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# *ADDRESS AND THE AESTHETICS-ETHICS DICHOTOMY*

Monique Roelofs, Duquesne University

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On February 17-19 2000, the Workgroup for Analytical Aesthetics of the Dutch Association for Aesthetics organized a conference on the theme "Address and the Aesthetics-Ethics Dichotomy" in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The conference was the second meeting in a series on Aesthetics and Ethics conducted by the workgroup.[1] The intention of the Utrecht conference was to examine the mutual implications that current perspectives on address in cultural theory and current perspectives on the aesthetics-ethics relation in philosophy might have for one another. In the present section of this book, which includes the papers that were presented by five of the ten participants in the conference, namely Ellen Rooney, Graham McFee, Rob van Gerwen, myself, and Elizabeth Weed, we hope to give an impression of the debates that were initiated on a provocative subject that trans-

[1]The Utrecht meeting of the workgroup was entitled "Address. Aesthetics and Ethics Part II". The first meeting in the series, "The Boundaries of the Aesthetic: Aesthetics and Ethics Part I" took place at the Hoger Instituut voor Wijsbegeerte, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 1999.

cends the boundaries of several disciplines - philosophical, literary, political, psychoanalytical, and feminist.[2]

I would like to open this collection of papers by situating the subject of the conference within developments that have recently taken place within the relevant disciplines. Then I will trace a line of connections among the Utrecht lectures by reading these lectures through two lenses. One, I will highlight the different understandings of address that were formulated by the five authors whose papers are represented in the following, as well as by three other participants in the conference, namely Rosi Braidotti, Richard Wollheim, and Paul Crowther. Secondly, I will signal how these speakers conceptualized the implications that their notions of address might or might not have for the analysis of art's ethical and political workings. My analysis in this essay, I should note, will follow only one strand of connections within a dense web of themes. It will be up to the next meeting to be planned by the workgroup to take the polemics that were initiated in Utrecht in yet another direction.

## 2. PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS, CULTURAL THEORY, AND THE ETHICAL CHALLENGE

Questions of ethics are emerging across the board in the fields of art and culture. Analytical aesthetics and cultural theory have joint ranks in this regard. To take aesthetics first, in the last several years, this field has launched a highly concentrated effort to work out the relations between aesthetics and ethics. Philosophers are exploring ethical dimensions of artworks; they are examining ways in which moral values implicate aesthetic values; and they are studying ways in which aesthetic experiences, judgments, and actions coincide with, rely upon, and make possible moral experiences, judgments, and actions.[3] The dominant direction of this philosophical trend is to outline intersections and interdependencies between aesthetics and ethics. The remarkable consensus with which aestheticians, to my mind, have embarked on ethical trajectories can only be attributed to the legacy of

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[2] These papers have been collected by Rob van Gerwen and myself, both members of the Workgroup for Analytical Aesthetics. The idea to gather the papers from the conference in this volume was Rob's, who also took care of the bulk of the arrangements for the conference, and whom I would like to thank for making possible both the event and its aftermath in print.

[3] See, for example, Jerrold Levinson's collection of essays *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* and Marcia Eaton's "Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?"

autonomy theories of art from which analytical aesthetics is still working to divest itself.[4] But most likely this is not the whole story. For a parallel move towards ethics is taking place within cultural theory.

Ethics has recently become a focal point of attention among cultural scholars. To list two examples, in the 1998 volume The *Cultural Turn*, Fredric Jameson recognizes a return of ethics, politics, and religion in the field of "theory".[5] A 2000 collection of essays edited by Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, entitled *The Turn to Ethics*, explores work on ethics in literary studies. Several contributors to *The Turn to Ethics* consider the structure of reading in light of moral demands that other subjects and other cultures are seen to place upon the reader.[6] One critic examines processes of culture formation in terms of ethical values such as interdependency and trust.[7] Another critic describes cultural and cross-cultural affiliations as ethical projects.[8] As cultural scholars look to ethics, ethics itself is not left stagnant in the process.[9] The editors of *The Turn to Ethics* identify a "crossover" among the fields of literary studies, philosophy and political theory, where ethics is seen and done "otherwise."[10] One distinctive attribute of this alternative brand of ethics seems to be its focus on cultural configurations rather than individual agency, which brings it closer to political theory than many other branches of ethics.

