

TIPS ON EXAMS, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. These notes are written principally for undergraduates at Caius beginning to make plans for their second year of the English course, though they may also have a use for undergraduates in their third year, as a reminder. Many choices need to be pondered and then made in planning an individual scheme of work, including decisions about the selection of exam papers and components to enter for; some course plans will involve a connected strategy, choosing a particular combination of options in sequence from Part I to Part II. These notes do not directly concern any of such larger issues, being confined to specific practical aspects of preparing for, and taking, formal written examination papers as elements in Parts I and II of the English Tripos. However, do not conclude from this that skill with exam technique can be left until the late stages of revision, for a few last-minute practice sessions; performing successfully in written exam papers requires planning a fair way in advance.

2. Some of you who took a gap year before coming up will not have well-focussed recent memories of taking examinations; and such memories as you have will be of GCSE and GCE examinations or of others like them. At an early stage, therefore, you will need to take stock of the rather different kind of challenge presented by university examinations, and of the distinctive navigational skills required in steering towards them. Some of your earlier technical aptitudes will assist you, but others if unamended will be an undoubted hindrance.

3. There are two suites of written exams which make up the English Tripos: Part I in the sixth term, at the end of the second year, and Part II in the ninth term, at the end of the third and final year. There are a few special cases which do not conform to this schedule but these do not require to be mentioned here. Until fairly recently there was also a Preliminary Examination to Part I, set in the third term at the end of the first year; but this examination has been discontinued, semi-permanently, even though certain individual colleges have devised replacement tests of their own. Caius has never devised such an additional examination, and has no plans to do so in the immediate future. The Regulations for the English Tripos, which are issued each year in up-to-date revised form, specify which papers in Part I and Part II are compulsory and which optional, and which requirements in the each of the examinations overall may be met by submission of a portfolio or dissertations. Planning a course of study and selection of options will determine which exam papers you will enter for, in due time finding yourself at a small desk in a large hall writing time-limited essays on one side of the paper only.

4. The general character of written exams in the field of literary study needs to be sized up. The task of formal exams is of course to test the range and depth of your understanding of literature, your knowledge of texts studied and the whole historical development of English (British) literary culture; and to challenge your powers of analysis and argument and expression, your

ability to grasp the specific format of a question asked and to work an answer that shall shew strong intellectual control, active imagination and powers of distinctive individual insight. In Part II, of course, the range is even wider, to include most of European literary and para-literary culture and cultural history, with American and Commonwealth strands woven in (Reconstructive Minoan Astrology is next on the list).

5. Different exam papers in different areas of study, set at different stages of a university course, will introduce specific secondary requirements; but underlying all of them is the expectation that the study of literature is a critical enterprise, so that estimating and judging the values of texts, the excellence of individual works in the context of literary evolution and innovation, is a defining focus to the general task of understanding and interpretation. No aspect of literary study in the English tradition (which does somewhat also mean, the Cambridge tradition) is merely descriptive or historical, although critical judgement cannot make any headway at all unless supported by descriptive and historical aspects, including in first place a full grasp of language as the instrument of literary composition. In individual terms, a good accurate memory is the springboard to what you can do with it.

6. So much should be self-evident. What follows next is more contentious but may provide grounds for reflection. In the context of your previous life, public examinations set by examining boards operating within the secondary school system (including sixth form colleges and the like) had and have as their primary function the test of achievement within the school system and its curriculum subject by subject. The task is primarily retrospective within a closed frame of knowledge and the skills required to handle it proficiently. Very large scale exam-marking procedures require standardised expectations, measured by specific schedules of performance against profiles of knowledge and technique. There is no requirement that a candidate should individually extend the range of a task, by self-challenge in any substantial way. Training and practice in exact performance within essay-writing skill domains are decisive for attaining good grades. This characterisation rather insists on the aspect of a closed system, in order the more to point up the contrast with what follows.

