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Writing the Essay

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Exercise 1

Step Toward a Small Theory of the Visible

In the essay “Step Toward a Small Theory of the Visible” by John Berger, Berger explores the significance in the process of collaboration and participation between an artist and a model to create a deeper feeling in the work of art. Berger knows that in today’s technological world, “images abound everywhere”. Although we have access to images “transmitted at lightning speed” of anything we can imagine from “what things look like on the other side of the planet” to “the other side of the moon”, these images are often feel empty or “disembodied”.

Berger quotes Silesius, “a seventeenth-century doctor of medicine in Wrocklau”, who examines the “dependence of the seen and the seeing”. The quote is a dialogue between an artist and the object he or she is trying to portray. The artists asks the object “how did you become what you visibly are?”, and the object replies “I am as I am. Im waiting”. The artists then asks “What for?” to which the object says “for you.” The object then tells the artist that it will wait as long as it takes for the artist to “abandon everything else” and take “as long as it takes” for the artist to truly understand and depict the object. Berger believes “Every authentic painting demonstrates a collaboration”, and this short dialogue is an example of that process.

Transfiguration

“Transfiguration” by Annie Dillard is a short essay where Dillard attempts to develop the readers understanding of what it takes to be a writer. In her essay, Dillard goes into great detail about what is seemingly meaningless. She tells us where she lives, what she does in the morning, and outlines in great detail a spider web behind her toilet in the bathroom. She discusses the dead bodies that the spider has left below its web, and in particular notices the dead moths.

Dillard then explains a camping trip she took where she went to the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia to read, and noted a time when a moth flew into a candle she had lit at night time, and the moth died a slow death then became almost like another wick on the top of the candle.

Dillard’s motive in this essay was to get readers to truely think about what it takes to become a writer. Dillard talks about how she asked her class “Which one of you wants to give your lives and be Writers?” Dillard claims that the class probably thought “she was raving again” because they don’t understand the sheer amount of time and effort in observation required to be a writer.

Souls on Ice

“Souls on Ice” by Mark Doty describes the process of seeing a spectacular site and then writing a poem about it. Doty was at a “stop and shop” grocery store in Orleans, Massachusetts when he was “struck by the elegance of the mackerel in the fresh fish display.” The fish were “rowed and stacked, brilliant against the white of the crushed ice.” Doty noted how he loved “how the black and glistening bands were, and the prismed sheen of the patches between, and their shining flat eyes.”

Doty’s motive in this essay is to examine the process of describing a situation in which he “lost himself” in a moment of time. While discussing description, Doty says “it’s clear to me that these descriptive terms aren’t merely there to chronicle the physical reality of the object.” Doty then argues that descriptions describe more than just the physical attributes of a specific object at any give moment in time, they also “reflect the psychic state of the observer.” When an observer is feeling happy or sad or angry, Doty is suggesting that these emotions affect how the observer views the world and then relays his or her view with descriptive words.