Question 2

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)

In the following passage from Rebecca Solnit's "Arrival Gates," the author discusses her return to a shrine in Japan and the impact its singular architecture has upon her thinking. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, show how the author's rhetorical devices gradually lead her to an epiphany on the nature and meaning of the phenomenon of "arrival."

Please remember to:

- Frame a thesis that takes a defensible position on how the author's rhetorical devices gradually lead her to an epiphany on the nature and meaning of the phenomenon of arrival.
- Select and use evidence that supports your line of reasoning.
- Follow the conventions of standard written English when crafting your response to the question.

Line

After the long flight across the Pacific, after the night in the tiny hotel room selected so I could walk to the world's busiest train station in the morning, after the train north to the area most impacted by the tsunami in the Great Tōhoku earthquake of March 11, 2011, after the meetings among the wreckage with people who had seen their villages and neighbors washed away, after seeing the foundations of what had once been a neighborhood so flattened it looked like a chessboard full of shards, after hearing from so many people with grief and rage in their voices talking about walls of water and drowning and displacement and refuge, but also about betrayal by the government in myriad ways, after the Christian minister pontificated forever while the Buddhist priests held their peace in the meeting my hosts secretly scheduled at the end of the twelve-hour workday, after I told people I was getting sick but the meeting went on, after I left the meeting in the hopes of getting to the hotel and stood outside in the cold northern light for a long time as the snowflakes fell, or was it raindrops, I forget, after the sickness turned into a cough so fierce I thought I might choke or come up with blood or run out of air, after the tour continued regardless, and the speaking tour at the universities, after the conferences where I talked about disaster and utopia, after the trip to the conference in Hiroshima where I walked and saw with my own eyes the bombed places I had seen in pictures so often and met with the octogenarians who told me, with the freshness of people who had only recently begun to tell, the story of what they had seen and been and done and suffered and lost on August 6, 1945, after the sight of the keloid scars from the fallout that had drifted onto the arm of a schoolboy sixty-seven years before, so that he grew into a man who always wore long sleeves even in summer, after the long walks along the beautiful river distributaries of Hiroshima and among its willows and monuments, draped in garlands of paper cranes, to the vaporized and poisoned dead, and plum trees in bloom but not yet cherries, after the one glorious day in Kyoto when I was neither at work nor overwhelmed and alone but accompanied by a pair of kid graduate students, after a day of wandering through old Buddhist temples with them and seeing the dim hall of a thousand golden Buddhas lined up in long rows, I arrived at the orange gates.

You get off the local train from the city of Kyoto and walk through a little tourist town of shops with doorways like wide-open mouths disgorging low tables of food and crafts and souvenirs and then walk uphill, then up stairs, under a great torii gate, one of those structures with a wide horizontal beam extending beyond the pillars that hold it up, like the Greek letter π, and then a plaza of temples and buildings and vendors, and then you keep going up. There are multiple routes up the mountain, and the routes take you through thousands of further torii gates, each with a black base and a black rooflike structure atop the crosspiece, each lacquered pure, intense orange on the cylindrical pillars and crosspiece. The new ones are gleaming and glossy. Some of the old ones

are dull, their lacquer cracked, or even rotting away so that the wood is visible underneath.

The orange is so vivid it is as though you have at last gone beyond things that are colored orange to the color itself, particularly in the passages where the torii gates are just a few feet apart, or in one extraordinary sequence many paces long of gates only inches apart, a tunnel of total immersion in orange.…

Arrival is the culmination of the sequence of events, the last in the list, the terminal station, the end of the line. And the idea of arrival begets questions about the journey and how long it took. Did it take the dancer two hours to dance the ballet, or two hours plus six months of rehearsals, or two hours plus six months plus a life given over to becoming the instrument that could, over and over, draw lines and circles in the air with precision and grace? Sumi-e painters painted with famous speed, but it took decades to become someone who could manage a brush that way, who had that feel for turning leaves or water into a monochromatic image. You fall in love with someone and the story might be of how you met, courted, consummated, but it might also be of how before all that, time and trouble shaped you both over the tears, sanded your rough spots and wore away your vices until your scars and needs and hopes came together like halves of a broken whole.

Culminations are at least lifelong, and sometimes longer when you look at the natural and social forces that shape you, the acts of the ancestors, of illness or economics, immigration and education. We are constantly arriving; the innumerable circumstances are forever culminating in this glance, this meeting, this collision, this conversation, like the pieces in a kaleidoscope forever coming into new focus, new flowerings. But to me the gates made visible not the complicated ingredients of the journey but the triumph of arrival….

Précis and Explication of Free Response Question Two:
From Rebecca Solnit's "Arrival Gates"

Rebecca Solnit's deceptively titled essay "Arrival Gates" initially leads the reader to believe the piece will be about airports. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Though Solnit does begin by mentioning her long flight across the Pacific and her subsequent train ride north to the Tohoku region, the area devastated by the tsunami—then pays a solemn visit to the city of Hiroshima, the site upon which the first atomic weapon was unleashed—the real "arrival gates" prove to be orange, π-like structures in Kyoto. Though Solnit devotes only thirty-five lines of the passage to a description of these structures, her visit to the Fushimi-Inari-taisha shrine reveals the impact of its singular architecture upon her thinking, lending a greater significance to the trips she takes to Tohoku, Hiroshima and Kyoto. Ultimately, "Arrival Gates" examines the relationship between an individual's journey and the culmination of it, claiming that throughout our lives we are continually arriving at new places of knowing, of understanding, and of healing.

