The M.A. Exam

The purpose of the M.A. exam is to test students’ ability to work with concepts central to the discipline, to articulate literary-historical arguments, to discuss significant patterns that extend beyond individual texts, and to articulate how such concepts relate to the interpretation of individual works. Just as importantly, it initiates and gives form to a departmental conversation around the student’s interests that, once started, needs to keep building till the completion of the dissertation.

The examination takes place in the eighth week of Spring Quarter of the student’s first year of graduate study. Its basis is a list of some twenty to twenty-five texts selected by the student in consultation with the three members of the student’s M.A. exam committee. (The committee—consisting of three members of the department’s core faculty—is to be designated by the director of graduate studies in consultation with the student.) This list reflects a category of literary research such as a genre, a period, or a general concept bearing on a mode of writing. Examples of the former might be “The Bourgeois Tragedy” or “Modern Urban Short Prose” or “The Elegy.” Periods can be variously conceived: Enlightenment, Realism, Weimar Republic. General concepts are more abstract categories such as “narrative” or “performance” or “argumentative writing.” Lists could also be organized along thematic lines or in terms of a traditional narrative subject. The point is that the list be designed so as to sustain a process of coherent intellectual inquiry. In addition to the 20-25 primary texts, the list includes a representative cross-section of secondary literature addressing the topic under study.

The examination itself has two components:

a) a take-home written examination, and

b) an oral examination approximately one hour in length.

The take-home component consists of three essays (of two and one half, never more than three double-spaced pages) written in answer to questions devised by the faculty. These questions offer the student an opportunity to demonstrate her/his ability to explore various intellectual issues raised by the list as a whole as well as by specific works on the list. Students will receive these questions on Friday morning of the eighth week of classes and hand in their completed essays by 5:00 p.m. the following Monday. The oral examination is devoted to a critical discussion of the students’ three essays as well as to works included on the list but not addressed in the written part of the examination. It will take place one week after the written exam. Following a forty-minute discussion of the essays, the student and the faculty examination committee will assess the student’s overall progress, including course work. A crucial aspect of the M.A. examination is planning and advising. Students should choose their examiners and have one planning meeting with each examiner by the eighth week of Autumn Quarter. Students should choose examiners and design the lists with a view to the seminars they plan to attend throughout the year. Students must submit their lists for approval at the end of the fourth week of Winter Quarter. Two weeks after submission, they should meet with their examiners to discuss preparation for the exams. During Spring Quarter, students should meet with their examiners twice prior to the exam in order to discuss questions arising from their readings. Of course,
throughout the process students are encouraged to discuss questions arising from their readings with other faculty members, both inside and outside the Department of Germanic Studies.