Merleau-Ponty's Examination of Gestalt Psychology

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The thought of Merleau-Ponty has recently moved from being present to being past for us. Among other things, including the passage of time in continental philosophy, this is no doubt due to his posthumous works becoming available and to the maturation of scholarship during the two decades since his death. If he is now a past figure, it is at least easier to subject him to historical study where his development, the internal harmony of the parts and phases of his thought, the influences on and by him, etc. are concerned, i.e. to treat him as having thought in history rather than as having dropped from the sky to challenge us.2

The present study contains the results of asking how Merleau-Ponty interpreted, criticized, and developed thought from one of his earliest and largest sources (the present author will deal with the other early large source, Constitutive Phenomenology, in another essay). No doubt there are profounder and subtler gestalty traces in the core of his position than are brought out here,3 but it seems of importance to study how he dealt with a scientific movement at arm's length, as it were, since this will show something of the assimilative technique as well as the results he gained. The published writings have been worked
through chronologically and the several hundred passages where a gestaltist text or author is referred to or a matter is discussed in gestaltist terms noted. Often Merleau-Ponty simply uses Gestalt Psychology approvingly, but often he also discusses it and shows why he accepts and rejects parts of it; hence the word "examination" in the title above. Given the magnitude of this task and the limits of space, it is hoped that merely an interpretation of this examination be accepted in lieu of an examination of it.

Merleau-Ponty read widely in philosophy and science and should be studied for how he relates to Bergson, Brunschvicg, Cassirer, Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, Marcel, Sartre, Scheler, etc. Where scientists are concerned, some work has been done on the Saussure connection and on Marxism, but work remains to be done on involvements with Freud and other psychologists, with Sociology and Ethnology, and indeed with the Human Sciences in general. Here the concern will be only with the Gestaltists, who for some reason have not received the attention they deserve in Merleau-Ponty studies, possibly because too few in philosophy take science as seriously as he did. Anyone who has read any of his writings knows of this involvement and may even recognize that there is more than can be handled even in only an expository article, unless the Gestalt Physics of Köhler and the Gestalt Physiology (e.g. SC 33-47/33-46) and Psychopathology of Gelb and Goldstein are excluded, in which case the signification of "Gestalt Psychology" in the title above is clearer. Speaking positively, "Gestalt Psychology" refers chiefly to the work of Wertheimer, Köhler, and Koffka, the leaders of the so-called Berlin School of the 1920s, which came to the United States about 1933, but Lewin and the influential French appreciator of Gestalt Psychology, Paul Guillaume, and such convergent investigators as Katz, Michotte, Rubin, and Tolman must also be mentioned.

Before turning to what Merleau-Ponty made Gestalt Psychology out to be, we might survey his thirty-year involvement with it. In the 1920s, Guillaume began writing, translating, and reporting on gestaltist works. It may be that Merleau heard Köhler lecture on "La Perception humaine" at the Collège de France in 1929, although the publication of that lecture is not in his bibliographies. When Merleau-Ponty and Gurwitsch met in Spring 1933 the younger man was already familiar not only with phenomenology but also gestaltist thought and even Gurwitsch's dissertation, in which the attempt is made to relate that thought to Husserl's philosophy. That April Merleau-Ponty applied for a grant to study "the experimental investigations undertaken in Germany by the School of 'Gestalttheorie'" (G 9). In February of