

**Galen A. Johnson**

*The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics.*

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Galen Johnson's *The Retrieval of the Beautiful* is a sustained inquiry into Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics. His argument is made clear at the outset: "Maurice Merleau-Ponty seldom spoke of beauty, yet his philosophy is about the beautiful. It is also about the sublime" (xvii). More specifically, Johnson aims to "retrieve" the beautiful insofar as it can be renewed from the status of "a completely neglected idea...at the onset of the twenty-first century" (xviii). A theme of "profound loss" is therefore at the heart of Johnson's book. Whether or not this loss entails a tone of nostalgic lamentation hinges upon how successful Johnson's methodological act of retrieval is.

Divided into eight chapters, Johnson's book is thematically diverse and conceptually rich. Beginning with a chapter concerning the "eclipse of beauty," Johnson spends a large part of the first section of the book exploring Merleau-Ponty's late essay, "Eye and Mind," an essay to which he will return time and again. Hereafter, three historical figures are employed in order to reconfigure a Merleau-Pontean notion of beauty: Paul Cezanne, Auguste Rodin, and Paul Klee. The final part of the book details Johnson's approbation of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics as it serves to contribute to contemporary and future debates.

"Beauty in Eclipse," the book's first chapter, sets out to identify some of the key dangers implicated in the neglect of beauty. Above all, what this neglect confronts us with is a "bifurcated thinking," whereupon "the separation of subject from object dominates philosophy and science" (5). The power of the beautiful for Johnson is such that it allows us to "transcend the subject-object dichotomy, and in it both union and difference are philosophically integrated" (5). How Johnson will achieve this transcendence will depend in large on his use of the term "retrieval." His particular usage of the term refers less to an "archaic history" but more to a sense of revision and reviewing. As such, it carries with it a critical integration alongside a recognition of the mutual involvement of "future-past-present" (11).

The book's second chapter focuses in particular on Merleau-Ponty's late essay, "Eye and Mind." The importance of this essay is that it provides a key linking Merleau-Ponty's account of aesthetics with his late ontology, as it figures in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Johnson's handling of this difficult yet central essay is careful and nuanced. After providing an overview of Merleau-Ponty's two earlier essays on aesthetics, he then proceeds to plot the development of Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Descartes, so as it figures as a central dynamic in "Eye and Mind." Indeed, for Johnson, "Eye and Mind" is fundamentally a confrontation with the potential inhumanity marking contemporary science and philosophy (21). This inhumanity Johnson detects in the "monstrous child" of contemporary science, a child that was conceived by Cartesianism (22).

In this way, according to Johnson's reading, Merleau-Ponty's ontologically grounded aesthetics seeks to renew vision that "prospect the actual world" and in the process clarifies the errors inherent in the Cartesian model of science and vision (22). The Cartesian background to "Eye and Mind" sets in place a series of themes such as light and depth that have a specific appeal to painting and engraving. Johnson's reading here accents the phenomenological rejoinders to Descartes, as when "Descartes' first aesthetic error was that he assumes the truth and finality of linear perspective drawing" (27) or when "Cartesianism mistakenly takes for granted the perspectival techniques of the Renaissance" (28). In response to these errors, Johnson shows us via Merleau-Ponty that vision is multisensory, involving the totality of the tactile body in its relationship with the world rather than solely the eyes and the head. Such an idea reappears in Merleau-Ponty's notion of "the flesh" (*la chair*); Johnson's demonstration of the flesh as having an aesthetic structure to it that is employed in "Eye and Mind" is compelling and engaging.

Ultimately, the articulation of beauty in "Eye and Mind" forms only a "glimpse" into this concept, and it will fall to later chapters to develop this concept more broadly. In the meantime, Johnson turns to the sources of Merleau-Ponty's essay by studying the works of Cezanne, Rodin, and Klee. In each of these three chapters, Johnson weaves a series of themes that gives a vital quality to Merleau-Ponty's abstractions. It is in the final part of the book, however, that the integration of aesthetics and ontology is most clearly realized.