Cultural scholarship on ethics brings together analyses of the production and consumption of cultural forms with explicitly normative conceptions. Normative issues that are being considered, for example, are values such as recognition, respect, and liberation, and their counterparts such as social invisibility, domination, and violence. While analytical aesthetics has not traditionally focused on these kinds of cultural and political phenomena, the recent philosophical attempt to connect aesthetic and ethical questions would seem to create space for intersections with ethical perspectives in literary studies.

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[4] Many aestheticians addressing ethical questions explicitly criticize formalist and autonomist tenets. See the essays by Noël Carroll, Berys Gaut, Karen Hanson, Mary Devereaux in *Aesthetics and Ethics*.

[5] Fredric Jameson, The Cultural Turn: *Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, 1983-1998, 94-5 and 102.

[6] See Judith Butler's "Ethical Ambivalence," and Dorris Sommer's "Attitude, Its Rhetoric" in the *Turn to Ethics*: 15-28 and 201-220.

[7] Barbara Johnson understands culture formation in terms of Winnicott's notion of transitional objects in her essay "Using People: Kant with Winnicott," in *The Turn to Ethics:* 47-63.

[8] Homi Bhaba in "On Cultural Choice" in *The Turn to Ethics,* 191.

[9] Marcia Eaton recognizes this phenomenon also in philosophical aesthetics, "Aesthetics, The Mother of Ethics?," 361.

[10] "Introduction: The Turn to Ethics," *The Turn to Ethics*,

Strong historical oppositions, however, divide the fields of analytical aesthetics and cultural theory. One highly provocative concept that channels some of these oppositions is the concept of address. The concept of address - which has its rhetorical and philosophical origins in Quintilian, Althusser, Barthes, and Derrida - is a term of art in the fields of feminist and postcolonial theory, where it points to the differential ways in which discourse is seen to position social agents. Central to the notion of such subject positioning is the idea that cultural entities postulate specific cultural, emotional, and cognitive capacities on the part of their audiences in order to make their effects. In this manner cultural entities both reflect and produce social differentiation in terms of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. Because the notion of address helps to register differential workings of artworks and other cultural objects, it is central to the analysis of the political dimensions of these entities. With the help of the concept of address, one might say, cultural theory is elaborating an aesthetic ontology in terms of difference. Philosophical aesthetics in the analytical tradition, on the other hand, has grounded its ontology in the postulate of human commonalities. Accordingly, when philosophers and cultural theorists engage in debates about the nature of address, two contrary traditions encounter one another, one humanist, centered in intersubjective judgments and experiences, the second anti-humanist, centered in discursive structures and social difference.

In the face of these historical polarities, the question is: Can the concept of address, as it operates in cultural criticism offer new impulses to philosophical understandings of the aesthetics-ethics relation? And conversely, can philosophical ideas about the relations between the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of art feed positively into the theory of address?

These questions were at issue at the Utrecht conference on address and the aesthetics-ethics dichotomy. Because all speakers seemed to entertain somewhat different notions of address, I would like to use the following pages to identify the various conceptions of address that were developed in the lectures that are included below. My questions will then be rather elementary, but not for that matter, easily answered: What kinds of things does address do? How can we understand its structure? What is it for a given artistic production to address a particular community of readers or a public? In distilling the various accounts that were given of these questions, I will focus narrowly on the intersection of questions of address with questions of aesthetic/ethical ontology and interpretation.[11]

