

MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE DISCLOSURE OF *SENS*

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Barry Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism: from terror to reform*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1979, cloth \$17.50, pp. 223.

Professor Cooper's aim is to present a critical study of Merleau-Ponty's politics. He points out that scholars have dealt only superficially with this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's work, and proposes to rectify the situation by confining his purview to the political dimension.

Cooper argues that Marcel's notion of commitment and Hegel's critique of religion influenced Merleau-Ponty's choice of humanism as the core of his political thought. To elucidate the philosophical justification for this commitment to humanism, Cooper briefly considers Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. He prefaces his remarks with the rather curious contention that since *Phénoménologie de la Perception* has been acclaimed a classic, "one is justified in reading it in a particular way if one can show it to be consistent with other, chiefly political, pieces of the same period" (p. 16). Deeming it futile in any case to attempt a balanced summary of the book, and stressing that his "purpose is simply to document the genesis and nature of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical assumptions insofar as they bear upon his politics," Cooper restricts his consideration to Merleau-Ponty's notion of historical contingency (pp. 16-17). He notes that human being is a continual act of commitment to a future ontologically distinct from its past, and that vertical transcendence is an illusion. Pointing to Kierkegaard, Cooper argues that Merleau-Ponty erred gravely in failing to recognize that "human being is ontologically limited by its very nature" (p. 24). "For Merleau-Ponty", says Cooper, "the only limitations to human commitments are either natural or given limitations or else merely human limitations, that is, the pragmatic consequences of earlier choices. In neither case are these limitations ontologically significant to human beings as such. Rather they should be seen as challenges to action and obstacles to be removed" (p. 24). This lack of ontological limitations constituted "an aberration of understanding" which restricted Merleau-Ponty's political thought and, valid critical insights notwithstanding, excluded "the further questions that carry one's perspective to further and more comprehensive levels" (p. 25).

Cooper devotes considerable attention to Merleau-Ponty's reflections on

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the experience of war, occupation, resistance, and liberation, which confirmed practically his theoretical commitment to humanism and prompted him to articulate a political 'ethics of responsibility'. Cooper argues that besides emphasizing responsibility for the unanticipated consequences of one's commitments, Merleau-Ponty "tried to justify responsibility for violence in the name of humanism" (p. 36). His adoption of Marx's theory of the proletariat and the inseparability of means and ends, ruled out reliance on the fabrication metaphor to justify humanist violence. However, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of history as process raised the problem of relativism, the spectre of the historical traveller who lacks all signposts and "can know neither where he is nor where he is going" (p. 42). "How can it matter what we do", asks Cooper, "if history is a process and the final 'moment' or 'product' is not held to be its proper justification?" Cooper concludes that "any justification of humanist terror must be from outside history" (p. 40). Yet by rejecting a divine situator of human beings, Merleau-Ponty excluded the possibility of judging politics "through mimicry of the divine logos" (p. 45). He therefore posited a 'logic of history' which, as an 'absolute within the relative', eventually eliminates 'irrational historical forms' but does not preclude a series of accidents ending in chaos. Cooper dismisses this negative dialectic as "pragmatic make-believe" whose only justification for violence was hope (pp. 41-42). "If one focuses upon process rather than outcome," says Cooper, "there is nothing to prevent men from believing that limits are temporary, wilful, or even desirable conventions that must disappear as the process unwinds" (p. 45). By drawing out the political implications of his philosophy, Merleau-Ponty arrived at an argument from necessity which "constituted, in effect, the sought-for external justification of humanist terror." (p. 44) It stipulated, contends Cooper, that:

As contingency, violence may some day be ended, but we can have no knowledge of that day before it dawns. Nevertheless it was the day to which all human beings (all whose consciousnesses had been purged of transcendence) were necessarily committed. At the same time, as necessity (prior to that day), violence was justified not on its own terms but by the context of a violent world . . . The whole problem, so far as Merleau-Ponty was concerned, was that the new day had not (yet) dawned and we can meanwhile only hope for it while being compelled to employ violence against those whose hopes are different. (pp. 46-47)

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Cooper argues that Merleau-Ponty's "appeal to hope is an appeal to abandon our common sense experience of everyday reality as well as our experience of divine reality and take our bearings within the imagination, where humanist, progressive violence provides the only means to achieve proletarian power or mutual recognition" (p. 55). In his view, Merleau-Ponty "tried to overcome, or at least obscure with rhetorical bluster, the obvious embarrassment of having to rely on such fragile and vulnerable assumptions" (p. 53). By reducing all non-violence to hypocrisy, Merleau-Ponty "violated the first rule of phenomenological hermeneutics, to allow the meaning itself to appear" (p. 185, #30).

