My purpose is to advance the phenomenological theory of perception by filling what appears to be a gap in the classical, that is, Husserlian form of the theory. To this end, the classical phenomenological theory of perception will be presented briefly to the extent required to bring out the still unanswered problems. A solution to the problem in terms of Gestalt theory will be proposed. Finally, we shall consider a consequence which the proposed solution has for Husserl’s theory of sedimentation and for his idea of a genetic phenomenology in general.

§I. The Classical Theory

The fundamental phenomenon which the phenomenological theory of perception must consider first, and take as its point of departure, is that of perceptual adumbration. By this we mean the essential onesidedness of every particular perception of a material thing. For instance, we stand before a building and look at it from a certain point of observation. Accordingly, the perceived building presents itself from one determinate side, say, its front side, and not from a different one; it appears as near, as located straight before us, as seen at street level, and so on. It is its relatedness to a point of observation that gives the particular perception the character of one-sidedness and, in that sense, incompleteness. Such incompleteness, however, is not ascertained from a point of view above or beyond, or, in any sense whatever, outside the perception in question. On the contrary, its incompleteness or one-sidedness denotes an immanent and inherent phenomenal feature of that very perception. For a particular
perception to be experienced as incomplete, it must be experienced as in need, or at least as susceptible, of being complemented. In its being experienced as incomplete or one-sided, the given perception refers to further perceptions to be realized from different points of observation, perceptions through which the selfsame thing—the building—will appear, but under different aspects, in different orientations, in varying manners of adumbrational presentation.

Speaking noetically (that is, in terms of acts rather than noemata), the particular perception is experienced as a phase of a process which, in addition to that perception, comprises further perceptions, namely, those through which the same thing presents itself, although under a variety of aspects. The experienced incompleteness of a particular perception thus proves tantamount to its experienced insertion into one sustained process and its reference to further phases of that process. From the noematic point of view, we must speak of references of the present perceptual appearance or adumbrational presentation (that is, the building offering itself under a certain aspect and in a certain orientation) to further appearances and presentations. Just as the present act of perception is experienced as a phase of a process, so the noema corresponding to that act presents itself as a member of a noematic system. Perceptual experience never exhausts itself in single acts, but can be understood only in terms of processes which, incidentally, are open, i.e., capable of indefinite continuation. It must be stressed that even a static phenomenological analysis—one which does not consider the perceptual process in its unfolding and development, but rather confines itself to the study of a single perception—must discover the process-character of perceptual experience, insofar as its quality as a phase, hence its reference to further phases, belongs among the phenomenal features of every single perception.

In all his writings dealing with phenomenological problems of perception (Ideen, I; Cartesianische Meditationen; Erfahrung und Urteil; and Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie), Husserl almost invariably expresses in noetic terms the process-character of perceptual experience as it is meant here, that is, as ascertainable by a static analysis. To recall only a few of his formulations: through every act of perception more is intended than merely that which is given in direct sense-experience; every act surpasses and overreaches itself in pointing to further acts by which it is to be