

Senior Oral Exam Topics List, with Sample Questions **Modern Europe Field, example 2 (France and Russia)**

Topic I. Travelogues, Tourism, and Exile in the 18th-19th Centuries: The Russians in France and the French in Russia

Denis Diderot, *Memoires pour Catherine II* (1774/1785/1830)

Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova, *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova* (1840/1859)

Astolphe de Custine, *Lettres de Russie* (1843)

Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts* ["Paris-Italy-Paris," 1847-1852] (1852-1870)

Germaine de Staël, *Des anneés d'exil* ["Introduction" and Part Two, "1810-1812"] (1821)

Alfred de Vigny, "Wanda. Histoire russe. Conversation au bal" (1847)

Martin Miller, "The World of Emigration in Nineteenth-Century Europe." In *The Russian Revolutionary Emigres* (1986)

Sara Dickinson, *Breaking Ground: Travel and National Culture in Russia from Peter I to the Era of Pushkin* (2006)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. The title of this topic suggests that tourism and exile may be the two dominant topics of French-Russian travelogues in this period. If this is the case, why might that be? If not, what other issues (or reasons for traveling) were important in this period? Use at least two primary sources and one secondary source to make your case.
2. What stylistic similarities and differences do you observe in the two memoirs? What roles might their different literary traditions, or the different gender role conventions that it is possible for us to assign the authors, play in the comparison of these two texts?
3. These primary texts critique Russia's political organization. Do you think the genre of the travelogue invites political reflection and comparison, or is there something special going on between Russia and France in the 18th-19th centuries?
4. Dickinson makes the argument that travelling in Russia helped Russians develop a "national culture" in their literature, but Diderot, De Stael, and Custine are French. Is her argument capable of being applied to their works, and if so, how?

Transitional question: Did educated Russians and French have a shared understanding of what was "civilized" and does this emerge in the literary culture? Can you give some examples?

Topic II. The Oriental Muse: The Empire and Myths of the Exotic in France and Russia

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Les lettres persanes* (1725)

Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of our Time* (1840)

Guy de Maupassant, *Bel-Ami* (1885)

Isabelle Eberhardt, *The Nomad: The Diaries of Isabelle Eberhardt, 1877-1904* (2001)

Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978)

Dorinda Outram, “Europe’s Mirror? The Enlightenment and the Exotic” and “Enlightenment Thinking about Gender.” In *The Enlightenment* (1995)

Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and the Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (1995)

Madeleine Dobbie, *Foreign Bodies: Gender, Language, and Culture in French Orientalism* (2001)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Is the “muse” of your topic’s title always female? What contemporary trends in the literary representation of gender relations may be informing the exoticism in these texts?
2. What tropes of orientalism in Said and Dobie’s texts do you find in Eberhardt’s diaries? Is it possible to read Eberhardt in ways that exceed an orientalist framework?
3. Do you think these works consider the “Orient” itself as a muse, or oriental women? And what exactly is “the Orient” in these works?
4. Is it fair to accuse Isabelle Eberhardt of Edward Said's type of “orientalism” given that she lived in Algeria and fought colonialists? If so, why?

Topic III. The Apollonian and the Dionysian in Fin-de-siècle France and Russia

Poets of *The Stray Dog Cabaret*:

Velimir Khlebnikov, “Incantation by Laughter” (1909)

Alexander Blok, “To Anna Akhmatova” [“They’ll tell you beauty’s a terrifying thing...”]
(December 16, 1913)

Anna Akhmatova, “To Alexander Blok” [“I had gone to see the poet...”] (January 1914)

Marcel Proust, *La Prisonnière* (1923)

Georgette Donchin, “The First Contacts” and “Themes in Symbolist Poetry.” In *The Influence of French Symbolism on Russian Poetry* (1958)

Christophe Charle, *Paris fin de siècle: culture et politique* (1998)

Richard Shead, *Ballets Russes* (1998)