The lengthy opening paragraph—some fifty-three lines in all—begins somewhat pedantically, with the author recounting her lengthy flight across the Pacific, her miniscule but conveniently situated hotel room, and her train ride north to the region most ravaged by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Solnit compiles a long catalog of lengthy phrases, each beginning with the word "after," that relate sequentially all that she witnesses and experiences in her first days back in Japan. For example, she describes not only the ramifications of the natural disaster on the region itself but also its impact upon the residents, recounting the "meetings among the wreckage with people who had seen their villages and neighbors washed away…[and] seeing the foundations of what had once been a neighborhood so flattened it looked like a chessboard full of shards…" (lines 6–11). She also describes the "many people with grief and rage in their voices talking about walls of water and drowning and displacement and refuge, but also about betrayal by the government in myriad ways…" (lines 12–15) and notes how "the Christian minister pontificated forever while the Buddhist priests held their peace in the meeting…" (lines 15–17). She relates how she felt she was getting sick, how "the sickness turned into a cough so fierce [she] thought [she] might choke or come up with blood or run out of air…" (lines 24–26), and how she nevertheless had to soldier on, talking at conferences about the devastation she had witnessed. She then describes her visit to Hiroshima "where [she] walked and saw with [her] own eyes the bombed places [she] had seen in pictures so often and met with the octogenarians who told [her], with the freshness of people who had only recently begun to tell, the story of what they had seen and been and done and suffered and lost on August 6, 1945…" (lines 30–37). Solnit sees with her own eyes "the keloid scars from the fallout that had drifted onto the arm of a schoolboy sixty-seven years before, so that he grew into a man who always wore long sleeves even in summer…" (lines 37–41) and takes "long walks along the beautiful river distributaries of Hiroshima and among its willows and monuments, draped in garlands of paper cranes, to the vaporized and poisoned dead, [its] plum trees in bloom but not yet cherries…" (lines 41–46). And she spends "one glorious day in Kyoto when [she] was neither at work nor overwhelmed and alone but accompanied by a pair of kid graduate students…" (lines 46–49) during which she wanders "through old Buddhist temples with them and [takes in] the dim hall of a thousand golden Buddhas lined up in long rows…" (lines 50–52). This sequence of 'after-effects,' if they may be labeled as such, Solnit crowns with the simple declarative statement "I arrived at the orange gates" (lines 52–53). The sheer simplicity of the culminating clause—the only complete thought in the entire paragraph—makes everything that comes before it seem superfluous, reducing it to a chronological record of work-related and tourist-like activities that is merely a prelude to the main event of the gates themselves.

Solnit's introduction of the gates is initially similar to her opening paragraph though not in its characteristically fragmentary nature. Rather, she describes this arrival in a similarly sequential manner, noting how

> You get off the local train from the city of Kyoto and walk through a little tourist town of shops like doorways with wide-open mouths disgorging low tables of food and crafts and souvenirs and then walk uphill, then up stairs, under a great torii gate, one of those structures with a wide horizontal beam extending beyond the pillars that hold it up, like the Greek letter π, and then a plaza of temples and buildings and vendors, and then you keep going up (lines 54–63).

The opening sentences are marked by instances of local color and by a sense of ascension, up hills and stairs until one comes to a great torii gate, a traditional Japanese structure that usually marks the entrance to a shrine and the passage from the secular world to a more sacred one. This upward progression continues (though there are various paths up the mountain), each route "tak[ing] you through thousands of further torii gates, each with a black base and a black rooflike structure atop the crosspiece, each lacquered pure, intense orange on the cylindrical pillars and crosspiece" (lines 65–69). The state of the gates themselves, writes Solnit, varies, some being new, others weathered and in need of repair. So vivid and arresting is the procession through these gates that the effect is powerfully spiritual. As Solnit relates, "The orange is so vivid it is as though you have at last gone beyond things that are colored orange to the color itself, particularly in the passages where the torii gates are just a few feet apart, or in one extraordinary sequence many paces long of gates only inches apart, a tunnel of total immersion in orange.…" (lines 73–79).

Line 80 marks Solnit's transition from providing description to proffering meaning. Positing that "Arrival is the culmination of the sequence of events, the last in the list, the terminal station, the end of the line" and that "…the idea of arrival begets questions about the journey and how long it took" (lines 80–84), Solnit ponders the respective journeys of a ballet dancer, a painter and a loving couple to the culmination of their artistic endeavors or relationship. Of the dancer, she asks, rhetorically "Did it take the dancer two hours to dance the ballet, or two hours plus six months of rehearsals, or two hours plus six months plus a life given over to becoming the instrument that could, over and over, draw lines and circles in the air with precision and grace?" (lines 84–90); of the painter, whether "it took decades to become someone who could manage a brush that way, who had that feel for turning leaves or water into a monochromatic image…" (lines 91–94); and of the couple, whether "the story might be of how you met, courted, consummated, but it might also be of how before all that, time and trouble shaped you both over the tears, sanded your rough spots and wore away your vices until your scars and needs and hopes came together like halves of a broken whole" (lines 95–101). Though the passage again has nothing to do with airports, Solnit's "arrival gates" serve a similar purpose, being the culmination point of various life journeys, the destination at which one's path ends.

In the end—and that seems a singularly appropriate phrase—everyone is in the process of some journey. As Solnit attests, "Culminations are at least lifelong, and sometimes longer when you look at the natural and social forces that shape you, the acts of the ancestors, of illness or economics, immigration and education" (lines 102–106), and because of this she avows "We are constantly arriving" (line 106). Using the simile of a kaleidoscope to convey how "innumerable circumstances are forever culminating in this glance, this meeting, this collision, this conversation…" (lines 107–109), Solnit affirms that our lives are always climaxing in new and unexpected ways, be they personal, professional or experiential. To her "the gates made visible not the complicated ingredients of the journey but the triumph of arrival…" (lines 111–113).