## 3. TOWARDS A THEORY OF ADDRESS

Ellen Rooney's lecture "Feminist Theory and the Mode of Address: Towards a Semiprivate Room," describes a form of feminist address, represented by the structure of a semiprivate room. Rooney extends this term from its ordinary reference, where it designates shared hospital rooms to classrooms and academic disciplines. A semiprivate room is a space that is neither private nor public. It is defined by constitutive exclusions. But it is not self-enclosed, because there is also a welcoming of unknown interlocutors and experiences. A semiprivate room can neither be privatized by closing it off from outside intervention, nor can it be made public by leveling conditions for participation and allows for an impersonal form of intimacy. The mode of address of the semiprivate room enables one to claim other people's stories in support of one's own feminist stance, and thereby breaks any automatic association that might be presumed to obtain between experience and political identity. In an earlier article that was a part of the background readings for the conference, Rooney argues that such a separation of experience and political stance allows feminists to transcend the limitations of experience-based feminisms, which tend to reproduce problematic structures of exclusion.[12]

Rooney's concept of feminist address conjoins several elements, namely, 1) institutional, political, and discursive conditions in which one's speech is produced and received (as established, for example, in the classroom, or the disciplines); 2) experiences; narratives; and acts of identification (as when one identifies with other people's stories); and 3) structures of authorization that are in play in a person's adoption of a feminist stance (as when one supports one's feminism through other people's experiences). Rooney has identified a highly intricate rhetorical-political constellation, which, in the vocabulary of analytical aesthetics I would describe as an aesthetico-ethical structure.[13]

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[11] For this reason I will pass over the powerful resonance which the conference theme accrued in the context of broader concerns, such as the topics of aesthetics, biotechnology, and global politics (Rosi Braidotti), aesthetic historicity and canonization (Paul Crowther), the relation between psychoanalytical interpretation and the reading of narrative (Richard Wollheim), and the nature of art's capacities to provide moral knowledge (Berys Gaut and Robert Hopkins). For a more extensive account of the conference see my "Aesthetics, Ethics, and the Theory of Address: An Interdisciplinary Encounter."

[12] Ellen Rooney, "What's the Story? Feminist Theory, Narrative, Address."

[13] This description would be controversial because I am deploying the term "aesthetic" here in a manner that goes beyond the art-appropriate, something that some might take issue with in this context. See, for example, Graham McFee's paper "Context, Audience, and Understanding" in this collection, which places serious strictures on what may count as art-appropriate.

Graham McFee, in his lecture "Context, Audience and Understanding", argues that considerations of address can be of philosophical relevance insofar they can be cashed out in terms of constraints on the knowledge and sensibilities that are required of aesthetically appropriate spectators. But in that case, the notion has nothing new to offer to philosophical aesthetics. According to McFee, all that counts when it comes to a characterization of the powers and capacities of audiences are questions about the concepts that a*ppropriately* mediate their perceptions of an artwork. Where an account of an artwork's address describes *actual* properties of appropriate audiences that might affect an observer's experience of an artwork, such as matters of power, class, or identity, it is in McFee's view extraneous to the field of philosophical aesthetics. McFee did not indicate whether there could be conditions under which empirical factors such as power, class, or identity might yield concepts that could appropriately mediate one's perception of an artwork, or what such conditions might be like. Thus it is not clear to me whether McFee would allow questions of power, class, and identity to have epistemic effects that might be considered aesthetically legitimate. I suspect that McFee would look negatively upon such effects, and that therefore the aesthetic and ethical role he would accord to address is negligible. However, McFee does in some cases permit appropriate aesthetic understanding to change with changing narratives of the history art and with changing tastes, so perhaps certain questions of power, class, and identity might permissibly affect aesthetic perception also. In that case address might have a non-trivial role to play in aesthetics. McFee de-fends thus a qualified view of address, where address either reduces to conditions of appropriate perception or to a brute empirical fact that is aesthetically irrelevant.

