The Responsiveness of Pictorial and Linguistic Figuration to Being’s Inner Fragility

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In this insightful and meticulously researched book, Kaushik addresses Merleau-Ponty’s long-neglected call for a “figured philosophy” capable of revealing the conditions of appearing or phenomenalization within appearing itself and thus within sensibility. In Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology of flesh, the figured philosophy reveals being’s lack of any foundational self-containment, or its inability “to enact itself without also coming into appearances” (13), crossing out the familiar dichotomies of the history of thought, such as reality versus appearance, presence versus absence, or activity versus passivity. In this context of Merleau-Pontyan “hyper-dialectic,” Kaushik considers the figure to be “a constellating structure of the sensible, from out of which the activity and passivity of vision [seeing and being seen] constantly refract on each other” (33), precluding an understanding of vision as subjective, idealizing, representational, or indeed necessarily human. Thinking, along with Merleau-Ponty, beyond the privileging of difference in late twentieth-century thought, Kaushik notes that vision is not thinkable as either pure identity or pure difference but is, rather, “the location from out of which the distinction arises” (34).

It is the art work, Kaushik argues, that functions as a mode of interrogation capable of granting access to an autonomous and dynamic “principle of gestation” underlying determinate appearances or events. As he puts it (with reference to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “a non-conceptual presentation of universal being”), the art-work “discloses depth itself, the multi-dimensional…field-structure of things that…circumambulates each specific thing” (56). The art-work can thus inaugurate and sustain a “figured philosophy” that, in contrast to philosophy’s historical privileging of being’s unicity and substantial self-sufficiency, and of actuality over possibility, recognizes being’s multidimensional and topologically articulated expressivity. The work of art thus fails to present any ideal world and further, rather than effacing their own facture in favor of an illusion, modern and contemporary visual works tend to
reveal the means of their own production and thus to subvert the traditional distinction between the gestures and means of creation and the created product. As Kaushik notes, art thereby “thinks from before the thought that tends toward absolutization and totalization” (ALF, 58)—a thought that, while political in its import, is indissociable from a metaphysics that rejects incompossibility, incoherence, ambiguity, incompletion or, in Kaushik’s apt words, “an inner fragility of being.” He interlinks the figured philosophy that art opens up access to with a phenomenology of life (inspired by the thought of Renaud Barbaras) that recognizes a continual incompleteness or dispossession, refractory to totalization, as fundamentally characteristic of life. This understanding of life resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s own thought regarding the “new biology” of the mid-twentieth-century, in his late lecture courses on Nature, in a way that calls for further analysis and reflection.

The question then arises whether the “autofigure,” defined perhaps most succinctly as “a region of openness or reflexivity that lacks self-sufficiency” or as “a spatio-temporal field of succession and procession” that allows for phenomenalization (53), is in any way alien to the linguistic figure or the linguistic work in its ideality. Merleau-Ponty, of course, made no such claim, given his profound appreciation of literature, which is indeed privileged over visual art in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence.” Nonetheless, Kaushik reflects, Merleau-Ponty’s figured philosophy emancipates the sensible as prior to signification and as resistant to idealization. Thus signification, characteristic of language, may appear to be marginalized, and the question as to how to think the relationship between art and language poses itself.

Kaushik guides the reader through an erudite and insightful discussion of the relevant thought of Lyotard, Genette, Ricoeur, Dufrenne, Chomsky, and Kristeva, as well as of the history of the very notion of figure. Historically, this notion indicates an opacity that is proper to language, insofar as it is “essentially complete unto itself and has its own terrain,” rather than being in any way denotative (61). This terrain is one of virtuality or, in Genette’s term, of a “substitutive obsession” or of metaphoricity rather than literality. More radically, it is a question here of the behavior of signs, or of their behavior within the virtual system of language, and within inter-textuality (a notion that complements Merleau-Ponty’s notions of inter-corporeity and of inter-animality). Language thus becomes removed from the sway of the historical dominance of subjectivity. Once this status of figurative language is revealed, the question becomes whether and how the figured philosophy can do it justice.

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