Robert Leach, chapters on Stanislavsky’s production of Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard* (1904) and Meyerhold’s production of Blok’s *The Puppet Show* (1906). In *The Makers of Modern Theatre: An Introduction* (2004)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Tell us about the role of theater in fin-de-siècle France and Russia, and in Franco-Russian relations. How do Shead and Leach shed light on the *Stray Dog Cabaret* Poems and Proust’s *La Prisonnière*?
2. How might you put into conversation the terse lines of Blok and Akhmatova’s poetic dialogue on the one hand and Proust’s expansive sentences on the other? For example, how do both the poems and the novel attest to psychological compulsions, and how might the texts articulate their ideas about compulsion through form?
3. How do these creative works use formal innovations and disruptions to confront social and political problems in fin-de-siècle and pre-world-war 1 Russia?
4. To my mind, although scandalous, and self-identified as outsiders, each of these creators was actually an insider with access to wealth and power, so their authorial stance is disingenuous. Do you think I am being fair?

Topic IV. Traces of Trauma: The Memory of World War II in French and Russian Fiction

Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation of a Beheading* (1957)

Alan Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) [film, screenplay by Marguerite Duras]

Georges Perec, *La Disparition* (1969)

Gilbert Michlin, *Aucun intérêt du point de vue national: La grande illusion d'une famille juive e France: récit autobiographique* (2001)

Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (1991)

James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (1993)

Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, selections (2000)

Paul Crosthwaite, *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the aftermath of World War II* (2009)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Trauma is often described as “unsayable,” and literature that confronts trauma is said to find ways to “say the unsayable”; the “traces” in the title of this topic suggest that tracing is one way of doing this. Do you conceive of these texts as saying the unsayable, and can you elaborate on how these texts trace trauma post World War II?
2. How does the portrayal of romantic love in *Hiroshima mon amour* (and in other sources) inform this period’s conception of genocide? Are Duras and Resnais in effect paraphrasing Adorno by indicating that “to [make love] after Auschwitz is barbaric”?
3. Is the role of deliberate forgetting or vagueness and avoidance an inevitable consequence of trauma? In other words how is forgetting, erasing, or mis-remembering a key aspect of these texts and how does it relate to trauma?
4. Do you think Rousso's argument that the French are obsessed with re-remembering and agonizing Vichy is true? Do your other texts support this reading?

Topic V. “Le Cheval de Troie”: Heteroglossia, the Social, and the Political in Minor Literature

Monique Wittig, “Le cheval de Troie” and *Les Guérillères* (1969)

Assia Djébar, *L’amour, la fantasia* (1985)

Michel Houellebecq, *Les particules élémentaires* (1998)

Helene Cixous, *Tambours sur la Digue* (1999)

Marie NDiaye, *Papa Doit Manger* (2003)

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984)

Guattari and Deleuze, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986)

Pierre Bourdieu, “The Habitus and the Space of Lifestyles.” In *Distinction* (1979). “Site Effects” and “An Impossible Mission.” In *The Weight of the World* (1993)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Guide us through the problematic of minor literature as you envision it through Bakhtin, Bourdieu, and Deleuze and Guattari. Which primary source best exemplifies this vision of minor literature? Do any of them (or perhaps another source on your list or bibliography) offer an interesting critique of it?
2. Djébar and Houellebecq’s texts make a striking juxtaposition here. What literary techniques do they each use to reconceptualize history? Is it possible to reconcile the worldviews these two novels offer?
3. Can you talk me through the logic of your topic a little? How do you see the connection between heteroglossia and minor literature in your texts?
4. How do these texts illustrate Deleuze and Guattari’s contention that “literature is the people’s concern”? Which people do these texts represent?

General and transitional questions:

1. Both your program statement and your thesis allude to the significance of cosmopolitanism in and for literature. Could you explain how you conceptualize cosmopolitanism? What are some exemplary cosmopolitan texts, or cosmopolitan readings of texts?
2. In your view, what European nation-state has made the most important interventions in the relationship between France and Russia? Which sources persuade you of this view?
3. Many of the literary texts here are written by someone uprooted from their homeland, an outcast within it, or reflecting on it from afar. Why do you think this position produces such powerful literature? Do your theoretical sources offer any insights?