In his lecture "Intimation or Address," Rob van Gerwen distinguishes artistic and communicative forms of address. Acts of communication, according to van Gerwen, address audiences because of the persons these audiences consist of. Artworks, to the contrary, address no-one in particular but assume a cognitive stock on the part of the audience they address. Van Gerwen distinguishes two ways in which the address of artworks can be reciprocal. One form of reciprocity between artworks and observers lies in the fact that artworks get observers to mobilize an aesthetic appropriate cognitive background and thereby convey general stylistic properties. Beyond this general form of reciprocity, great works of art, in the moral and artistic sense, display another form of reciprocity, which van Gerwen calls "intimation." Through a successful integration of style and

expression, these works inspire the observer's imagination to bring her or his personal cognitive background to the work. By eliciting from the audience empathetic, personal completions of gaps in the work's narrative, great works of art are able to intimate human consciousness, that is to say, to make the work's mental and moral meanings intimate to the audience. The viewer encounters an artist's individual style in this case with a highly personal cognitive stock, which is responsible for a form of reciprocal address that is close to the face-to-face reciprocity obtaining between communicators.

My own paper "Aesthetic Reciprocity: Skepticism or Address?," argues that the concept of address connects qualities of the form, medium, and context of an artwork with the tension, contradictions, harmonies, and pleasures that are produced in its observers in consequence of their individual realizations of the work's aesthetic demands. In virtue of this dynamical structure, the concept of address, in my view, is able to register relational dimensions of aesthetic exchange and identify a level of aesthetic functioning that is also ethical. My paper substantiates this account of address with the help of Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman documentary theater piece *Fires in the Mirror*. Smith makes her spectators aware of attractions and resistances with which they encounter other people's modes of address. Provoking shifting empathies and identifications with her characters, Smith facilitates a critical recognition and a subsequent overcoming of automatic and stereotypical responses. Through the work's distinctive structure of address, I argue, *Fires in the Mirror* makes an aesthetic intervention in modes of relationality that are formative of social identity, racial consciousness, and religious stance, exercising an ethical impact through aesthetic means. An artwork's address, accordingly, is indicative of ways in which the work locks into cultural strategies of differentiation and legitimization, and bears responsibility for the work's more or less reciprocal cultural functioning.

In her lecture "The Linguistic Turnabout," Elizabeth Weed distinguishes two kinds of address. The first mode of address, which Weed recognizes in Lacan as well as contemporary cultural critics "merely addresses" the reader, in the sense that it operates at the level of consciousness only, assumes its reader in advance, and leaves the reader essentially where she already was before she started her reading. The second mode of address, which Weed attributes to Freud's work and to poststructuralist writings, works at the unconscious level, and allows the reader no escape. Activating the reader's corporeal and libidinal investments, this mode

of address enlists the reader in a process of change along trajectories of which she does not know in advance where they will lead her. Address, as Weed deploys the term, pertains then to the ways in which a text engages the readers' psychic structures, which can be static or transformative, leaving the subject in place along with her comfortable certainties about its own instabilities, or getting the unconscious moving along unforeseeable paths of change. Because for Weed address is a matter of textual engagement, her notion of address, as I understand her, connects what in philosophical vocabulary might be described as aesthetic and ethical dimensions of reading.

The papers by Rooney, van Gerwen, myself, and Weed identify different ways in which forms of address do or do not give rise to specific aesthetic and ethical processes of subject-formation and intersubjective interaction. Rosi Braidotti, Paul Crowther, and Richard Wollheim gave further depth to this question in light of their accounts of subjectivity, of art's historicity, and of artistic interpretation.[14]

Rosi Braidotti outlined how a postmodern notion of the subject can support a new vision of the aesthetics-ethics interrelation. Braidotti argued that a field of energies and forces, understood along Deleuzian lines, is able to give rise to an aesthetic and an ethics of becoming. In Braidotti's view, the discontinuous, transformative, and interactional processes that realize what she calls "nomadic subjectivity" are able to set their own limits in the form of thresholds of sustainability. What needs to be preserved in order to sustain a nomadic process of becoming is the capacity to desire. According to Braidotti, the attitudes and actions that intensify and support such continual becoming (for example, stopping *just* before the last impulse you can take) are both aesthetic and ethical. Aesthetics and ethics, according to Braidotti, are then two dimensions of the same process. While Braidotti did not explicitly fold address into the Deleuzian picture, I assume that address, understood as an interactive process, would qualify as a process of becoming and as such would activate both aesthetic and ethical registers, according to Deleuze.

