SAMPLE EXAMINATION III

SECTION II

Total time–2 hours

Question 1
(Suggested time: 40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

Read the following poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti carefully. Then, in a well-crafted essay, discuss how the speaker in the poem uses literary elements and techniques to convey a point about the craft of writing poetry.

[Constantly Risking Absurdity]

    Constantly risking absurdity
                and death
      whenever he performs
           above the heads
5   of his audience
      the poet like an acrobat
          climbs on rime
            to a high wire of his own making
    and balancing on eyebeams
10   above a sea of faces
        paces his way
           to the other side of day
      performing entrechats[1]
          and sleight-of-foot tricks
15   and other high theatrics
          and all without mistaking
      any thing
        for what it may not be

      For he's the super realist
20   who must perforce perceive
       taut truth
        before the taking of each stance or step
     in his supposed advance
        toward that still higher perch
25   where Beauty stands and waits
        with gravity
          to start her death defying leap
    And he
      a little charleychaplin[2] man
30   who may or may not catch
     her fair eternal form
        spread-eagled in the empty air
    of existence.

—Lawrence Ferlinghetti

[1] In ballet, a jump in which the dancer crosses his feet a number of times while in the air.
[2] Silent film era star whose role as a hapless tramp endeared him to American audiences.

SAMPLE EXAMINATION III: PRÉCIS AND EXPLICATIONS
OF FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

SECTION II

**Précis and Explication of Free-Response Question 1:
Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "[Constantly Risking Absurdity]"**

Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "[Constantly Risking Absurdity]" compares the process of writing poetry to the high-wire act of an acrobat, through its content and style. The poem's visual presentation on the page attempts to capture the delicate balance that an acrobat must maintain while teetering on a slender wire, high above the heads of an audience below, suggesting that the act of writing poetry is fraught with risks as the poet seeks to cross the wide gulf between mundaneness and beauty.

The first line of the poem, which also serves as its title, introduces the idea of risk which the speaker sees as common to both acrobat and poet. That each artist risks "absurdity / and death / whenever he performs / above the heads / of his audience" (lines 1–5) suggests that while the former literally puts his life on the line when he walks out on the tenuous wire, his poetic counterpart figuratively does the same when he attempts anything cerebral that is "above the heads" of his audience. Unlike the ladder that the acrobat climbs to reach the lofty perch of his departure, the poet "climbs on rime / to a high wire of his own making / and balancing on eyebeams / above a sea of faces / paces his way" (lines 7–11) to the other side, employing a variety of literary 'tricks' while gradually moving his poem toward whatever truth he is endeavoring to convey. Whereas the eyes of the adoring crowd are affixed on the acrobat, the eyes of the poet's audience are drawn to the page, Ferlinghetti employing a clever pun—"eyebeams" for "I-beams," the precarious girders which construction workers daily navigate. His "entrechats / and sleight-of-foot tricks" (lines 13–14) are the metrics of the poem, the variations in rhythm, line length, and line positioning that his poem cleverly mimics. Just as the acrobat cannot make a misstep along the slender wire, so the poet must perform these "high theatrics" (line 15) "all without mistaking / any thing / for what it may not be" (lines 16–18). The speaker labels the poet "the super realist / who must perforce perceive / taut truth / before the taking of each stance or step…" (lines 19–22) along his path towards the elusive goal of creating something beautiful. Beauty in the poem is personified as a female performer, one who "stands and waits / with gravity / to start her death defying leap" (lines 25–27). Here Ferlinghetti again uses a double-entendre in the word "gravity," which is both the force which draws all airborne bodies downwards and the poet's seriousness of purpose. In the concluding lines the acrobat/poet is ultimately depicted as "a little charley-chaplin man / who may or may not catch / her fair eternal form / spread-eagled in the empty air / of existence" (lines 29–33). The allusion to Chaplin, the mustached silent film-era comedian whose hapless tramp character endeared him to audiences worldwide, suggests a similar potential for failure in the poet, whose attempts to capture beauty may well fall tragically short.

The style of Ferlinghetti's poem is reminiscent of the work of e.e. cummings though its language is less arcane and its theme generally more accessible. Written in free verse and featuring next to no rhyme, no regular meter, and an irregular line length, the poem also mirrors works such as George Herbert's "Easter Wings" in that the shape of the poem mirrors its content. The "absurdity" that acrobat and poet mutually risk lies in the aerial leap both must take, a leap spurred by their faith that there will be someone or something there to catch them.