

# THE CHARGE OF THE ARTS

Jane Acierno

“October,” a contemporary piece for concert band by Eric Whitacre, encapsulates loss, loneliness, and longing without words and in six and a half minutes. Whitacre’s “October” has thirty-three different instrumental parts. The composition has many “tuttis,” which mean “all together,” and it is during the moments when the band’s instruments play together that a melancholy emotion seems to enter the piece. Every instrument has something different and special to say, and Whitacre’s piece ends in homophony, where all the instruments are playing chords, despite going through periods of polyphony where the different instruments play different rhythms and melodies. “October” is beautiful and often makes me both cry and grin when I listen to it.

*This* is what I was trying to explain to my boyfriend-at-the-time, Freddie, as we sat together on the grey-striped rug on my bedroom floor. I had just played Whitacre’s masterpiece, and Freddie sat there with a blank expression, seeming to look around my room for some more entertaining stimulus.

“What did you think?” I asked him.

“It was kind of long,” he replied.

“That’s it?”

I was baffled. When I first heard “October” at band camp I was so moved that I lost all sense of the outside world. I almost forgot to play along with the other flutes because I found it so melancholically beautiful. “October” was the only reason I liked that camp, and I can say that Eric Whitacre was the only friend I made there. But somehow the piece that had resonated so deeply with me did not mean anything to Freddie. Everyone has his or her own taste, as author Tim Parks notes in his essay, “Why Readers Disagree.” Parks notes the maxim, “*De gustibus non disputandum est*,” which translates to English as “taste is not disputable” (1). In his essay, Parks strives to illuminate why readers can have different opinions when reading the same literature. He explains that when the reader’s main concerns in life match up with the main

concepts raised by the writer, the reader is more engaged with the work. If the issues presented are not concerns of the reader, the reader may be impressed with the writing but not respond on an emotional level. Drawing upon the work of psychological theorist Valeria Ugazio, Parks' essay explores in particular how one's family concerns can shape one's personal concerns, which in turn shape one's literary connections. Perhaps Freddie had not encountered the "particular themes or issues" that Whitacre works with in his piece, and therefore did not develop the dominant "conversation . . . establish[ing] criteria for praise and criticism of family members and non-members" that I had, which prepared me to be moved by Whitacre's "October" (Parks 2). In other words, maybe Freddie could not find himself and his concerns within Whitacre's work because his family did not converse about loss, loneliness, and longing as ways to measure themselves and others, whether through music or more generally.

Could Freddie have appreciated Whitacre's composition if it resonated more with his life? Maybe if Freddie had felt loss, loneliness, and longing in his life as central, or even reoccurring, themes, he would have responded to Whitacre's piece differently. Or maybe he would have still found it boring. Do our lives really determine what interests us in art? Can't a person connect to art and literature when it does not directly relate to his life?

In "The Secret Life of Us," Jeanette Winterson suggests that art's power arises from energy put in by both viewer and creator, rather than from the themes of the artwork or the person's life. Winterson contrasts art with capitalism, claiming that art is important because it provides us with perspective and connections that the consumer-based world cannot. In response to those who view art as a mere luxury, Winterson argues that art is timeless, alive, god-like, potent, confrontational, difficult, and, lastly, essential. "[W]e don't go to Shakespeare to find out about life in Elizabethan England," Winterson writes, "we go to find out about ourselves" (2). Certainly people can relate to King Lear's emotional journey and torment even if they have never been kings, or elderly, or lost a kingdom. I know when I read or see Shakespeare I feel pulled to the stage. I can feel my emotions blend with Lear's, and I adjust how I see the world during the time I am at the theater and afterward. Winterson suggests that the time and concentration that you and the artist invest in the work lead "not simply . . . [to] being recharged . . . [but being] charged at a completely different voltage" (2). My then-boyfriend Freddie may not have been "charged" by Whitacre's "October" for the reasons that Parks states: connections to art come from the "'system' or 'conversation' we grew up in and within which we had to find a position and establish an iden-

tity" (5). But even if the energy of "October" matched Freddie's, and even if Freddie had felt loss, loneliness, and longing (as we all have), he still may have never been moved by Whitacre's piece.

