

Wesleyan College of Letters
Junior Comprehensive Examination: Spring 2007

2007 Guidelines for Junior Comprehensive Examination:

1. The **written examination** will take place this year on **Tuesday, April 24, Wednesday April 25, and Thursday April 26**. The **oral examinations** will be held on **Monday May 14, Tuesday May 15, and Wednesday, May 16**. You are to pick up the question for each day in the **COL office at 9 a.m.** and to submit your written exam for each day at **9 a.m. of the following day** (e.g., Tuesday's examination paper will be submitted at 9 a.m. on Wednesday).
2. You may freely consult books and notes **before** you start to write your answer; but once you begin to write, further consultation of books and notes is forbidden. You will have 24 hours to work on this assignment but **three hours** to compose, write, and revise your answer. If there are two or more questions to be answered on a given day, you may take a break between the composition of each exam answer.
3. Read the questions carefully. Be sure you know what they ask before you begin to answer them, and make sure to identify (by day and number) the questions you are answering.
4. Please sign the honor pledge—**NO AID, NO VIOLATIONS**—on the front of each day's essays, and sign it.
5. Please do not discuss the exams among yourselves during the entire three-day period.
6. **Mechanics:**
 - a. Place page numbers, your surname, and the exam day on each page you write.
 - b. Use standard size white bond paper.
 - c. Do not make title pages.
 - d. Do not staple pages.

Day One

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General instructions:

The following questions invite you to display your understanding of the texts that you have read and your ability to make imaginative connections. Some of the questions ask you to address specific authors or reading lists; others leave the choice of texts up to you. Your essays will be judged on the breadth as well as depth of your understanding and the incisiveness with which you address and develop an issue.

You are asked to answer two questions for each day of the examination. Please make sure that your answers do not overlap to any significant extent.

DAY ONE
Tuesday, 24 April 2007

Tragedy, Death, History

1. Foucault's "What is an Author" sets aside the possibility of a "socio-historical analysis of the author as an individual." There are quite a few consequences to this setting aside, not the least of which is that the "author" is not necessarily in possession of his or her experience, conveyed in some directness through the language of the text. In some sense the author is more the "effect" of the text he or she writes. This problem of authorship comes up in several of the texts that you have read. In *Notes from Underground* there is a coy question about the relation of Dostoevsky to the nameless man who is his character. In Eliot's "Wasteland" the author appears to be a fragment "shored up against the ruins." In Kafka, there is a profound sense that the author, in order to write, must already be in some relationship with death, with "not being." It is perhaps the fate of the author in modern times to be in a particular relationship to the void. You may address this question by way of deploying this relationship, or, as a counter-argument, suggesting that this relationship that requires the author to be in some relationship to the void has been there from ancient times. Address in terms of three or four texts from any of your colloquia.

2. A celebrated ode in Sophocles' *Antigone* begins "Many wonders, many terrors,/But none more wonderful than the human race/Or more dangerous." A relatively literal word for word translation reads "many things are wonderful-terrible (*deina*), but none is more so than a human being." In developing this theme the ode goes on to sing of such things as humans' mastering the sea, plowing the land, controlling animals, speaking a language, living in cities, and arranging to anticipate the future – except for death. How, specifically, does Sophoclean theater dramatize and display the "wonderful-

terrible” character of the human? Is this tension/intimacy between wonder and terror specific to ancient tragedy, or does it appear in other epochs in similar or other guises? Draw from your readings in any of your three colloquia to address intersections of wonder and terror and the way in which such intersections define the “human.”

3. Many writers, ancient and modern, address the question of how justice might be understood in crises such as war, terror, and social disruption as experienced by individuals, states, and social groups (tribes, clans, families). In such times all organizations may seem to crumble, while philosophical and lived uncertainties arise in the absence of received and accepted institutions. Perhaps the founding of states always supposes such a crisis situation. You can address this question in a number of ways. You could think of how Herodotus and Arendt address the “other”—distinguished from “us” or the norm by culture, religion, or custom; you could think of how Beauvoir and Sartre address the possibility of freedom in an age of disruption; you could think of the analysis of conflict and ideology in Engels, Arendt, and Fanon; and you could ask how—in some of the writers from any or all of your colloquia—justice as a practice is addressed. This is a broad question so, while you are welcome to connect all of the above, make sure that you have a clear organization and argument.