Paul Crowther distinguished two modes of address, one of which he considered capable of integrating aesthetic and ethical effects in the subject. The first

[14] For these accounts, see, for example, Rosi Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory; Paul Crowther, Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness; and Richard Wollheim, Painting as an Art.

mode of address consists in a direct appeal on the part of the artist or the artwork to a specific historical public. In virtue of their relation with the imagination, artworks of high quality, according to Crowther, transcend such address to specific groups, and come to participate in a transhistorical horizon of aesthetic comparisons. In Crowther's view, artworks of high quality attain a form of address directed at the universalizable observer, across history and cultural location. Transcending their original contexts, Crowther pointed out, good artworks can become paradigms of what art can aspire to, modify ways of representing the world, and change their audience's ways of thinking. In this way, Crowther argued, these works achieve a fusion of the aesthetic and the moral, and generate a form of reciprocity. If I follow Crowther correctly, the moral/aesthetic fusion and the reciprocity that good artworks achieve both depend upon and make possible a universal mode of address.

Like Weed, Richard Wollheim took a psychoanalytical approach to address. In his public lecture "How Literary Works Come by Their Meaning," Wollheim outlined what may perhaps be seen as a two-fold mode of address taking place among texts and their readers, one mode linguistic, and the other mode engaging more extensive interpretive capacities on the part of the reader. Wollheim examined ways in which a reader's interpretation of the narrative meaning of a text (as opposed to its linguistic meaning) might parallel the interpretive work by which a psychoanalyst is able to arrive at the latent meaning of a client's narrative by way of its manifest meaning. If Wollheim's argument may indeed be cast in terms of address, then he can be seen to distinguish different levels of address in terms of the nature of the interpretive work that the reader is being asked to perform in comprehending a text.

## 4. CONCLUSION

If it is possible to mark common ground in the different perspectives presented here, I think it emerges around a notion of address that refers to an artwork's solicitation of appreciative capacities on the part of the spectator. As several speakers indicated, these solicitations can be generic or particularistic; they can be personal or impersonal; they may appeal to conscious or unconscious levels of mental functioning; to narrowly circumscribed linguistic abilities or broader appreciative faculties; they may be mediated by aesthetic narratives, traditions, and norms, or

they may express more direct empirical connections with audiences. Most speakers made the different aesthetic, ethical, political, psychological, and reciprocal effects that they did or did not ascribe to address contingent on some of these dimensions of an artwork's solicitations. Common ground between the talks was also discernible in the kinds of capacities speakers attributed to address, namely artistic powers to engender unforeseeable forms of subjectivity; to create alternative kinds of intimacy; and to establish reciprocal modes of being that are joint aesthetico-ethical achievements.

To my mind, however, the conference was most provocative not so much on account of the common ground that it may have outlined, but in the questions it raised about the entanglements of address with a range of assumptions about subjectivity; the art-appropriate; the public-private divide; the separation between the generic and the particularistic, and the split between the personal and the impersonal. Insofar as many of the central issues, from a philosophical perspective, seem to converge in the question of a specifically *aesthetic* form of address, it is worthwhile to consider Rooney's suggestion that aesthetics, as one of the disciplines, represents a mode of address in itself, organized around constitutive exclusions that allow for a critical openness to the unfamiliar. What can the disciplinary address that constitutes aesthetics tell us about address?

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