To develop her own idea about the connection between art and nature, Mae Roney used a number of short stories, essays, and other texts from art criticism, as well as painting, screenwriting, literary art and journalism, and the postmodern novel. Written in Jennifer Cayer’s “Writing Art in the World,” this essay demonstrates how an eclectic array of sources can be synthesized into something new.

ON IMPORTANCE: ART AS ENLIGHTENMENT

Mae Roney

In 1928, Myles Connolly, a renowned and successful screenwriter in the 20th century, removed himself from Hollywood and published a vibrant and philosophical short story about place, God, and the connection between art and existence. The fictional story, Mr. Blue, is about J. Blue, a young, Catholic layman who takes his religion into his own hands, shunning the society of 1920s America, taking a vow of poverty and living a selflessly generous and loving life. The first time that the readers are introduced to Blue, he is standing on the parapet of a rooftop, excitedly marveling at the beauty of the sky, where “God is more intimate” (Connolly 24). After continuing to converse a little with the narrator about the proximity of God and taking in the beauty of the roof, he proclaims: “When God became man He made you and me and the rest of us pretty important people” (Connolly 25). The view of the city that Blue gains from the rooftop makes him feel closer to God, which in turn ignites a realization of his individual importance as a result of God. The beauty of the large city skyline that Blue sees seems to clarify his importance to him and—although the enlightenment may seem abrupt, even a little absurd—it is recognizable as an instinctually human response to beauty and grandeur. It is a part of human nature to want assurance that we each belong, and that we matter in the face of such a large, daunting world.
John Berger’s essay on the effect of art and nature on our sense of place in the world “The White Bird” first introduces a simple sculpture of a bird carved out of white wood. The birds are usually presented hanging, suspended in midair, which instantly gives the beholder a sense of flight and life: of something outside, which is brought inside and frozen. Berger elaborates on this, claiming that the birds stir in the viewer a distillation of the intense emotion felt when looking at nature (83). He explains the rush of emotion that one feels when struck by beauty in nature, saying that “what has been seen is recognized and affirmed, and, at the same time, the seer is affirmed by what he sees” (83). Berger claims that the viewer, by way of this instantaneous and simultaneous recognition, temporarily feels like “God in the first chapter of Geneses . . . And he saw that it was good” (83). The viewer does not feel like they themselves are a god, but instead feels that they are looking at creation, or that they have somehow created something. Moreover, the viewer feels that they matter, and that their reception of the beauty around them is locked and intertwined with something bigger than them, whether it be an ecosystem, Mother Nature, or God. The nature and beauty snap the viewer into the context of a system, and brief clarity they attain about their importance and place in this bigger picture. Berger asserts that this moment of connection to a whole and place within it “offers hope” in the chaos of “a world that has to be resisted” (83). The moment of understanding of a bigger picture that a viewer may experience while struck by beauty in nature provides a promise that the world is not huge and random, that a single person matters. Since art—especially art like the white bird—freezes nature, it is an attempt to “transform the instantaneous into the permanent” and to “transform the potential recognition into an unceasing one” (83). Art is not escape, and it does not offer a flimsy, imagined sense of security. Instead, art prolongs the burst of confidence nature inspires, telling us we each have a place and an individual importance in a large, otherwise overwhelming world. Art gives us the opportunity to digest and accept the stunning reassurance of our existence that we may find in striking, natural beauty. Yet when looking at something as grand as nature or a beautiful skyline, it is easy to feel one’s importance being challenged, even alongside a sense of belonging to the bigger picture. If art attempts to cap-
ture and prolong the emotions felt when encountering nature, might it also capture the tests to identity that such grandiose nature presents?