7. The study of literature within the Cambridge English course also includes precisely specified elements, and exams are set that test knowledge of these elements and of what is sometimes referred to as a notional curriculum or canon of agreed central texts that represent the defining core of the subject. But in contrast to the control by teachers and educationists, in the world of school, of what is required to be known and understood, the Faculty of English acknowledges no regimented schedule of tests which in themselves define a proficient or excellent knowledge of the subject. In this sense the curriculum is so notional as to be afloat within the currents of informed discussion and debate, open to argument and revision even where generally stable agreement defines much of the ground. What this means, in effect, is that even in formal examinations there is less that can be taken for granted, as a framework within which to demonstrate standard skills and to cover the range of allotted tasks. It is not the case that each exam essay must work out afresh the fundamental critical justifications for all literary study; but it is the case that active thought and intelligence of a questioning kind are

essential to good answers, and essays that merely deliver proofs of proficiency will slide down into the low middle of the assessment scale.

8. Within these contentious generalities it is possible to discriminate more closely between Part I and Part II. Part I concludes the first two years of the undergraduate course, and this segment of the three-year course overall does have a certain self-contained character. Part I is marked and graded with the full rigour of a university examination, but the results do not contribute towards an undergraduate's overall class of degree; it is the results and final class of the Part II examination that comprise the results of the course as a whole. This traditional arrangement means that the Part I examination can be a kind of trial or test run, to some extent independent of the course overall. It also means that in certain cases it is practicable to combine a Part I English course with Part II in another subject, or alternatively, to follow Part I in another subject with Part II English.

9. There is, therefore, within Part I a certain emphasis upon precise and full knowledge of texts studied, and of the defining contexts that locate them in an historical development. The exam papers which you will meet at the end of your second year will in various ways reflect this emphasis. Where there are questions asking for comment on passages of text or explanation of difficult features, it will be expected that a good answer will as a minimum produce the specific information requested, delivered succinctly and with a coherent sense of overall context. And since information that is active within understanding of texts exerts influence upon interpretation and judgement, even answers concentrated on the production of information will shew alertness to critical implications. Likewise, essay answers in the main period papers will be expected to focus closely upon particular individual works in specific detail; but again, too inertly or narrowly descriptive answers will not score at highest levels. Questions are often phrased so as to allow individual candidates to base their argument on texts or authors which they have nominated for themselves; so that the connection of an active line of critical thinking, from text to argument and from argument back to text, can follow along tracks already explored.

10. At Part II level the case is altered. The central nucleus of compulsory papers sets before candidates the largest and most formidably wide-ranging questions, which must be addressed from specific knowledge but which both invite and expect analysis connected to fundamental principles and independent critical points of view. Course options and their exam papers are borrowed widely from neighbouring triposes, including our own Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (ASNC) Department. The skills for writing a fully exploratory essay have by now to be assumed as ready instruments, allowing a question to trigger immediately and under pressure of exam conditions an argument firing on all connections, recognising the general grounds for forming and justifying literary judgements but also re-making these grounds in the act of working an essay to its productive conclusion. There is no prescriptive marking schedule for the assessment of exam answers at this level; and there is agreement among markers only because strong critical intelligence and imaginative insight set their own recognisable standards of excellence. Many of the optional papers in Part II, which concentrate on special subjects for intensive specialised study, invite an understanding of scholarship and the

provision of essay answers that engage with scholarly argument on their own individual and professional terms.

11. Reaching the level of performance required to do well in the Part I and Part II exam papers requires a progressive evolution of intellectual development, and it also requires specific practical skills, sufficient to provide intelligence and good preparation with the means to demonstrate themselves convincingly. A strong memory is needful, but one active with ideas and moments of special response as much as loaded down with chunks of information. Over the run of a working term the pattern of weekly work--reading for full understanding, writing critical essays, following the developing argument in lectures and clarifying in your own mind the evolving tendencies in your own personal ideas--will be setting this foundation for the skills to handle examinations confidently. It is not necessary to regard exams as some special ordeal to which all else must be subject. But it is prudent to make certain plans in advance, so that when you reach the stage of revision for the papers which you will take you will be already prepared for the practical aspects.

12. Before anything you should understand in outline something of how the examination process works. For each current year a Board of Examiners for Part I and Part II is appointed, made up of a Chairman and Assistant Chairman and a complement of Examiners drawn from the Professors, Readers and Lecturers in the Faculty reinforced by certain College Teaching Officers; the University will also appoint one or more External Examiners, normally senior teaching officers from other UK university English departments. This Board of Examiners will in each case issue, in conjunction with the Faculty Board of English, a document called 'Information for Candidates' and this, together with the Compendium of Regulations, will set out the rules governing the form of the examination papers for the current year; when new subjects and papers are introduced for the first time there will be special information about this. The Board will then assign to pairs of examiners the task of producing draft question papers, and after review by the full Board these drafts will be emended and approved.