Ellen Hopkins is a writer who specializes in novels about teenagers in crisis. Her books are very popular with children in middle school, the time when most people begin to establish an identity. I recall reading many novels by Hopkins during those years. I was especially interested in one called *Perfect*, in which four teenagers' lives are told in verse. All four of Hopkins' teenagers have struggles with their identity: one struggles with her sexuality, one has an eating disorder, one is addicted to steroids, and one struggles with his race. And while the book now reads to me as kitsch, and is overly dramatic with too many plot points, back then I loved it. Only one of the four stories related specifically to my life, but I was also enthralled by and invested in the other three characters' miserable lives. My middle school quest to create an identity matched each of the characters' struggles to do the same. I loved watching others find their place in their world as I was finding mine. But now I have grown beyond that interest. Even art that speaks strongly to a person can lose its power in just a few years time.

When Tim Parks talks about connecting with themes in "Why Readers Disagree," he discusses more life-long themes, rather than life-period themes. For me, the life-long theme in my family is intelligence: who has it and who does not. Books like *Harry Potter*, with characters who, like Hermione, are defined by their intellect have the potential to appeal to me for much longer periods of time than do those that deal with themes that appeal to me as I go through particular struggles in my life. Themes such as intelligence transcend the particulars of the time in my life, and thus art that speaks to this theme speaks to who I am and how I define myself, rather than what I am currently struggling with.

When faced with a piece of art that I am required to write about for a school art class, I have to put myself in the mindset of someone who would enjoy the work. I have to imagine what they would see in it that I am not seeing; it is only then that I begin to understand the piece. But I only need to use this technique when the art has not grabbed me in the first place. I can easily appreciate and interpret art when its themes reflect my own life.

When Rothko's painting *No. 16 (Red, Brown, Black)* was projected on the monitor in my writing class recently, I felt no connection. The painting is appropriately named; it is a red canvas with one red, one brown, and one black block painted on top of the red background. I did not feel pulled in to the artwork like I do when I am reading Shakespeare, and I could not feel

energy going between Rothko's work and myself. Although I tried, I could not put myself in the shoes of the girl whose essay we were reading who cried upon seeing the painting. I was like Freddie listening to "October": I just did not get it. But when I first listened to "October," I had played the flute for years and had developed an ear for classical music, thus preparing me to develop an ear for modern art music. Some art forms, like classical music, modern art music, or abstract expressionism, may require time to learn to appreciate. Winterson's idea that the power in art stems from the sharing of energy between the artist and the audience applies here in that art can be appreciated if time and energy are devoted to it. But if the time is not put in, we cannot find ourselves in the artwork. Still, there is no guarantee that even if I had studied abstract expressionism, I would learn to like Rothko. "[F]ew works of art can have universal appeal," as Tim Parks rightly states in his essay. And while I might learn to be more impressed by Rothko, I might never truly connect with his work on an emotional level (6).

My family and the life within which I have found myself are both relevant and stir emotions for longer than any piece of art that speaks merely to one stage in my life. Everyone's life goes through stages, making works like Hopkins' *Perfect* moving to middle school children, but less so to high school students and adults. Art is certainly accessible when the viewer puts in energy and time to understand the work. And having particular and relevant events in one's life can, as Parks suggests, provide the energy with which to connect to the work. The relational moments in life that Parks illuminates help to generate the "energy" that Winterson sees as essential to the charge of art. Our lives shape our interests, and both help to shape how we perceive art and re-see ourselves.

---

#### WORKS CITED

- Hopkins, Ellen. *Perfect*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry, 2011. Print.
- Parks, Tim. "Why Readers Disagree." *New York Review of Books* 25 Apr. 2012: n. pag. Web. 1 Aug. 2014.
- Rothko, Mark. *No. 16 (Red, Brown, Black)*. 1958. Oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- Whitacre, Eric. *Festival of Contemporary Art Music Featuring the Works of Eric Whitacre*. Washington State University, School of Music and Theatre Arts, 2008. CD.
- Winterson, Jeanette. "The Secret Life of Us." Editorial. *The Guardian*[Manchester] 25 Nov. 2002: n. pag. Web. 1 Aug. 2014.