Jeanette Winterson explores the effect of challenging art in her essay “The Semiotics of Sex.” Winterson investigates the simultaneous human need for—and repulsion towards—art that challenges what is known. We are both afraid of and fascinated by art that “coaxes out of us emotions we normally do not feel” because it “occupies ground unconquered by social niceties” (Winterson 173). Winterson claims that “[t]he formal beauty of art is threat and relief to the formless neutrality of unrealised life” (175). This quotation calls to mind Berger’s claim that art organizes the chaos of the “world that has to be resisted” (83). The notion that life lies at the mercy of art incites the fear of breaking down our sense of security, because to truly engage with challenging art is to take a calculated risk; it can make vulnerable the ideas of the known in the hopes of gaining an understanding of the unknown. Art, like nature, is a threat to our sense of importance when it challenges what we think we know about both ourselves and our world. Yet, the same threat promises the unveiling of the unknown. It contains the hope that art provides respite from the daily, callous world, and offers a complex resonance with something indefinable and unconfined within us. Berger’s idea that impactful art connects us with a higher power, or a bigger picture, focuses primarily on the understanding of one’s individual place within all that is larger than us. Winterson, however, uses creation differently in her explanation of art. She thinks of art as “[c]reation,” or “an energetic space which begets energetic space,” something that does not offer escape, but instead “makes it possible to live in energetic space” (176). Art, for Winterson, becomes a means of understanding more of herself than of her place, giving her the ability to live in a vibrant and new space, forged through her interaction with challenging art. There is a clear connection between Winterson and Berger in their assertions about art and beauty as creation, but Winterson introduces a new concept regarding what exactly is being created. Berger describes a moment of recognition and assurance, when the viewer of beauty in nature simultaneously feels that they are creating while being created; Winterson describes art’s creation of new energy when viewed, and says nothing
of assurance. Winterson’s “energetic space” may be the recognition of the indeterminable unknown within us, and the energy within may allow us to detangle and wrestle with this unknown (176). Or, the energy might be a byproduct of the development of our new thoughts and unbridled emotion created by a renewed sense of identity and importance as a result of the challenge to what we know. A new way of thinking about the world renews one’s sense of place within it. Winterson suggests that the energy created by art allows the viewer to be more attuned to the potential for energy and understanding all around them. While Berger claims that one gets an understanding of a bigger picture by a feeling of simultaneous creation in the face of nature, Winterson claims that one may gain the understanding of the world through art that threatens and expands their understanding. Berger writes of a simultaneous creation; Winterson writes of a simultaneous challenging. In this simultaneous challenge, the viewer finds place through questioning art, which, in turn, challenges them rather than assuring them. This image is immediately more energetic, and suggests a more progressive, propelling way of understanding one’s personal identity and world. Winterson’s use of energy also expands Berger’s claim that art strives to prolong the self-recognition and the understanding of the world inspired by natural beauty, suggesting that challenging art itself is capable of inspiring this understanding of self and the world.

However, both Winterson and Berger ultimately assert that art allows us to process our understanding of ourselves and our world. Winterson claims that art has the “power to create rooms for us” (Winterson 176). If, as Berger says, art is an “attempt to transform the instantaneous into the permanent,” then this permanence, like the wooden bird in mid-flight, allows the space, or, as Winterson phrases it, the “rooms” toward which we turn in the search for understanding (Berger 83). In this stable space, we can assess our identity and place in light of a new perspective of the world, the bigger picture gained from the art. In some ways we crave the potential energy that art offers, because it will help us grapple with some of our tangled, confused, repressed, or simply undetermined emotions. The moment of understanding and connection to Creation and God that Berger details is irresistible. It is a part of human nature to desire to be “more
deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe” (Berger 83). At the same time, the gravity of this expansion of understanding is scary, because the unknown within us and around us is overwhelmingly frightening. The visceral pull felt by the prospect of understanding ourselves or our place in the scheme of the world is countered by a staggering fear of the unknown. This fear manifests itself, according to Winterson, in the ways in which people belittle and contain art, reducing it to a biography of the artist. We are afraid of the questions about the unknown that may arise from art, yet we do not want to live in a dreary world without the beautiful and terrifying stimulus that we find in art.

In “Laughing with Kafka,” David Foster Wallace investigates tendencies to shy away from provocative art. He is concerned with what makes us uncomfortable with this type of art in the first place as he grapples with the difficulties that his American students have in truly understanding Kafka. He begins by retelling a Kafka short story, narrated by a mouse, whose “world is growing smaller and smaller every day” (Wallace 159). The mouse begins to run, and is eventually relieved by the sight of walls appearing all around it. However, the walls quickly begin to close in, and finally the mouse is trapped in one “last chamber . . . [where] in the corner, stands the trap that [it] must run into” (Wallace 159). This abrupt and sardonically sad ending signifies that the mouse has been so absorbed and focused on getting to a smaller, more sensible world, that it has ignored its freedom while it lasted. Wallace roots his essay in the revelations found in Kafka’s art. He explains it as a door that readers approach and pound on, “not just wanting admission, but needing it” (Wallace 161). Yet, when the door opens, “it opens outward: we’ve been inside what we wanted all along” (Wallace 161).

