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Address and the Lure of the Aesthetic: Reflections on Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*

Carolyn Korsmeyer

Abstract

Monique Roelofs argues that some of the aesthetic power of art is traceable to the way that works address their audiences, promising the creation of cultural community. Such communities become exclusionary when modes of address presume and perpetuate social hierarchies. This paper explores this notion in works where moral and aesthetic precepts seem to conflict and whose address induces attitudes that one would reject in "reality" but that are required for the full appreciative grasp of a narrative.

Key Words

address, aesthetic value, imagination, moral value, race

1. Introduction

In *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, Monique Roelofs undertakes an ambitious project that knits together aesthetics and politics, with both broadly conceived. The scope of her claims is enormous, for the aesthetic, as she construes it, operates with everyday objects as well as artworks, with conversations as well as poetry. Also, politics is understood to include relationships among people involving power and its absence, cultural authority, and mainstream versus marginalized identities. Roelofs maintains that the aesthetic features of objects are not only admired but they also possess considerable social power, even though the influence of the aesthetic can operate so subtly that it goes unnoticed, making it all the more important to examine. There are three central concepts that she introduces to propel her analysis: *address*, *relationality*, and *promise*. Briefly, this is the way that I understand the connections among these concepts, though they are far-reaching and this summary by no means exhausts their meaning.

2. Address, relationality, and promise

'Address' refers to the ways that artifacts speak to us (as it were), presuming, sustaining, and sometimes creating cultural fluency through which we tacitly occupy a particular position in a community of reception. Address may be easily recognized in the apostrophic language of a poet or harder to notice in the mute positioning that a material object induces. As Roelofs describes it elsewhere, "Address concerns the modes of signification that we direct at people, things, and places, and that they direct at us."^[1] When art and other artifacts address us, we may shift our imaginative positions in the act of interpreting and understanding their meaning. This understanding may prompt critical resistance or it may not. Perhaps most disturbingly, it may not when it should.

Address, which Roelofs calls the “muscles and joints of aesthetic relationality,” involves several aspects of social power.^[2] First of all, it concerns the scope of audience that artworks assume as their ideal recipients, for the aesthetic engenders a web of “relationships” among artists, audiences, people in positions of cultural authority, and —outside the circle— people who are culturally disenfranchised. Aesthetic engagement is a kind of receptive glue that forms cultural communities. Those communities might be transient, focused on one work alone, or they might stabilize into general norms of taste.

The “promise” of the aesthetic includes the communal harmony of cultural inclusion sustained by aesthetic means, a harmony that can be warranted or manipulative, hopeful of change or supportive of the status quo. Address can emerge from an individual authorial voice but, at the same time, artists stand within traditions of creativity and absorb conventions of address that they then pass along in their works. Thus, modes of address are only partially the effect of the conscious intentions of artists. The promise of the aesthetic can be fulfilled but it can also be compromised and betrayed when the culture on offer is exclusionary. Therefore, aesthetic modes can also provoke resistance and shifts of what we might call “taste” but that can also be regarded as a network of desires and needs that prompt demands for political change.

While most of the cases Roelofs analyzes are works of art where, indeed, address is most in evidence, she is by no means offering a theory that pertains only to art. The aesthetic pervades life, and so this book is as much a contribution to the study of the aesthetics of the everyday as it is of poetry or painting. Even foods speak to us, daring us to eat something strange or coddling us with the familiar. Objects such as desks and rooms address their users, making them feel comfortable or awkward, included in the world they inhabit or upstarts who don’t belong there. Lack of inclusion can be amusing, as when parents visiting elementary schools perch on a child-sized chair. But, more importantly, it can be coercive, as when an artful product entices us to accept characterizations in its fictional world that would be offensive upon reflection.

The triad of concepts Roelofs introduces is examined in particular detail through what she calls “racialized aestheticization” when social hierarchies of race are presented as aesthetic norms, and “aesthetic racialization” when admiration is bestowed on art that perpetuates racial power dynamics.^[3] Her treatment provides us with a fresh and powerful way to approach questions about the intersection of aesthetic and moral values, for often the aesthetic carries a moral, social, or political valence. By drawing our attention to the address of different works, Roelofs highlights social values assumed by art, artists, and audiences, values that are often so subtle and taken for granted that their power is overlooked, though exerted nonetheless.