13. When candidates have done the examination each script is first read by two examiners each marking independently; examiners will then compare marks and their full notes and, if there is disagreement, the script will be read and marked again by a third examiner and in some cases it may be arbitrated by an External Examiner. Each submitted component remains anonymous throughout, and no examiner will mark a dissertation or portfolio that he or she has supervised or which has been submitted by a candidate from his or her own college. Each component is scored out of 100 against a grid of predetermined class boundaries, so that each one will end up, after being read and marked at least twice, with a scored mark and a class. The Board will then review these results for each individual component and will assess them as (anonymous) candidate profiles with a view to assigning an overall class. There are formal guidelines for resolving disagreements and determining borderline cases; but the Board will exercise its collective judgement rather than slavishly following a grid at this final stage.

14. You may also be interested to know that, quite soon after the results are

known and the class-list is published outside the Senate House, a breakdown of the marks for individual candidates is sent to Directors of Studies for transmission onwards to candidates themselves. The availability of Part I marks for each component (written papers, portfolio, dissertation; also original composition) is especially significant, as this will enable you to make a review of your overall progress so far, your strengths and weaknesses, and to consult with your Director of Studies about specific action that might need to be taken to improve your position over the year ahead. The Part II marks are also significant for anyone considering the option of some further graduate study, and wishing to estimate their chances of funding for this. From a different angle you may also be interested to know that the Board of Examiners for each Part in each year issues a report, on performance overall and on the outcome for each paper in turn. These reports are often rather hasty and can be somewhat negative in tone, even occasionally carping; there is no reason to pore over them or even pay them any notice at all, especially since the examiners for the year following will be a quite different team; but for the curious they can be freely consulted (including those for previous years) on application to the issue desk of the Faculty Library.

15. A brief word about results, classes of degree, examination success or otherwise. It is clear that in a civilised society, and in the context of humane study drawing on so many varied motives and interests and commitments within the overall framework of an academic course of study, the presence of formal examinations should not loom too large. There is no reason to let the prospect of exams distort the natural energies of intelligent enquiry and enthusiasm, installing negative anxiety in place of buoyancy and keen personal development. That said, there are various further considerations. First, we are an academic community whose fundamental motivation is study and the pursuit of knowledge and understanding along somewhat formal lines. There are many ways and styles of turning this general context to acceptable individual advantage, but the existence of exams does remind everyone who is a party to the academic contract that standards of intellectual commitment and hard work are written into the reason for your being here. Second, while there is no magic in constant strife above all else to attain a top-level degree result, a course that is followed with intense personal commitment for its own values and rewards is likely, given some prudent management, also to lead you towards a result that fairly reflects your best level of ability and attainment. A result that does not do this, not giving you and your family and the wider world a fair measure, is satisfactory to neither man nor beast, and will probably annoy you in later life. These are reasons for taking the prospect of exams in your stride, with a good spirit, improving your practical skills in order to do well, while at the same time keeping a sense of proportion along the way. Running the exam system causes the teaching staff an immense convulsion of minutely conscientious extra labour, and no one does this for fun or as an instrument of torture.

16. All this last aside, there are certain inferences that may be drawn from the summary outline given above. In particular, the high level of double and treble marking means that it is not a matter of individual examiner's opinion whether your work finds favour or not, even in the case of a specific dissertation or portfolio or exam script. Indeed, the question is not one of

favour but of impartial judgement, in which individual preferences are given an element of effect but not allowed to override a more mediated and collective view. The question-setting also follows this same pattern; individual questions may suggest a distinct viewpoint, but the balance of questions within a paper will be the work of many hands, and answers written to an individual question will be read and marked by examiners other than the one who first brought it into being.