Cooper maintains, in sum, that having unnecessarily restricted the field of his political thought, Merleau-Ponty was prompted to shift the whole discussion "to the level of the imaginative" in an attempt to overcome the objections of relativism and to preserve his conception of humanism. "However," says Cooper, "one cannot live always in the imagination, and Merleau-Ponty was also a man of great common sense" (p. 55). When he put aside "the grand theoretical questions of process, incarnation, and the dialectic of contingency and necessity," and turned to common sense questions, "some of these ambiguities and inadequacies were cleared up or at least modified" (pp. 71, 55). Hence, Cooper devotes much of his book to the study of these latter questions. He situates them in their polemical context, outlines the historical background of the political events which led Merleau-Ponty to alter his judgements, and traces the evolution of his politics. Cooper thus examines in detail the Moscow Trials and "the thoroughly practical, common sense, though not, perhaps, everyday question of the actual historical fate of Bukharin" (p. 55). He applauds Merleau-Ponty's analysis as "a model of clarity" and declares that "in the limited sense of political action . . . his understanding of contingency is undubitably valid" (p. 69). Cooper speaks of our having to act with and against others, our inability to foresee all and control the consequences of our actions. Nonetheless, he criticizes the "limitations in his thinking" which prompted Merleau-Ponty to ignore "the spiritual corruption of Stalinism" and cling to an attitude of 'Marxist waiting'. As Cooper sees it, "the politics of hope and resignation were translated into a practical commitment that refused to judge what was unknown" (pp. 83, 71, 76, 75). Yet Merleau-Ponty's efforts to avoid blocs and war "were of no avail; their impact on real politics was nil. As a result he developed a more modest understanding of the political role of the thinker, as well as a more moderate politics" (p. 168).

Until the Korean War, claims Cooper, Marxism belonged to Merleau-Ponty's "ideological imagination" and was not challenged by "real life" (p. 98). With this event, however, the truth of Marxism as critique irrespective of action could not be maintained: 'There must be something that prepares for the defects of action, even in criticism.' That 'something' was the failure to

recognize that 'revolutions are true as movements and false as regimes', because once institutionalized, they stifle any authentic opposition (pp. 109, 133). Cooper stresses the importance of Merleau-Ponty's concept of institution, noting that it "indicated a more concrete and commonsensical . . . turn in his political thought" (p. 133). Lacking this concept, Marxism decomposed into consciousness and history. Cooper contends that *Les Aventures de la Dialectique*, which embodied these reflections, constituted "a watershed" for Merleau-Ponty's political thinking and "may also have been a turning point for his philosophy as a whole", although philosophers have not appreciated "its pivotal philosophical significance" (p. 134).

Merleau-Ponty's continued refusal to accept the inevitability of blocs now led him to propose a 'new liberalism', or 'non-communist left', instead of a 'Marxist waiting'. Cooper points out that "from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's political writings, his later philosophical efforts seem directed towards something like a metaphysics of common sense . . . whose first task is to uphold the realness of factual truth." In the political dimension, "this means an insistence upon the reality of the mundane and factual" (pp. 169-170). Further, Cooper interprets Merleau-Ponty's stipulation that "direct ontology cannot be done" as "philosophical moderation", and argues that "the practical ethical implication that Merleau-Ponty drew . . . was that one must learn to moderate one's indignation at suffering or beholding injustice" (p. 176). Between the "metaphysics of common sense" and the politics of reform Cooper detects a "coherence": "justice implies moderation, while ontology . . . implies indirection" (p. 176). He concludes that Merleau-Ponty came to realize that "moderate speech is the public responsibility of the philosopher" (p. 177).

In discussing Merleau-Ponty's political thought, commentators have generally noted the importance of humanism and considered various political events contributing to the development of his position vis-à-vis Marxism. Although Cooper provides a comprehensive account of the political context within which Merleau-Ponty wrote, his argument is weak. Cooper confines himself to the political dimension of Merleau-Ponty's thinking — abstracting it from the rest, interpreting it, and referring back to the "more philosophical works" exclusively from the perspective of the political, in search of assumptions underlying the political as already interpreted by him. His failure to understand the whole from which he has isolated the dimension renders Cooper's treatment of the latter superficial and misleading.¹

Merleau-Ponty contends that "history is other people; it is the interrelationships we establish with them".² He argues, further, that all forms of human coexistence are based on perceptual experience and manifest the same fundamental structures. As Merleau-Ponty notes, this is not to say that history consists in perceiving. "Perception is rather the fundamental basis which cannot be ignored."³ A study of this primordial realm is therefore indis-