3. When does address interrupt appreciation?

Address most obviously concerns the voices that speak within narratives. To whom are they speaking? From what

perspective? Who is ignored or omitted from the implied conversation? Often when one is appreciatively struck by an artwork, one says "This *speaks* to me." But we rarely mean that it speaks to ME specifically; rather, we mean we are moved, pleased, or intrigued, sometimes because it opens a world that is NOT MINE and where I do not belong.

The appreciation of a poem or a painting is seldom a function of one's actual social position. Artworks often address their audiences in ways that demand an imaginative change of identity. Indeed, that is part of their charm. So, if aesthetic enjoyment can mark the fact that one's imagination is captured by a fictional world, the question becomes, when does this phenomenon mask or overcome values that would otherwise be in place?

On occasion, the address of a story interrupts our imaginative engagement with a fictional world. Sometimes these moments are jarring but momentary as, for me, is a scene in *Casablanca* (1942), when Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) refers to the pianist Sam (Dooley Wilson) as "boy." The dominant address of this movie, to freedom fighters, anti-fascists, and ordinary people trying to flee the dangers of war, is the one that takes over, though once one notices the word, aspects of Sam's relation to the other characters become appreciably asymmetrical. Other times, obnoxious presumptions about audience so pervade a work that it cannot be appreciated at all. An example of this for me is the movie *Mash* (1970), where crass sexism and supposedly comic racism get in the way of what is meant to be funny. With such an extreme dissonance between artistic attempt and moral reception, the aesthetic simply loses its power. But what of the times when a work is sufficiently strong that our imaginations carry on without pause? As Roelofs aptly says, "The realm of the aesthetic furnishes prolific devices enabling us to adjust aesthetic idioms that we (not typically consciously) deploy to conceptualize and inhabit instances of knowledge and ignorance."^[4] In other words, the aesthetic can covertly and efficiently screen out things we would prefer not to acknowledge, a tacit "aesthetics of ignorance" that rides alongside an "epistemology of ignorance" that induces one willfully to ignore things that one ought to pay attention to.

4. Reality vs. fiction

We always fill in fictional worlds with familiar realities we assume in both fiction and real life. This is what Kendall Walton refers to as the Reality Principle.^[5] We don't need to be told that Hamlet had great-grandparents, for instance, because we know that everyone has great-grandparents. We draw upon ordinary beliefs to supply relevant presumptions implicit in a story. But when those beliefs include our values, and the story noticeably violates those values, the Reality Principle clashes with the fictional world.^[6] Walton seems to trust that in egregious examples, Reality overtakes Fiction and we cease to enjoy; the promise of the aesthetic is broken alongside the loss of appreciation. Certainly this can happen but there are many cases where it does not and where we remain carried away in the fictional world. In these cases, the address of the story still holds us in thrall. Though this may compromise our moral sensibilities, it is also the case that

suspending our Reality Principle seems a necessity if we are to engage with complex works from different times and cultures.

Does resisting the address of a story restrict our ability to understand cultures that are not our own? And, if so, is this a flaw in the story or in our appreciative compass? I think that the answer to this question is slippery and highly dependent on the historical imagination that is called upon when we read things from the past.

5. Two examples of aesthetic pleasures

Among my own reading matter during the weeks after I finished *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* were two novels that summon worlds that are now part of history: Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* and Sir Walter Scott's historical romance, *Quentin Durward*. With Roelofs's book in mind, I became especially alert to aspects of address as I read. Both narratives address the reader in terms and tones that presume, insinuate, and promote attitudes that are now repugnant towards women and towards non-white peoples. Both address their readers as white Europeans or Euro-Americans. Both manifest aesthetic racialization. But I enjoyed them both, and it this appreciation that I now want to query.