17. Against this background it is possible for you to plan a reasonable approach to exams. If you are a Part I candidate, your choice of portfolio and dissertation options will affect the exam papers which you will actually sit. In the case of Part II your choice whether to submit one dissertation or two will leave you with two or one further optional papers to choose. At an early stage of your planning, therefore, you will know exactly for which papers you will write a script. Soon thereafter you will need to study the rules and guidelines for each paper that you will take, and should discuss the spread of your work with your supervisor. It would be sensible also, at some stage, to look at immediately past papers, bearing in mind that no paper-setter will feel in any way bound to follow precedent unless it is specified in Regulations or in Information for Candidates. Full sets of previous Cambridge University Examination Papers are held in the Caius Library, and selected pages from them may of course be photocopied within the Library for your own personal use.

18. During the Michaelmas Term of the year in which you will sit your exams you will be expected to take personal charge of the detailed arrangements concerning your formal exam entry. After discussion you will choose your combination of papers as permitted by regulations and as appropriate to you individually, and soon thereafter you will be sent forms from the office of the Senior Tutor on which to record these choices. This information must without fail be supplied by the deadlines specified; it is then fed into the computers within the heart (or maybe spleen) of the University Offices, from which a first consolidated list of entries is sent back to the College for checking. You will again be asked to check your entry by a specified deadline and again there are penalties if you delay completing this formality. If there are any doubts or queries, consult your director of studies at once; but do not imagine that this business of your entry will somehow take care of itself without your prompt and specific personal attention.

19. At a later stage, remember the solid merits of carefully planning a revision timetable. You need to schedule the completion of original preparation work so as to culminate mostly by the end of the term before the exams, although if you are also submitting a dissertation (or even two) your easter vacation will be under siege in respect also of final preparations for the printout. It is good to allocate specific slices of available time to each paper in turn, setting out a pattern of regular sessions that is realistically attainable and which will not pitch you into premature panic or chronic fatigue. For each exam paper requiring three essay-type answers it is prudent to prepare fully to be ready with four answers or areas in which you would be competent to tackle a question; the extra margin is a precaution in case a particular question that you hope for does not turn up or is given an awkward aspect by the form in which it is couched. Remember that no books are allowed into the

exam room, with the single current exception of the Part I Shakespeare Paper, for which a plain text of the *Works* (minus glossary) is provided. Keep in mind that final-stage revision can easily become stale and can take the lustre from the very work it was intended to polish; the best last-minute revision of a text that is to be important for you is to refresh your thoughts by re-reading some part of it, even at a running skim over a couple of scenes or a chapter, because mind contact with real literature will raise the spirits and reconnect thoughts with the reasons for having them. Do not go into an exam room in too much of a traumatised or exhausted state; plan to take some kind of last-minute break before you enter the fray. (There are fuller suggestions about this phase of your work in 'Tips on Exam Revision, for Students of English', which you could read in conjunction with these paragraphs.)

20. Part of your revision programme, probably close to its final stages, should include writing some trial answers within limit of time and under exam conditions (no access to notes or texts, etc); this will be especially important if there has been a somewhat extended interval since you last attempted a formal exam. Use a recent exam paper and subject yourself to the specific challenge of answering the question rather than just adopting it as a topic indicator. You may initially find yourself disappointed by how much you have to leave out; but don't lose heart, because leaving out the detail of a fuller essay will, with practice, enable you to move forward more swiftly and elegantly, and to convert loss to gain. Your supervisor or Director of Studies will certainly be willing to read such essays promptly by return and to give you advice about your success in adapting to the specific needs of the exam essay genre, and you will be able thus to get into the run of rapidly mobilising your ideas and shaping up a productive argument via the pen in your hand. Even writing legibly and keeping control of grammar and spelling will improve with such practice, and if these mechanical features let you down on the day there is a risk that first impressions for the reader will not be buoyant.

21. At certain stages during revision you may find yourself feeling a bit jaded or depressed, by the impossible mountain of work still to be done and the demands of peak performance on the day, each day. Such stage-fright is quite natural, but take it in your stride. Anyone preparing for a crucial concert or play-production or track event knows that pacing yourself beforehand and keeping steady on course are learnable skills. The many crises you have already endured in writing weekly essays to a deadline will have given you survival instincts which you may not know that you possess, just as the many school exams in your past will come to your aid. Part II may be harder than Part I, but Part I will have prepared and practised you for Part II. In general, candidates for exams find them less painful on the day than they have imagined in advance; with a bit of reasonable luck it is quite possible to enjoy writing at least some of them.

