it sorts, disciplines, constrains, or banishes. [.]

For this special issue, *in/habitable* offered itself as a fitting totem word for thinking a central dialectic of modernity. As we proceed further into a twenty-first century defined by the unprecedented crises affecting climate, environments, homes, livelihoods, the very claims

and practices of inhabitation are increasingly under strain. Haunting questions may be seen to attend not only the semantic, pragmatic or “modal” field of inhabitation—*how* to inhabit—but also its “subject field”—*who or what* inhabits a place, who or what becomes displaced or placeless, who or what survives or is “worth saving,” who or what is remembered or imagined, who or what vanishes in the uninhabitable.

(B) *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* special issue “The Economy of Form” (vol. 55, no. 2, 2022)

It all goes back, perhaps, to Hegel’s definition: *die moderne bürgerliche Epopee*, “the modern bourgeois epic” (452). Tied in this way to a class whose historical fate coincided with the rise of capitalism, the novel became for Hegel—“both the liberal and Marxist theories of the novel” (Jha 36)—the paradigmatic literary case of economy structuring, one that was also being structured by literary forms. George Steiner, accordingly, praised the ways in which “the novel . . . expressed and, in part, shaped the habits of feeling and language of the Western bourgeoisie from Richardson to Thomas Mann. In it, the dreams and nightmares of the mercantile ethic, of middleclass privacy, and of the monetary-sexual conflicts and delights of industrial society have their monument” (555). Georg Lukács, for his part less inclined to monumentalize the industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie, preferred instead to glean from the novel “the field of action of the demonic” (*Theory* 90), a fiendish spirit of rebellion pitted against a whole economic order; the “uncertain attitude,” in short, “of romantic anti-capitalism” (19). For all intents and purposes external to the story itself, the nature and impact of whatever we mean by this attitude ought to elude the economic models and social institutions that intend to capture and codify “dreams and nightmares” as well as “the monetary-sexual conflict and delights of industrial society.” With something like this in mind, the articles included in this special issue refocus our critical attention from that already codified material onto the elusive semiotic residues that often cloud key narrative events so that they resist rationalization as either pro- or anti-capitalist.

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[I]t is misreading the novel, we feel, to determine its formal relation to capitalism without first accounting for its special relation to specific modes of production—as Balzac knew well when he indulged in the descriptive digressions of “the Stanhope press and the ink-distributing roller” (3). Around machines such as the Stanhope, along railways and new means of transportation, a new mode of life was becoming dominant between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the novel represented such a mode of life while being produced, distributed, and consumed in it. It is, after all, impossible to imagine that a literary form could become dominant in Europe “between the mid-sixteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth” (Mazzoni 3) and still remain untouched by such a radically new mode of life. Nor is it possible to imagine its very language would remain extraneous to the coeval spread of the categories and concepts of the new dominant science: namely, political economy.

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Rather than reading fiction as thus economically scripted, the articles in this special issue call attention to just how a selection of novels over two centuries folded the economic discourse of their particular moments into the complex process of coming to terms with the conditions under which life must be lived and continue to seem worth that effort. To put it simply, these articles demonstrate that the novels in question have at least as much to tell us about the economic conditions of the time that could not be explained by contemporary and possibly future economic reasoning, as that reasoning can tell us about the quality of experience captured in novel form.