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pensable for an understanding of Merleau-Ponty's political thought. Such an examination reveals major flaws in Cooper's argument.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigation discloses perception itself to be "a violent act".⁴ Perception is shown to be already "primordial expression", and it emerges that the structure of expression involves a fundamental encroachment.⁵ This elemental violence characterizes the very being of incarnate subjectivity and therefore is a condition of all modes of human interrelations. Hence this form of violence, which constitutes the background of all political life, is an ontological limitation which precludes the possibility of ever eliminating all forms of violence.⁶ Far from pointing "to the threads of violence that *decorate* the social fabric", as Cooper would have it (p. 48, my emphasis), Merleau-Ponty discloses the ineradicable background of ontological intrusion and urges that any discussion of terror be situated within this context. With respect to the different sorts of eradicable violence, such as the terror discussed by Cooper, the notion of humanism and the criterion of progressiveness are indeed crucial for Merleau-Ponty. The significance of these terms, however, is fundamentally altered when one recognizes — as Cooper fails to do — the ineradicable residue of encroachment in all human coexistence.⁷ Contrary to Cooper's argument, human contingency for Merleau-Ponty implies a violence whose origin is ontological. Hence Cooper errs in arguing that Merleau-Ponty regards any limitations as ontologically insignificant and considers violence a necessary, but "temporary limit" to the achievement of a "homogeneous society" in which all "limitations to human commitments" would be ended (p. 24). This means rejecting Cooper's further claim that Merleau-Ponty clung desperately to that "ideal" until events finally forced him to adopt "a sensible political attitude" (pp. 98, 199, #88).

An examination of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perceptual experience reveals, moreover, that the denial of a divine situator and truths beyond history does not entail a relativism of the sort suggested by Cooper's description of the traveller for whom "there are no signposts at all". Merleau-Ponty's position on relativism, significance and truth is extremely complex, and there can be no question of reconstructing it here. It is an issue to which he returns again and again. The following considerations, however, will indicate the weakness of Cooper's argument.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological study discloses that perceptual experience comes into being through a primordial "communication" in which our body's "coexistence with the world magnetizes experience and induces a direction in it."⁸ Phenomenal body and pre-objective world are inseparable, but irreducible, terms of a "primordial dialogue" in which the world, as "intentional pole", "beckons" the body; and the body, as intersensory transcendence, outlines a "general form of the world" and lays down the general structures of experience.⁹ It is in this primary, pre-personal, pre-

objective, pre-logical dialogue that the world, objectivity, subjectivity, certainty, significance and truth come into being: "the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us".¹⁰ Phenomenal body and pre-objective world "gear into" a reciprocal "hold", giving rise to a "perceptual field" within which perceptual constants "become crystallized" and "things" emerge. The thing's identity is a dynamic "style of existence" which emerges in the way in which it elicits and responds to perceptual exploration. Colour, for example, has to do with a "total configuration" involving an interaction of all parts of the perceptual field through "the logic of lighting".¹¹ There is a genesis of mutually implicatory perceptual constants; the objects of perception come into being only as part of a whole dynamic configuration which, though open-ended, is self-affirming. From the anonymous, primary dialogue a perceptual absolute, or "world" comes into being. Because "our body is not geared to the world in all its positions", and because the genesis of reality is inseparable from "a certain bodily attitude", there is a perceptual optimum or telos consisting in an intersensory balance of detail and clarity, in virtue of which things can emerge as unreal, as more or less probable, or as self-evident.¹² The reciprocal "hold" of body and world, though contingent, is thus not arbitrary. Hence to claim, for example, that no one site, shape, or colour is truer than any other since these "vary with the perspective", is to presuppose our experience of determinate sizes, shapes and colours, and further, the experience of a perceptual world — and to fail to account for their genesis in perceptual experience. In tracing the genesis of reality, Merleau-Ponty brings to light a "logic of perception" which effectively subverts this sort of "vulgar relativism".¹³

Perceptual experience is inherently perspectival, open-ended and ambiguous; yet "the perceived world is grasped only in terms of direction" and "the very significance of the object . . . must be linked to its orientation, as indeed is indicated by the double usage of the French word *sens*."¹⁴ The primordial dialogue of perceptual experience reveals that significance is both centrifugal and centripetal, thus indicating "a new meaning of the word 'meaning'."¹⁵ Further, the primary dialogue and the meaning emerging from it are already intersubjective, for the perceptual world is always already a cultural world. Just as the phenomenal body's sensory fields "gear into" each other and open onto an intersensory perceptual world, so the sensory fields of plurality of body-subjects "gear into" each other and open onto an intersubjective world, or "interworld": "The phenomenal world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears."¹⁶ History is the web of significance which emerges from this "interworld"; it manifests the same fundamental structures. Though irreducible to perception, history likewise involves an intersubjective,