Wallace’s description of his interaction with Kafka’s story, at first, seems much bleaker than Winterson’s electric interpretation of the spontaneous, energetic development of challenge and understanding, or Berger’s profound and vibrant expression of the realization of creation, existence, and place. If Wallace’s anecdote about the room is analogous to Kafka’s proverb of the mouse, then by the time the door opens, revelation may come too late for those who waited and begged. Both Wallace and Winterson use images of doors and rooms to ana-
lyze the effect of art on the individual; however, Winterson speaks of the power of art “to create rooms for us” while Wallace speaks of the door opening only after we have wasted time pounding on it, revealing our tragic mistake (Winterson 176). Yet, perhaps Wallace’s experience isn’t as depressing as it initially appears in contrast to Berger and Winterson. By using the analogy of the door, Wallace captures the same attraction—to or need for—the understanding of the unknown or the bigger picture that Winterson and Berger describe. But what Wallace points out that is if we spend too long searching for meaning or our place in something that eludes us, we may miss other opportunities for enlightenment already around us, and potentially ignore the place we already have in the world. Winterson’s concept of rooms created by art in which to process challenges to security—like Berger’s intimate introspection inspired by nature and prolonged by art—beckon to be retreated into. Wallace illustrates the danger in chasing the elusive: that, in the midst of the chase, we may run past the understanding that we desire, missing it entirely. If this is true, then the energy begotten by a challenged and renewed understanding of self in Winterson’s piece, or Berger’s electric feeling of importance within the fantastic whole, must inspire us to truly live in the world. We cannot pound at the door, narrowly focused on self-importance and understanding, while allowing the surrounding beauty and opportunity for enlightenment to pass by. Art is the spring-board that provokes us to look at ourselves and the world through a new lens. We cannot retreat into our thoughts and our search for understanding like a safe haven. It is irresponsible to ignore the life and importance around us, because maybe the revelation that we seek is around us in the art and beauty that we encounter on a daily basis. If we are so bent on finding our place in life that we retreat from life, our search becomes meaningless.

At one point in Mr. Blue, the narrator includes letters that he has collected from Blue. In one such letter, Blue talks about the need for feeling in our society, saying that “[o]ur fear of exuberancy, of ecstasy, of any genuine passion is being stamped on our face and our lives” (56). Just as Winterson warns of the way people today fear challenging art and emotion, Blue warns that as a result of this fear “[w]e have as much hunger for loveliness as a turtle. And about as much
capacity for intense and varied living as a cabbage” (Connolly 56). This insensitive and unimpassioned world is one that Blue rejects throughout the book, talking to anyone and everyone about the beauty of life and God, and the necessity of art to enlighten and communicate beauty and inspiration. However, Connolly, like Winterson—and Berger, to some degree—stresses and challenges the duty of artists in the fight against this dreary society, or chaotic world. Blue says later in the short story that artists “take contemporary life avidly into their arms . . . and out of the union is born their art” (Connolly 77). Yet, when commenting on the uninspired architecture of churches in New York, proclaims that it “is cowardice to blame the age” and that maybe the lack of inspiration is the fault of the artist, attributed to the “dryness and dullness of their souls” (Connolly 77).

Which is it, then? Are artists in “union” with life, or are they dried out? If they are inspired, Blue seems to suggest that Berger’s double affirmation occurs first between artist and nature. The artist’s job, then, is to create art that not only pushes against the dullness within the world around us, or helps us find our place or importance within it, as Berger claims. The artist has a great responsibility, because it is art which allows us to tackle and comprehend the world in which we live. It allows us not only to live in the creative, provocative space, as Winterson says, but encourages us to live in our world with more clarity, and to see the beauty of our world more vividly. If the artist is entrenched in a fearful, unfeeling society like the one Winterson depicts, or the bleak, chaotic world that Berger claims art has to resist, then there is no hope for their art. This search for enlightened art begins to echo that of those pounding on the door in Wallace’s tale, so intent on finding meaning that they miss it all around them. Instead of wasting time finding fault in our society or the age, and expecting an artist to transcend it, we should look at the art that the world around us already offers. While an artist certainly has a responsibility to see the world in a different way, and to communicate this view, there is responsibility held by the audience as well. We must recognize beauty and opportunity for understanding as they already exist around us, or we risk being too focused on an elusive enlightenment to notice that we have been in the midst of tremendous art and life all along.
WORKS CITED


