

College of Letters
Wesleyan University

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2013

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Over three days you will have the chance to think and write about the texts you have read dealing with ancient, medieval, and twentieth-century culture. We encourage you to use examples that range across the various periods you have studied. Each of your answers should make general claims supported by specific evidence and have an overall, coherent argument. In some cases, where the texts obviously require or allow it, your essays may be based around exegesis and interpretation; in other cases we expect analysis and criticism. At least some of your essays must consider whether an idea or view contained in the texts *is plausible*. Feel free to consult the primary texts as you write up your responses.

Please refer to the guidelines for deadline and formatting instructions. Be sure to include your name and the exam day, and to number your pages. Do your best to observe specified page limitations.

Examination Day One:

Part 1. Comment on *two* of the following passages in detail. Limit yourself to 1800 words total (about six double-spaced pages).

- (1) Homer, *Iliad* 24, lines 468-551
- (2) Virgil, *Aeneid* 4, lines 331-381
- (3) Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: “The fact is that today neither men nor women are satisfied with each other. But the question is to know whether there is an original curse that condemns them to rend each other or whether the conflicts in which they are opposed merely mark a transitional moment in human history” (716)
- (4) Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book 2, Chapters 1-2.

Part 2. Choose one of the following themes and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length. We encourage you to make use of several different texts, and where appropriate to consider dialogue and disagreements between authors and between different historical periods and cultures. As a rule of thumb, do not feel compelled to incorporate discussions of more than *three* texts, although you may do so if you feel that it suits the structure of your essay. We are more interested in ideas, reactions, and arguments, than in summaries of the material. Try not to repeat what you have written about in Part 1.

- (a) *Tragedy*. “A tragic situation exists precisely when virtue does *not* triumph, but when it is still felt that man is nobler than the forces which destroy him” (George Orwell). We might also say that the tragic view supposes that this is a cruel and unjust world, and that bad things often happen to good people, *with no recompense*. Several of your texts espouse this tragic view in some form, others argue directly against it, others implicitly reject it. Using a range of texts discuss the basic outlines, and the plausibility, of the tragic view and its alternative(s). You may wish to consider the ethical implications of these competing views of life.
- (b) *Revelation and Inspiration*. Saint Paul lays claim to a special form of inspiration, and hence authority. Socrates claims a divine voice, and goes into trances. Dionysian madness and poetic inspiration are also (traditionally) forms of revelation. Aquinas seems to treat Aristotle as (in effect) inspired. Is there a coherent concept of revelation and (divine) inspiration that emerges from these texts? Or interesting disagreements about its nature? Can inspiration support claims to authority? Using a range of texts discuss the concept of revelation, and whichever of these issues and problems interest you (or others of your own devising).
- (c) *Love and Desire*. “It is a good thing to lie with a woman in love” (Homer). “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (Augustine). There seems to be a disagreement here. For some, Eros is the greatest of the gods, for others, he is a kind of inner demon. Who from among your various authors (across all periods) offers what you consider the most plausible account of romantic love (and/or sexual desire); of its place in human life and its relation to our other interests and goals?
- (d) *Relationship*: Compare and contrast Sartre’s *No Exit*, Lorca’s *Blood Wedding* and one other text of your choice. What constitutes relationship in these texts? What leads to confidence in its possibility? How does it fail?

Examination Day Two:

Part 1. Comment on *two* of the following passages in detail. Limit yourself to 1800 words total (about six double-spaced pages).

- (1) Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 2, chapters 37-40 (contained within Woodruff 40-43).
- (2) Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 444-496
- (3) Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 95, Article 1
- (4) Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*: “If Irma’s pains had an organic basis, once again I could not be held responsible for curing them; my treatment only set out to get rid of hysterical pains. It occurred to me, in fact, that I was actually wishing that there had been a wrong diagnosis; for, if so, the blame for my lack of success would also have been got rid of.” (108)

Part 2. Choose one of the following themes and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length. Assume the same guidelines as for yesterday’s Part 2. Also, try not to repeat what you have written in any previous part of the examination.

- (a) *Silence*. “The silence of snow, though the man sitting just behind the bus driver. If this were the beginning of a poem, he would have called the thing he felt inside him the silence of snow.” To what degree is silence pivotal in the description of the modern condition? How so? Please answer this question through the relevant texts by Primo Levi, Marjane Satrapi and Orhan Pamuk.
- (b) *Wickedness*. ‘There is none righteous, not even one.’ Your texts contain many portraits of human crime, wickedness, sin, moral failure. At one extreme Paul suggests that we *all* fall short ethically. But Aristotle (in NE 1 and 2) suggests that moral virtue is the key to happiness, and that it, and happiness, are fully attainable without assistance from outside our humanity. Using at least these two authors, and one other, consider whether moral failure (more than moral success) is somehow part of our condition, and some of the broader implications of this view of human beings.
- (c) *Duty, Obligation & Law*. Using a range of texts discuss the relation between our moral obligations and our private moral sense on the one hand, and the laws and rulings of the state (or of religion) on the other. You may wish to consider texts chosen from among Plato’s *Crito* and/or *Euthyphro*, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, *Exodus* 20, *Gospel of John* 8.1-11, Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.2. Consider the potential problems in the relation between the two — public law and individual moral sense — and their possible resolution(s).
- (d) *Death*. Is death a bad thing? Socrates (in *Apology*) says it might be the best thing that can happen to a man for all we know. Aristotle (*NE* 3.6), agreeing with Homer (consider *Odyssey* XI, 473-92) says that it is the worst and most frightening thing of all. Many of your authors believe in immortality, which perhaps overcomes the fear of death (but perhaps not, since in a sense it amounts to *denying* death). Sartre’s *No Exit* makes a hell out of an endless existence. Using a range of texts, consider who offers the most plausible account of the nature and significance of death. (Do not answer this question if you wrote on *Tragedy* on day 1, or if you write on passage (4) on day 3.)

Examination Day Three:

Part 1. Comment on *two* of the following passages in detail. Limit yourself to 1800 words total (about six double-spaced pages).

- (1) Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*: “So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers,”(125-126).
- (2) Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*: “Thus the life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its division. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it” (65)

- (3) Rumi, “The Guest House”, “Love Dogs”, “Dance When You’re Broken Open” (*The Essential Rumi*, p. 109, 155, 281).
- (4) Plato, *Apology*, 40c4-41c7.

Part 2. Choose one of the following themes and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length. Assume the same guidelines as for the previous Part 2’s. Once again, try not to repeat what you have written in any earlier part of the examination, but this time do not feel obliged to follow this rule to the point of disrupting or weakening your essay. The examiners will be more lenient on this point at this stage of the exam.

- (a) *Visual Record*. What counts as a visual record? Discuss the role of a visual record and explore the range of its uses in three examples of your choice.
- (b) *Power*. Some authors believe that the exercise of political power can be explained by some simple set of principles or rules. Others suggest that it is more complex — perhaps beyond any full explanation. What, if anything, fundamentally drives the choices and actions of the powerful? Is power always amoral, or is that too cynical a view? Make use of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, and Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* to address one, some, or all of these questions, as you please.
- (c) *Exile*. Several of your texts concern the experience of exile broadly conceived. Please discuss in detail three examples, paying particular attention both to the rhetorical rendering of exile and its historical context. Please use Mazower to contextualize your answer.
- (d) *Human Nature*. Do human beings have a nature? That is, do they have a determinate, (fairly) detailed nature, as opposed, say, to a mere capacity for acquiring *any* set of interests and *any* set of cultural practices? Use a range of texts to discuss this question. Try if possible to consider and compare texts that have radically different proposals.