

National Taiwan University
Graduate Institute of Foreign Languages and Literatures
2018 Ph.D. Program Admissions Examination
Subject: Literary Theory and Criticism

Read the following passages from critical texts. In passage A, Walter Benjamin asserts that *Hamlet* follows the dictates of the *Trauerspiel* (German mourning play of the Baroque period) and cannot be read as a classical tragedy. Passages B, C and D are statements expressing various theoretical points that may or may not be useful in the reading of *Hamlet* or of other literary texts. Please choose one (or more) out of the last three passages (B, C, and D) and use it (or them) as a basis to write an essay (1) to discuss, extend, explicate, critique, or otherwise comment on the issues raised in passage A, and (2) to present (in the concluding part of the essay) what you think of Benjamin's critical position and of its general significance for literary theory today. Note that the point of this essay question is to develop theoretical possibilities in a concrete critical context. You may refer to additional facts or views that you know, but the focus should be on showing how you read, develop, and connect the passages in a meaningful way, possibly leading up to your concluding remarks.

A. For, with reference to the death of Hamlet, what is the point of attributing to Shakespeare a final “residue of naturalism and the imitation of nature, which causes the tragic poet to forget that it is not his job to provide a physiological reason for death”? What is the point of arguing that in *Hamlet* death has “absolutely no connection with the conflict. Hamlet, who is inwardly destroyed because he could find no other solution to the problem of existence than the negation of life, is killed by a poisoned rapier! That is, by a completely external accident . . . Strictly speaking this naive death-scene completely destroys the tragedy of the drama.” This is what is produced by a criticism which, in the arrogance of its philosophical knowledgeability, spares itself any profound study of the works of a genius. . . . [Hamlet] wants to die by some accident, and as the fateful stage-properties gather around him, as around their lord and master, the drama of fate flares up in the conclusion of this *Trauerspiel*, as something that is contained, but of course overcome, in it. Whereas tragedy ends with a decision – however uncertain this may be – there resides in the essence of the *Trauerspiel*, and especially in the death-scene, an appeal of the kind which martyrs utter. (Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*)

B. What is important for Kuki is the “now and here” – the “this present”-ness characterised by a severance in the flow of time. This present is not something, as Heidegger assumes, that is authenticated by a forerunning future while it itself can only be grasped as corruption (*Verfallen*). Neither is it merely a single limit of the past as Bergson assumed. For Bergson, the past is what guarantees the continuity of time's flow and is the only thing that is real. On the contrary, Kuki is interested in the present as something that is on the one hand an instant in a flow but on the other a reality in itself – a point where being comes into contact with nothingness. As he writes, “The temporality of possibility is the future; the temporality of necessity is the past. In contrast, the

temporality of contingency is the *present*, symbolised as ‘now.’” (Tatsuya Higaki, “Deleuze and Kuki”)

C. In this sense, the concept Nature isn’t only untrue; it’s responsible for global warming. Nature is defined within agrilogistics as a harmonious periodic cycling. Conveniently for agrilogistics, Nature arose at the start of the geological period we call the Holocene, a period marked by stable Earth system fluctuations. One might argue that Nature is an illusion created by an accidental collaboration between the Holocene and agrilogistics: unconscious, and therefore liable to be repeated and prolonged like a zombie stumbling forward. Like Oedipus meeting his father at the crossroads, the cross between the Holocene and agrilogistics has been fatally unconscious. (Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology*)

D. . . . the allegorical relies on the literal, just as the literal can be fleshed out or made more alluring by the allegorical. In other words, you need all those creatures, you need all the gory details of their metamorphoses, you need those tortured descriptions of a character’s inner state as they confront something utterly alien – the allegorical level doesn’t erase them; in fact, it brings them out even more. In a way, this runs counter to much literary criticism, enamored as it is of the higher levels of abstract, symbolic meaning, which quickly depart from the literal and rise up to those interpretive heights. But horror is “low.” It is flesh and fluids, mud and material formlessness, inhuman matter of life reduced to primordial physics and cosmic dust. It is the literalness of horror that makes it horror; it is not “as if” an unnameable, tentacular, other-dimensional entity were feasting on your soul – it really is. (Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night*)