Chapter 6 turns to the important issue of desire, in both the aesthetic and erotic sense. Given its place in the tradition of Kantian aesthetics, desire plays a central role in the aesthetics of beauty. In that tradition, desire, with its attachment to the sensuality of the body, is taken to be an obstruction to the disinterested judgment of art. This pernicious appraisal of desire runs deep in post-Kantian and Platonic philosophies of art, and Johnson's treatment is aimed at restoring desire to a site of affirmation rather than negation (147). Critiquing the notion of desire as it figures in both Sartre and Hegel, Johnson presents the reader with an alternative account, which frames desire as a bodily teleology, or "a movement outward toward the outside" rather than an act of negating the Other (152). This approbation of desire as a constituent of the living body allows Johnson to employ desire as a form of mutual interrogation between self and world. The principle merit of this approach is that it generates an open aesthetic sensory field, restoring aesthetics to its original term, "*aesthesis*." In other words, desire becomes emblematic of, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "let[ting things] be and to witness their continued being" (159).

It is within this chapter that Johnson gives form to his Merleau-Pontean account of beauty. For Johnson, beauty coincides with wonder and a "fecund silence of life, love" (168). In concrete terms, this is manifest in "the awesome silence of the primeval forest at dawn before the awakening of birdsong, of the windless canyon at sunset, of the calm and quiet sea at daybreak, not a wave lapping" (168). In each of these examples Johnson's account of beauty suggests a pre-world of immense silence, prior to the split between subject and object. Yet, for Johnson, this aesthetic realm extends to the world more broadly, stating that "the beautiful has been enlarged and opened up as the entire realm of the sensible" (168).

Given that the beautiful covers the whole realm of the sensible, how can it distinguished from the sublime? The final chapter engages with this question directly, placing Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics against the backdrop of Kant's. What is distinct about Merleau-Ponty's sublime? Johnson mentions two aspects. First, in distinction to the Kantian sublime, which privileges "inner consciousness," the Merleau-Pontean sublime reinforces our relationship with the world (224). Whereas the Kantian sublime gains its affective powers through empowering the lone subject (one thinks of archetypal images of sublimity in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich), Johnson accents the intentional quality of the sublime. The second aspect of the Merleau-Pontean sublime is rooted in the "inhuman element in perception" (225). By this, Merleau-Ponty refers to a mode of experience in which all the familiar attributes are taken away, thus revealing the strange and uncanny world lurking within the familiarity of appearances. This allusion to an alien or "wild" uncanny points to an important departure not only from Kant's sublime, but from discourses on the aesthetics of beauty more broadly. With this gesture, Merleau-Ponty's sublime points to the postmodernist approbation of the sublime, a point Johnson develops via Lyotard's critical interrogation of Merleau-Ponty.

For all this, one wonders if Johnson's aesthetic working of Merleau-Ponty retains enough phenomenological openness to render it a genuine *aesthesis*. This worry is directed in particular at a particular kind of aesthetic phenomenon that surfaces frequently in Johnson's book, one marked by scenes of serenity and stillness. How do ugliness and violence fit into this theme? Can Merleau-Ponty account for an aesthetic experience of horror? If he can, then to what extent can Merleau-Ponty approach the tension between aesthetics and ethics inherent in this aestheticization of horror? Such questions are implicit in Johnson's book, but never fully dealt with in detail. The reference to an "inhuman element in perception" points to this aspect of the sublime, but the theme is not fully developed.

Despite this criticism, Johnson's book is a worthwhile addition to Merleau-Ponty scholarship for at least two reasons. First, it clearly articulates that aesthetics for Merleau-Ponty is not an additional aspect of his philosophy, but at the very genesis of his thinking itself and central for an understanding of both his late and early ontology. Second, the book demonstrates that the retrieval of the beautiful need not entail the uncritical approbation of the past: it is instead an invariant feature of human experience, so far as experience makes an appeal to a prereflective union between subject and object.

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