The University of Denver and The Iliff School of Theology

Joint Ph.D. Program in the Study of Religion

Dissertation Proposal

THE AMOROUS IMAGINATION:
EVENT, SATURATION, AND HERMENEUTICS IN JEAN-LUC MARION’S THE EROTIC PHENOMENON

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According to French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, love needs rethinking. “Philosophy today no longer has anything to say about love, or at best very little. And this silence is for the better, because when philosophy does venture to speak of love it mistreats it or betrays it. One would almost doubt whether philosophers experience love, if one didn’t instead guess that they fear saying anything about it.” But what is Philosophy about, if not love?¹ How is it that love remains one of the most meaningful human experiences and yet we so rarely submit it to philosophical inquiry?

Drawing on Romanticism and 20th century phenomenology, this project will take up the question of love and examine its transcendental structures, describe its hermeneutical processes, and explain its role in the way the subject and the Other relate to one another. The goal of this project is to provide a phenomenological account of love as a unique kind of inter-subjectivity that does not reduce the Other to the Same and results in a radical individuation of the Other. I will examine what I call the “amorous event” and describe the way in which the Other becomes this Other; that is, how the Other becomes the Beloved. I argue that much of this has to do with the way the lover and Beloved imagine one another. Romantics like Stendhal, Novalis, and Shelley celebrated the imagination’s role in love but they provided no systematic account of precisely how the imagination functions as a condition for the possibility of love. Likewise, although philosophy has had much to say about the imagination, no philosopher has provided a clear and focused account of how lovers invoke the amorous imagination and its implications for subjectivity, alterity, hermeneutics, knowledge, and time. I will argue that through the amorous imagination

¹ Philosophy, or philosophia, means “the love of wisdom.”
the subject-as-lover creatively responds to the saturating givenness of the Other-as-Beloved, individuating her and affirming the Beloved’s meaning by engaging in an endless hermeneutic.²

**CONTEXT**

The amorous event is difficult to think according to the traditional categories of *eros*, *agape*, *philia*, and *nomos*. Love always seems to evade or exceed their boundaries. The conventional topology is especially problematic because it carries theological and metaphysical baggage that diverts attention away from the phenomenon of love itself, replacing the rich, lived experience of *amour* with unsurvivable, logical problems. The history of the idea of love is replete with disputes and paradoxes regarding love’s ontology. Can *agape* and *eros* be reconciled with each other? Anders Nygren and Martin Luther say no. Thomas Aquinas and Augustine say yes.³ But none provide an account for the *experience* of love. They stop short at the *idea*. Some philosophers attempt to think love *qua* love but end up reducing it to desire, passion, or a psychological disposition.⁴ Philosophy renders love the handmaiden of epistemology, metaphysics, or ethics. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima famously declares that love (*eros*) is the *desire* for the perpetual possession of the good.⁵ But love is more than desire, disposition, or idea.

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² A brief note on pronouns: I will occasionally use “he” to refer to the subject-as-lover and “she” to refer to the Other-as-Beloved. I am aware of the danger of heterosexual normativity, gender oppression and hierarchies, and the contested nature of sexual identity. My descriptions are not implicit prescriptions that the way we ought to talk about love is as only between “one male and one female.” I do not think that is true and I wholly acknowledge love between genders and sexes and groupings other than my own. There are limits to language. The task of this project is to provide a phenomenological account of the amorous imagination as it relates to the experience of love. If my descriptions and analysis do not resonate with the reader because of the complexities of gender and sexual identity, I invite and encourage others to contribute to the conversation by critiquing my account and offering alternatives that will help us flesh out the nature of love. I could hardly imagine a better consequence of my project.


Philosophy must free itself from the confines of its own analytical categories and examine love in its fullness and on its own terms. We must overcome *eros*, *agape*, and *philia* and take up the amorous event itself.