22. When looking at question-papers, remind yourself of some very specific technical considerations. Each paper will commence with a general rubric or instruction to candidates, about how many questions to answer, chosen from which sections and whether under any selection choice; there may also be subsidiary rubrics governing specific sections of the paper. Study these instructions carefully, with a view to working out exactly what you must do, may do, may not do. Such rubrics will not stay the same year by year, and so

in the exam room itself you will need to study the rubrics for each paper that you take, and be sure that you grasp completely what they mean for you. Then follows a traditional reconnaissance: read through every question carefully, bearing in mind how much freedom to adapt the terms may be offered by some but not all of them, to work out which questions you would be able to answer and which you will finally select. Remember that of course you are not obliged to attempt your questions in the order that they are presented in the paper, and that it is usually essential to ration your time equally between the answers that you write; a scrappy final answer earns no remission.

23. Some definitions need to be mentioned here, as a reminder. In the context of the Part I exams, 'English Literature' is by convention understood to mean British Literature written in one of the languages of Britain: e.g., insular Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Renaissance Latin (and other British languages or dialects in the context of certain specialist papers). In the context of the Part II exams, 'English Literature' is by convention understood to mean, more widely, literature written in English, thus including American and Caribbean and Commonwealth English (India, Australia, South Africa, etc.); and including for comparative purposes (even more widely) literature in foreign languages which by genre or subject-matter falls within the scope of the range of the Part II course in its widest and most inclusive aspect. More particularly in relation to Part I, works written by English authors in Latin or other tongues (Bacon, Beckett), as also works translated out of a foreign language (Pope's Homer), are all considered as part of their *oeuvre*. By elastic convention, works written in English by authors of (Southern) Irish nationality (Yeats, Synge) are regarded as part of English literature; and certain specific authors who were not English by birth, e.g. Conrad, James, Pound, Wyndham Lewis, T.S. Eliot, are also regarded as part of English literature; although for the purposes of the Part II optional American Literature Paper James, Eliot and Pound are more aptly regarded as Americans. In both Part I and Part II 'English Literature' is also understood to include as a topic of study the English language itself. Your supervisors will guide you across this intricate minefield, as and when needful.

24. Some further conventions relating to Part I concern the period boundaries of the historical papers, and prevent certain authors from being sliced up by arbitrary division. The works of authors whose dates of production and publication fall across a boundary between one paper and another (or between separate sections within a paper) may by convention be treated as one whole within either paper or section, though more probably within the paper (section) which contains most of this work and which more fully defines its milieu. This convention also applies to portfolio essays and to dissertations; in the latter case, a candidate proposing a dissertation concerned with an author or topic falling across a period boundary, or making a comparison between an author from one period and an author from another different one, may choose the paper for which the dissertation is to be substituted according to the location of the dissertation's main emphasis. In all these complexities your supervisors or your director of studies will guide you as may be required.

25. Returning to actual exams, be sure in each case to answer the question.

This may not be as simple a matter as it looks. As already mentioned, some questions will give you licence to nominate the texts or authors which are to be for you their subject-matter, sometimes under constraint of date or period. Some initial questions presenting passages for comment may divide into sub-questions, from which a specified further selection has to be made. Some questions will divide into successive stages: first do this, then do that. Be careful not to get into a muddle about any of this. Remember also that, in any paper which you confront, your choice of questions may be constrained by the rule not to write more than once about the same author or topic anywhere within the examination as a whole, except for passing mention or comparison; this restriction also refers to material presented in a portfolio or dissertation.

26. The terms of some questions will be quite general and permissive, but others will employ specific vocabulary which is part of what is being asked. Sometimes a special term will be used in its current, modern sense; sometimes in a sense distinctive to the author named or to the historical period of the exam paper; sometimes there may be a nuance of sense shifting between the historical and the modern usage, and indeed this shift may be the implied crux of the matter. There is seldom merit in heavy-handedly plodding forward with formal definitions upfront; sometimes a neater tactic is to work in your working definition as you enter the question and set out the spread of your discussion. But if an examiner thinks that you have evaded a challenge by sliding past a difficulty, then you may forfeit some marks. It is certainly prudent to inspect the exact terms of the question again during the course of writing your answer, and yet again as you rally up your thoughts towards a conclusion.