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reciprocal “hold” on the world, such that a direction, a non-arbitrary configuration crystallizes: “What is known as the significance of events is not an idea which produces them, or the fortuitous result of their occurring together. It is the concrete project of a future which is elaborated within social coexistence and in the One before any personal decision is made.”¹⁷ Here, as at the primary level of perception, there is a fundamental dialectic such that “we confer upon history its significance, but not without its putting that significance forward itself. The *Sinngebung* is not merely centrifugal”.¹⁸ In short, just as there is a genesis of perception, there is a genesis of history in which, ambiguity and incompleteness notwithstanding, events take shape and a self-affirming structure emerges. To say that history is process, is to say precisely that it is this dynamic, ongoing structuration. As at the level of perception, accidents are never ruled out; and these can disturb the “dialogue”, thereby upsetting the dynamic structuration of the historical field. Nonetheless, there is a “logic of history” just as there is a logic of perception, such that a telos, an absolute, emerges from contingency. There is no God to “(fix) the future from behind the world scene”, and there is only “a horizon of probabilities, comparable to our perceptual horizon which can, as we approach it and it becomes present to us, reveal itself to be quite different from what we were expecting.” Nevertheless, “the future . . . is not an empty zone in which we can construct gratuitous projects; it is sketched before us . . . and its outline is ourselves”. History, thus, is not “the configuration of choices that cannot be justified”, as Cooper’s interpretation alleges.¹⁹ As in the case of perceptual experience, a “vulgar relativism” presupposes the existence of historical significance and fails to account for its genesis in our intersubjective experience.

Merleau-Ponty was acutely aware that he had only begun to sketch out a phenomenology of culture, of truth and of history.²⁰ The project remained unfinished at the time of his death, and many of the difficulties which it poses remain unresolved. However, it is clear that the denial of a divine situator and truths beyond history does not imply the sort of relativism claimed by Cooper. In light of Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that the fundamental structures of perceptual experience pervade all forms of human coexistence, his contention that there is a logic of history which is an absolute within the relative, cannot simply be dismissed without first considering his phenomenological account of perception. The latter indicates that Merleau-Ponty’s contention is not mere “pragmatic make-believe”, as Cooper maintains, Merleau-Ponty therefore had no need to take refuge in the imagination so as to evade the charge of relativism — nor is the development of his political thought to be chartered in terms of his emergence from the imagination into the common sense world, as Cooper would have it. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty argues at length that common sense is dogmatic, that it suffers from a retrospective illusion which masks the genesis of reality. The world which common sense

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regards as natural or factual is a result, not a starting point. Hence for Merleau-Ponty there can be no question of analyzing "the given", as common sense dictates. On the contrary, "the realistic prejudice which all the sciences borrow from common sense" must be put in abeyance, in order to disclose "the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being."²¹ To contend that Merleau-Ponty's thought moved increasingly towards common sense is, therefore, a serious misinterpretation.

Merleau-Ponty's political position must, as already indicated, be understood within the context of his fundamental philosophical project. Contrary to Cooper's claim, I would suggest the following development. In the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty points out that "because we are in the world, we are *condemned to meaning*, and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history." It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's entire work constitutes a comprehensive effort to *dis-close* the emergence of "sens" by tracing its genesis in "a *logic lived through*", which is the very "flesh of history".²² Although his endeavour remains constant, Merleau-Ponty's insight develops as he digs ever further "down to the perceived world" whose structure "is buried under the sedimentations of later knowledge." In order to disclose "the core of primary meaning around which the acts of naming and expression take shape",²³ Merleau-Ponty undertakes a phenomenological investigation of the incarnate subject and the perceived world. He reveals the primary "dialogue" between phenomenal body and pre-objective world, and describes the reciprocal "hold" of its terms. Having shown the existence of this primordial "communication", as well as the interdependence and non-coincidence of its terms, Merleau-Ponty focuses increasingly on the "chiasme", the "écart" between them from which all meaning emerges. This shift of focus requires a corresponding shift from *perception and the body* to *vision and the flesh*; hence, Merleau-Ponty concerns himself increasingly with painting and language. The subject of perception is one for whom seeing, thinking and speaking are already distinct modes of relating to the world. To reach the level of "brute being" below the perceived-world-as-already-meaningful, Merleau-Ponty abandons the "tacit cogito" and turns to the realm of the painter, where he finds an example par excellence of vision as creative participation in the coming to be of "sens". The painter's vision is at the juncture of eye and mind, where thought, speech and vision have not yet become differentiated. It is a "concrete" seeing which "installs" itself in things, so that the painter has the impression of being looked at by them. His activity involves an optimal distance from, and a reversibility with, the visible which he is interrogating. This reversibility, and the attempt to capture it at its birth, lie at the root of his fascination with the self-portrait. Through a violent movement which decenters and recenters the visible, the painter transforms our vision of, and hence our relation to, the world. It is the philosopher, however, who recognizes the universal significance of such