Poet Randall Jarrell's only novel, *Pictures from an Institution*, was written in 1952.^[7] It is subtitled "A Comedy." The institution in question is a small liberal arts women's college, possibly modeled on Sarah Lawrence, where Jarrell taught for a while. The narrator is a professor; the other characters include administrators, secretaries, and a writer-in-residence. The address is familiarly academic in some ways, though the picture of women in the academy is noticeably of an older era. An over-worked secretary and an administrative assistant are women utterly devoted to their bosses, and they are treated with kind condescension. A professor of literature, Miss Batterson, is a naïve and virginal soul (who for some reason drops dead when she moves to another college), and is regarded as too good for this world in a way that no one today would recognize in their female colleagues—or indeed in any woman at all.

Miss Batterson was potentially anything and actually almost nothing. She was still, after so many years, taking her first look at life; that first look was her vocation. She had made trembling-on-the-verge-of-things a steady state, a permanent one; she lived in the State of Innocence.^[8]

Though I was a bit offended on Miss Batterson's behalf, I thought: Oh well, it was the fifties. False consciousness on my part, perhaps, but I went along with this "picture from an institution" partly because I wanted to finish the story, and partly because it was recognizable enough as a snapshot of a world only recently passed. As such, it was not without insight and sympathy.

On the other hand, although Jarrell makes some statements that indicate he was aware of and critical of racial discrimination in the America of the fifties, his occasional allusions to Africans as though they simply provide images to

use in comic metaphors are both jarring and, more or less, gratuitous. It appears that an otherwise sensitive poetic voice slides into a then-conventional mode of address that became more obnoxious to a general readership only years after the book appeared.

Scott's *Quentin Durward* (1823) is a novel with a far larger readership than Jarrell's. Scott has exerted considerable aesthetic influence over readers across the globe, and many of his works have been made into movies for both large screen and television. Thus, we can presume that the address of his works continues to possess some power. This particular novel induces chivalric attitudes towards women—a well-known and rather seductive convention—and towards kings and dukes to whom one owes fealty, which is somewhat harder to imagine but easy enough to go along with as one reads. It also invites the reader into a world of medieval Christian sensibility that holds non-Christians in contempt, a particularly important mode of address that shapes our reception of the gypsies in the narrative.[\[9\]](#)

The novel takes place in the fifteenth century during a conflict between the French King Louis XI and Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. Quentin is a young knight who joins the ranks of the Scottish Archers who protect the king. He is assigned to escort to safety Isabelle, Countess of Croye, who is fleeing an impending forced marriage. Naturally, they fall in love, though this is hardly the centerpiece of the plot. Acting as a guide is a gypsy, Hayraddin Maugrabin, who at the secret behest of King Louis connives to deliver Isabelle into the hands of an even worse husband, the bestial William de la Marck, the "Wild Boar of Ardennes." Although he is a scoundrel and utterly untrustworthy, Hayraddin is loyal to Quentin for having tried to save his brother from the gallows. The reader is invited to consider gypsies as alien, indeed, as hardly human. They are small and dark, nearly African in complexion, and, in distress, are prone to strange, Oriental wails. The Europeans—Scottish, French, Burgundian—hardly know how to classify them, calling them by just about every outsider name they can think of:

Evil?—why, boy, they are heathens, or Jews, or Mahomedans at the least, and neither worship Our Lady nor the Saints ... and steal what they can lay hands on, and sing, and tell fortunes.[\[10\]](#)

When we first meet Hayraddin he is wearing unclean, gaudy garments; his face is described as a "swarthy and sunburnt visage" with "black elf-locks which hung around his face, and the air of wildness and emaciation, which rather seemed to indicate a savage than a civilized man."[\[11\]](#) Quentin quizzes him about his way of life and learns that he owns no property, observes no laws, has no leader to whom he swears fealty, and, worst of all, no religion. What does he have? Liberty, he declares. Liberty of thought, which he claims Quentin lacks with his entanglement in law, social hierarchies, and religious beliefs. But this is by no means an appeal to modern readers with a portrait of savage or secular nobility. The novel does not treat us to a revelation of Hayraddin's hidden good character and an affirmation of the brotherhood of man. He is a thief and a cheat. His loyalty to Quentin represents a kind of primitive blood bond, not a thoughtful moral precept.