27. Regarding the order in which you attempt the questions, there is sometimes advantage in doing first a question most strongly freighted with delivering information: commenting on text passages, making translations, and the like; then you will feel freer, to pursue the development of ideas. Sometimes the completion of a fully prepared and worked out essay first of all will give confidence for a more risky later project, in which you have to improvise some connections or face an unexpectedly tricky manoeuvre; and remember that such a final question can sometimes hit a brilliant note precisely because you are headed into partially unfamiliar territory.

28. There will be many instances within questions papers, though rather more frequently in those set for Part II, in which questions will be set requiring more than just delivery of prepared thoughts and arguments. You will be challenged to make comparisons between authors, estimate lines of historical connection, assess the relevance of strongly partisan critical opinions, analyse distinctive features of style or use of genre or conventions of performance, as gauged alongside powers of poetic imagination and human insight, ethical judgements and personal feeling and conflict, original developments in uses of language within the contexts of historical perception and social practice as these shift and change. Some of this, depending on how you choose your questions, you will have in some part to work out right there on the spot. No one said this was an easy course. The translation exercises will be from anywhere at all within a set text, or will be entirely unseen; and in the case of practical criticism you may be challenged not only

to work out critical comparisons, across periods or genres or both, but also to respond to specific questions introducing the unseen passages for analysis that are by no means merely neutral or permissive.

29. In this way, writing exam scripts requires alertness to organise thoughts in sometimes unexpected ways, to reframe your prepared knowledge by adroitly improvised argument and definition. Examiners will not cheat with trick questions, but neither will they invite you to tip out the contents of your revision folder on to the desk before them. Do not therefore pre-cast your revision work into solid blocks; preserve a modular approach, so that one element can as required be joined into the discussion of another, or turned back-to-front to make an unforeseen connection. In the same spirit, do not go into an exam too much narcotised and weighed down by sledges of information; you will need at crucial points to move fast, think sideways and spend a few dangerous moments on very thin ice. In particular, answers need a strong and decided turn at the finish, to hold distinctly to the terms of the initial question, and stamina is needed not to miss this clinching moment, in the rush forward to the next task.

30. The quality of your actual writing counts for a lot. Passively delivering a prepared question may come across as lifeless and unengaged. Long statements of the obvious, extended plot summaries, lists of compositions and dates, pompous introductions and simpering eulogies can all advise your reader that a boring, stolid script lies on the desk; likewise, one full of airy generalities, fanciful descriptions and weak chronology may present as chronically under-prepared work. Sometimes a candidate will fall into writing defensively almost without knowing it, out of fatigue or inattention; ginger yourself out of this, by listening out for a pretentious drone coming into your sentences, or bureaucratic mannerisms and empty clausal fabrications. You may be for a moment or two stupefied, but do not present yourself as stupid. Keep your wits about you, imagination fully tuned. Get quickly to the nub of a problem, and bite at it and find its sharp places. Remember your critical mission, to bring questions to judgement through analysis and discrimination; compiling an inventory of aspects that might go into an answer is frequently just avoiding the difficulty of a question. There is no merit in mere screeds.

31. Remember also not to make foolish errors. This advice will look quite odd in the cool light of day, but in the dark smoky fires of the exam room it can become lost to sight. Spell names correctly. Put the right accents on foreign words. Do not quote passages with outrageous and fatuous inaccuracy. Try not to write down statements which a moment's reflection would shew to be untenable in that form, or which could easily be falsified by counter-examples. Try not too often to hit on the wrong word, trusting that an examiner will see what you mean: what you mean is what you say. Stay legible. Exercise a few sceptical moments to pause now and then, to take stock of the torrents of brilliance flooding from your pen. Do not even begin to write until you have sized up your task and worked out some tactics for approach and a likely destination for the argument. It is important to improvise with bravura, sometimes, but also to retain control. Do not merely abandon the idea of aiming for some element of polish in how you present your answers, or you will let yourself down. But equally, do not let a sardonic

or over-manipulative tone creep into your work, because genuine good energy and freshness can give qualities of relish and lively acumen to a script, and lift it up.