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reversibility, and the “gap” which makes it possible. Through a creative decentering and recentering of language, the philosopher employs this fundamental reversibility in order to disclose the genesis of “sens” in all aspects of human coexistence. By being “everywhere and nowhere”, he traces events and his own discourse to their birth in “the flesh of the world”, thereby opening them up so as to disclose their fundamental element of contingency. In so doing, he reminds us of both the logic and the contingency of the history which we are making. By seizing the meaning of events, as it comes into being, Merleau-Ponty’s “phenomenology of origins” thus seeks to avoid a closure of history.²⁴ This ceaseless interrogation is a genuinely “concrete” philosophy — not because it is a “metaphysics of common sense” as Cooper claims, but because it locates the meaning of events in the very texture of “brute being”.

It is within this context that the development of Merleau-Ponty’s position vis-à-vis Marxism must be considered. His detailed discussion of the Moscow Trials, for example, centers on the Marxist understanding of history. In response to the charges brought against him, Bukharin acknowledges that there is indeed a logic of history; but he insists that this logic is not pre-determined. By continually qualifying the prosecutor’s questions and comments, Bukharin points out that the logic of history is a direction, a configuration of meaning which emerges in a lived situation whose terms are interdependent. For Merleau-Ponty, Bukharin’s case throws into relief the dialectical interaction of human being and intersubjective world — that intertwining of logic and contingency which is the very texture of history. Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental effort to disclose the genesis of “sens” precludes regarding his treatment of Bukharin as a “thoroughly practical, common sense” question. Similarly, his later rejection of the theory of the proletariat as an arbitrary closure of history, must be understood not as a moderation of indignation, but as part of an increasing focus on the “écart” in primordial being. Such a comprehensive study of Merleau-Ponty’s political thought has yet to be undertaken. Regrettably, Cooper’s book does not constitute an advance in this direction.

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Notes

In order to avoid possible confusion between citations from Cooper’s book and citations from Merleau-Ponty’s works, I am putting the latter in single quotation marks (‘. . .’) in the first section of my review. In the second part, I revert to normal quotation marks since there is no occasion for confusion.

1. A statement Cooper makes with reference to Merleau-Ponty’s consideration of Lukács perhaps best indicates the scope of the problem: “At one level Merleau-Ponty was simply reiterating a commonsensical sociological observation first made in the *Phénoménologie*, that one lived such-and-such a role before being conscious of it.” (117; the reference is to pp. 506-511)
2. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, (ed.) James M. Edie, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 25.

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3. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, pp. xviii, xix; *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 33.
 4. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 361.
 5. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 67; Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, trans. J. O'Neill Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. 109.
 6. As Merleau-Ponty notes in *Humanism and Terror*: "Inasmuch as we are incarnate beings, violence is our lot . . . Life, discussion, and political choice occur only against a background of violence . . . It is a law of human action that the present encroaches upon the future, the self upon other people." (109). Cooper cites this and other passages, but does not seem to appreciate their significance.
 7. For an elaboration of these points, see my article, "Merleau-Ponty: the ontological limitations of politics" in *Domination*, (ed.) Alkis Kontos, University of Toronto Press, 1975, pp. 101-114. See also my "Violence in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1973)
 8. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 254, 252.
 9. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 87, 214, 84.
 10. *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 25.
 11. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 300, 312.
 12. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 297, 252, 303.
 13. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 297, 299.
 14. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 253.
 15. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 428, 146.
 16. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 357, xx.
 17. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 449.
 18. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 450. See also Merleau-Ponty's remark that it is a matter of studying the body of history, rather than its head or feet (*Ibid.*, p. xix).
 19. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 49; *Humanism and Terror*, pp. 94, 55, 95, 96.
 20. *The Primacy of Perception*, pp. 9, 20, 25.
 21. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. xiii, xiv, xix, xx, 10, 39.
 22. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. xix, 49; *Signs*, p. 20.
 23. *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 5; *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xv.
 24. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 184, xviii; "Eye and Mind" in *The Primacy of Perception*; "Introduction to *Signs*: Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (ed.) Claude Lefort, Northwestern University Press, 1968, pp. 168, 171, 200, 250, 259, 264, 266.
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