Hayraddin himself compares his people to dogs, for when they tell fortunes they are like the hound on the trail of a scent that mere humans cannot detect. In short, this is not a character we are supposed to identify with, admire, or like. Scott musters just about every racist and Euro-centric description available to his pen to convince us of this.

At the same time, with this character Scott delivers an extraordinary final scene. Hayraddin, facing execution, asks Quentin to take care of his horse, apparently his one object of affection. Refusing a priest and a last-minute conversion that would save his soul, he asserts that his hope for the afterlife is only to “be resolved into the elements,” to return to earth so that

the mysterious frame of humanity shall melt into the general mass of nature, to be recompounded in the other forms with which she daily supplies those which daily disappear, and return under different forms—the watery particles to streams and showers, the earthly parts to enrich their mother earth, the airy portions to wanton in the breeze, and those of fire to supply the blaze of Aldeboran.... Hence! begone!—disturb me no farther![\[12\]](#)

He then greets the gallows “as one who, plunged in reverie, bids adieu to company which distracts his thoughts.”[\[13\]](#)

In the atmosphere of the story, these words are blasphemous and bereft of soul. But they are among the most memorable in the whole long novel, and I read them over and over. The consternating point is that without the reader’s participation in the unrelievedly denigrating portrait of gypsies, the drama of this execution would falter. Hayraddin must remain steadfastly Other for the dramatic content of his fearsome sensibilities to sustain their power. In other words, an aesthetic triumph of this narrative rides on the reader’s imaginative acceptance of deeply disturbing ethical precepts.

6. Concluding reflections

My point with these examples is to highlight the complexities of address when we assess its power over the moral imagination, especially when art takes us into the past. When a reader enters appreciatively into the world of these novels, does a kind of moral compromise sneak into the experience?

With a novel from the 1950s, such as *Pictures from an Institution*, the repugnant sensibilities it assumes are still relatively recent and raw; perhaps they stand out for that reason (rather like the hair styles in movies of the early 1960s that look outdated, whereas those of the 1930s and 40s are elegant and period-appropriate). We might think of *Quentin Durward* as just a vivid portrait of a time so long gone that it has no practical thrall over anyone today, though I doubt this is the case. The conventions of historical romance continue to exert considerable audience appeal, whether in prose novels, movies, or video games, where medieval costuming and weaponry are rife. Such works evidently still grab the imagination of many, and they represent a lucrative aesthetic industry.

So my own confession of engagement with these books is also designed to prompt a worry. As Roelofs so deftly argues, such works exert a covert power over our minds. And it is certainly enticing to abandon one's Reality Principles from time to time.

Perhaps this should lead us to wonder how to identify those moments when our aesthetic engagement prompts an irresistible but reprehensible enjoyment. Yet, at the same time, without the capacity to respond appreciatively to appealing and repugnant attitudes alike, our aesthetic sensibility and our moral compass might become narrower and less flexible to changing culture. Such may be the abiding tension between aesthetic and moral values.

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Endnotes

[1] Monique Roelofs, "Navigating Frames of Address: María Lugones on Language, Bodies, Things, and Places," *Hypatia*, forthcoming.

[2] Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 177.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

[5] Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 144-161 and passim.


[6] Hume makes the same observation at the end of the essay "Of the Standard of Taste," when he suddenly rails against obtrusive Christianity in love poetry.

[7] It was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1954, but my copy says © 1952. The earlier date presumably refers to the copyright of sections that were published in periodicals before the novel was complete.

[8] Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution: A Comedy* (New York: Meridian Fiction, 1960), p. 92.

[9] In a long note, Scott reports that gypsies had arrived in Europe just before the time of the narrative. The story includes several actual historical characters and episodes, and the author provides the reader with many explanatory comments identifying characters and the historical sources he researched for the plot, adding to the complexities of address in this novel.

[10] Sir Walter Scott, *Quentin Durward* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, n.d.), p.115.



[11] *Ibid.*, p. 228.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 466.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 467.