32. The advantages of quotation within exam essays are not easy to determine. There is little merit in strewing a litter of passages through every essay that you write; your mind will be horribly cluttered with endless memorised quotations, and your answers may be skewed by a desire not to omit a choice morsel. But a few telling phrases from your text, or allusions to specific features of its language, can illustrate and clinch a point and will prevent your discussion from floating away into generalities. It is thus expedient during your revision to select certain key moments from the texts you plan to discuss, and to commit a few lines to memory in each case. Remember that the briefest touch will suffice, since your reader will know the context and will take the point; economy and accuracy count for more than copiousness. The use of quotation from critical or secondary material is more doubtful, since it will more interest an examiner to follow your own opinions and arguments than to be reminded of those already recorded by pundits. Sometimes a telling phrase which sets up a critical perspective or historical judgement may be brought in as a point of reference; but keep the context in your answer flexible and on the move.

33. The advantages of brevity and concision, in writing exam essays, may look self-evident; but reliably attaining the felicity of compact form is not a straightforward skill. In most exam papers you have just under one hour for each of three questions, leaving a little time at the start to scan over the paper and a few moments to plan each answer in your mind before you start into it. In real life you might, at the culmination of preparing for an essay over the span of a week's work, spend three or four hours writing out your essay, thinking and testing ideas as you go and reading back into your texts to trace a connection or test an argument. There is a family resemblance between these two kinds of essay, but very significant differences, some of them not obvious.

34. To some extent the exam essay is a miniaturised redaction of its real-life counterpart; but however compacted, the exam essay must have the full bones of an argument, articulated by outset from and return to the terms of the question put, and with links and hinges to perform a development. It is expected that the demonstration of the argument, the flesh on these bones, may be drastically curtailed: one single point may have to stand proxy for the range of such points that would, outside, more fully meet the case and support it. Sentences are typically shorter, as also and even more so, paragraphs. Quoted illustration, background evidence, comparative and parallel case-work, devices for affirming discretion, modesty, or balance of alternative views, can all be cut back from customary deployment, to get the essay quickly into full stride. Neither introductions nor summing-up reviews in conclusion are called for or affordable. But the backbone and basic segmental links are vital, and indeed may come into their own when the fleshy matter is stripped away. Brevity is not just shortness: it is concision.

35. Writing in compacted form requires control, and assurance. It is necessary not to adopt an apologetic tone, even implicitly, for writing with

brevity; while at the same time avoiding a compensating temptation to be gleeful or to show off. If you can hit a steady pitch of writing with clarity and firmness based in confidence that, if you had longer, the bare bones of this answer would enlarge out to a fully structured and argued essay, then you can turn advantage out of compression and snatch up the special merits of flair. Make the words you use work cogently for you; a precise and implicating vocabulary will save you mere elaboration and flurry. There is absolutely no need to be slick and bandy mere terms or fashionable postures; but under pressure to go fast there can be moments of adeptly judged summary overview, or of counter-turn in the central motion of your argument, that can lend touches of instant and unforeseen brilliance to what gets written down.

36. In the heat of the moment, then, if you have good preparation and control, you will condense a whole argument into its more or less bare outline, ride it out with a modest snap and, having clinched your point, swivel upon it for rapid further advance. References to text, to the evidence of period or contrast with other writers and works, can be touched in by parenthesis, or by a choice of wording that implies a context of knowledge on which it draws. Different individuals will do this differently, and there are different kinds of answer apt for matching to different kinds of question, to enable your answers within a paper to present some variety of approach even within the pressures of reduction. But concision is paramount.

37. Writing exam answers intensively over a short period can seem like an oppressive ordeal; the extra stress can be irksome, as also the sense of submitting to unrelenting interrogation. But these very features can also be turned to account. If you remain fully connected up to your underlying commitment to the power and wit of a literary culture, to the exhilarating superiority of the best over the mediocre and also-ran, your essays sentence by sentence will communicate energy and an individual note even within the spate of dutiful scribalism challenging an examiner's powers of endurance. It is sometimes dangerous to attempt an exercise of constructive thought right there in the exam room, since there is such pressure to write fast and without too many pauses for reflection. But after full and steady preparation a moment of danger can sometimes elicit a brilliant responsiveness, in complete grasp of the challenge to write concisely without smartness, making claims that you clearly cannot immediately substantiate but which carry the conviction of one who is equipped to give the demonstration and geared up to do so. These are the scripts which an examiner will remember, and reward.

J.H. Prynne
Director of Studies in English

Gonville and Caius College,
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