4. In *The Work of Fire*, Blanchot describes Kafka’s narratives as “among the darkest in literature, the most rooted in disaster,” and, he adds, “they are also the ones that torture hope the most tragically, not because hope is condemned but because it does not succeed in being condemned.” This statement follows upon his reading of the ending of *Metamorphosis*, in which the sister’s “movement of awakening to life” is “the height of horror” because it signals that even death (the death of Gregor) does not put an end to existence. Camus’ *The Plague* cannot be said to be opposite *Metamorphosis* on its grim view of existence (indeed, it defines cognition as “a warmth of life and an image of death”), yet there seems to be an affirmation of hope that stems from the very small, day to day actions in the face of extremity. Between Kafka’s distrust of the very penchant toward hope and Camus’ nuanced affirmation of it can be situated a great number of important texts literary, philosophical, and political. Discuss, drawing upon readings from different colloquia.

5. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau argues that “when it is repressed, death returns in an exotic language (that of a past, of ancient religions or distant traditions)... Texts proliferate around this wound on reason. Once again, it supports itself on what cannot be mentioned. Death is the problem of the subject.” Many of the texts that you have read, literary and historical, organize themselves around a meditation on death—even when they exclude or appear to transcend it. Choose specific instances in texts from different colloquia that deploy this issue as the problem of the subject.

Day Two

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DAY TWO
Wednesday, 25 April 2007

Bodies, Motion, Speech

1. What could be more basic to human beings than eating and drinking? Yet these fundamental (animal?) activities have been variously developed, practiced, stylized, ritualized, and often associated with prohibitions and taboos. Anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss devote volumes to unearthing the deep structures of various cultures through analyzing practices, myths, and beliefs concerning “the raw and the cooked.” In *The Odyssey*, for example, meals can be occasions for great hospitality or for inhuman cannibalism (the Cyclops episode); in Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” the question of how Gregor is to eat is crucial. How do humans define themselves through their practices of eating and drinking? Discuss with reference to at least one work from each of the colloquium lists, and at least one or two from your other seminars. In each case be attentive to the role that the relevant acts, thoughts, and feelings associated with eating and drinking play with respect to the significance of the text you are discussing.

2. Speech can be “frightful,” as in *Oedipus Rex* both the Herdsman and Oedipus agree. Absence of it can be equally devastating, as the unfolding of *King Lear* tells us from Cordelia’s “I cannot heave my heart unto my mouth.” Often texts organize themselves around such moments of fateful speech or hearing. This question asks you to think of turning points in a narrative—dramatic or epic or historical—past which one could say that nothing could ever be the same again. You may think of the moment in which Francesca and Paolo stop reading the book on Lancelot and Guinevere; or the

moment in which rumor in *The Aeneid* starts a war. Organize an essay around such moments of speech or its absence from some of the texts that you have read.

3. According to Blaise Pascal, the plight of being human can be boiled down to our inability to sit quietly in a room. Does Virginia Woolf agree, since she makes a primary demand that the writer have a room of her own? That may depend on what we think constitutes action and whether writing can be construed as a form of meditation. Many texts seem to accept wandering, flight, nomadism, and colonization as ineluctable dimensions of human life; do they confirm Pascal's thought or do they offer an alternative construction of the human? What is it to be situated, to be in a place? Why must we travel and why are we restless? Where do we want to go and where do we actually go? Is wandering terminable or interminable? What is the point of the flight or journey? Discuss with reference to some of the following: Homer, Herodotus, Genesis, Exodus, Chaucer, Dante, Hemingway, Benjamin.

4. Aristotle says that only gods and animals live outside cities. From ancient to modern times, the city marks a boundary between the citizen and the foreigner, the human and the inhuman, and in that respect the construction of a building, a tower for instance, may constitute a claim to a space and a name (Derrida in "Des Tours de Babel" gives Chouraqui's translation as—"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower...Let us make ourselves a name, that we not be scattered over the face of all the earth"). Yet it may be that a city becomes precisely the space of isolation and exile it is at first designed to defend against, and that the four walls marking the boundary of a room—as in Kafka or Dostoevsky—highlight the problem of that boundary. Drawing upon some of the texts that you have read, outline what problems are at stake in the delineation/articulation of spaces large or small.

5. Christian theology at its (Pauline) extreme severs flesh from spirit. Perhaps that schism is an anomaly, or perhaps a logical development. Consider the relations of body and spirit in some of the texts that you have read. In Book XI of *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus tries to embrace his mother, she is to him "impalpable, and wavering like a dream." At the end of Book V, Creusa appears to Aeneas as a creature whose past is immaterial to his future, a ghost rendered such in the very act of her speech. In Dante's *Inferno*, souls *are* bodies, so open to sensation that the very structure of divine punishment is built on the body's ability to feel the pain of the flesh, though no flesh be there. And this relationship of body and its absence—simultaneously—is activated in Abelard's castration. His bodily passion seems to have been banked by his missing body part, but the problem of eros is not resolved (hence the lengthy correspondence) by the severing of flesh from spirit. This question asks you to think of the separation of flesh and spirit (regardless of which of the two the separation privileges) as a kind of transformation, as a "metamorphosis" that occurs when one form (body) turns into another.

Day Three

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**DAY THREE
Thursday, 26 April 2007**

Making, Unmaking

1. In Plato's *Ion* Socrates says that the poet and the rhapsode are inspired by the gods. In part this seems to be a negative claim: since poets do not know what they are talking about any more than the rest of humanity (and sometimes less so), their work must come from elsewhere than their articulable knowledge and intentions. The claim has also been read as an affirmation that poetry (and perhaps all the arts?) draw on powerful forces beyond the reach of individual consciousness. Freud could be said to naturalize Plato's claim in his view of artists as expressing psychic conflicts typically beyond their ken. Yet the poet, as the Greek word suggests, is also a maker, and Plato's student, Aristotle, seems to have thought that the principles of poetic making can be explained and learned. Discuss the issues here with reference to the figure and practice of the poet or artist in the following colloquium texts and in others you find relevant: *Odyssey*, Kafka "The Hunger Artist," Virginia Woolf, Foucault "What is an Author?"

2. W.B. Yeats mourns his coming late upon the scene when he says "I am looking for the face I had / Before the world was made." This not being a witness to one's own engendering seems to hit a chord with Telemachus when he asks (Bk. I of *The Odyssey*) "who has known his own engendering," and with St. Paul when he suggests that in the end he will come "face to face" and "know as he is known." Some forms of philosophy and religion promise this transparency and totality; literature refutes it so powerfully that there may not be enough room in the universe for God or truth and writer. Agree or disagree with this premise, organizing your essay so that you draw upon readings from your three colloquia.

3. Great works are marked by certain tensions and contradictions. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for instance, outlines a journey towards God, but it is also a journey toward the moment of its writing—the moment in Canto XXX of *Purgatorio* when Dante can quote (absorb) Virgil (“I recognize the tokens of the ancient flame”), mark him for the dark, and name himself. At times the tension between Dante and his precursor take the shape of a rift (sutured, but not invisibly) between the theological and the poetic, the Christian and the pagan; at times the tension is more writerly. Either way, it is one of the forces driving the text to its own generation. What tensions in some of the texts that you have read might be said to be constitutive of the text, even if (perhaps especially if) they remain active and insoluble?

4. How to end a text is perhaps as difficult as how to begin it, for authors as well as characters. Virgil was not satisfied with the ending to *The Aeneid*, and Dostoevsky's nameless man from *Underground*, we are told in the text, cannot bring his *Notes* to an end. Among the texts that you have read, are there endings that surprise you because they signal more than bringing something to a close? What does “closing” mean and how is it enacted? You might consider Aristotle's definition of tragedy as a whole, and his definition of a whole as that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Is his definition of a literary work sustainable in the texts that you have read? How do texts close, and absent proper closure, what burdens does a fragment impose upon the reader? Upon his/her understanding of literary history?

5. According to Panofsky “Like the High Scholastic *Summa*, the High Gothic cathedral aimed, first of all at ‘totality’ and therefore tended to approximate, by synthesis as well as elimination, one perfect and final solution.” Aquinas and Dante are typically thought of as producing such definitive *summas*. How do Aquinas, Dante, and the High Gothic architects construct such *summas* in the varying genres of philosophy, poetry, and architecture? In constructing a “totality” the builder is confronted with various resistant materials, ranging from the accidents of bodily experience for the philosopher to the materiality of stone and other elements in architecture. Does a *summa* ever succeed in mastering these elements? What strategies does it employ in its attempts? How would apparently anti-systematic writers and thinkers like Eliot, Benjamin, and Foucault respond to the project of the *summa*?