To do so requires that we breathe new life into old ideas. Romanticism, for example, represents a watershed moment in the history of the idea of love because it introduced the novelty of the imagination as a means by which lovers engage one another and harmonize or even merge their beings with Nature.⁶ Goethe, Keats, Shelley, and Friedrich Schlegel saw that the creative imagination was the key to sympathy. By imaginatively “reaching out,” the protean lovers could experience each other as part of themselves. They could bond with one another, transforming their world and propelling the lovers into a state of ecstatic rapture. At its idealized height, the imagination was even a way to transcend death. Sitting next to his lover’s tombstone, imagining her pulling him into the next world, Novalis contemplated the Night’s ability to dissolve boundaries and return the lover to his origin. Like the Night, Novalis believed the imaginative faculty was the amorphous site of transcendence that allowed for fusion with the Beloved, even beyond the grave. In *Hymns to the Night*, he writes: “Just a short time / And I shall be free / And lie in love’s tomb / Drunkenly” (4th hymn).⁷ The Romantics ushered in a new way of thinking about the amorous event that up to that point had been weighed down by the theological moorings of *eros*, *agape*, and *philia*. Thanks to the Romantics’ attention to the power of the imagination we can now think about love in a way that was not accessible prior to their insights; namely, that love fundamentally involves *the creative engagement of the imagination*. But the Romantics went too far. While they celebrated sympathy as a way to dissolve the self and merge with the Beloved they

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⁶ See e.g., Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. by Peter Firchow, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1971).

failed to see the violence inherent in the desire for oneness. They reinforced rather than overcame a metaphysics of the Sublime, which animated the lovers’ desire for union. Despite their attention to the experiences love can bring, the Romantics rarely if ever examined love on its own terms.

Then philosophy abandoned love, or at least sent it underground. Perhaps love had proven too elusive. Or perhaps the horrors of the 20th century left no room for it. In the meantime, a new philosophical method has emerged, one that is equipped to provide an account of love: phenomenology. By bracketing metaphysics and looking only at phenomena as they appear, phenomenology avoids the categorical pigeon-holing and psychological reductionism that has plagued the philosophy of love. Phenomenology gives us access to the phenomenon of the amorous event, not merely the idea of love. But not all phenomenologies are the same. Not all provide the reduction necessary to access love because to do so requires a robust account of the Other. Husserlian phenomenology falls short. For him the subject accesses the Other only by analogy, as an alter ego. Heidegger’s existential analytic fares no better. Heidegger sees the Other as always given via mediation of ready-at-hand tools or instruments that refer *Dasein* to the presence of an Other but that never confronts the Other as a phenomenon itself. Husserl and Heidegger leave little room for the Other, and certainly not for love. To think love on its own terms requires a full, phenomenological account of the Other.

Building on and contesting Husserl and Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas deployed phenomenology to describe how the Other is given in experience and what implications the Other has for subjectivity, time, and ethics. He concluded that the brute phenomenon of the Other renders ethics first philosophy. According to Levinas, the Other is always radically other and is encountered as an infinite alterity. Western philosophy is characterized by a desire to know; viz., a desire to convert experiences into objects, to explain them within a totalizing system, and to
reduce them to the Same. Knowledge consumes. Levinas saw what the Romantics did not: love as metaphysical merging is always violent because if the Other is radically other and the task of love is to reduce the Other to the Same then the aim of love violates the very nature of the Other as alterity. Levinas’s account of the Other goes beyond Husserl and Heidegger. But his description still falls short of an account of the lover’s love of this Other.¹⁸

French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion is one of only a handful of contemporary philosophers to take up the question of love, and certainly the most well-known. Marion admits a great debt to Levinas for his insights regarding the danger of the cogito ego and the limits of knowledge and consuming love.⁹ But Marion also critiques Levinas for the universal nature of the ethical injunction issued by the Other, an injunction that according to Marion renders the Other “substitutable.”¹⁰ Regardless of the cogency of his critique, Marion is on to something in his insistence that love renders the Other unique and unsubstitutable in a way that is not fully explained through Levinas’s phenomenology. In “The Intentionality of Love” Marion attempts a description of love that goes beyond ethics. He describes the lovers’ crossing gazes as that which constitutes and individuates the lovers: “To love would thus be defined as seeing the definitively invisible aim of my gaze nonetheless exposed by the aim of another invisible gaze; the two gazes, invisible forever, expose themselves each to the other in the crossing of their reciprocal aims.”¹¹ Later, in

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¹⁸ Levinas himself seemed to acknowledge that the anonymity of ethics may give way to the individuation of the erotic. See e.g., Emmanuel Levinas, “Beyond the Face,” Totality and Infinity, trns. by Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Jean-Luc Marion, “From the Other to the Individual,” Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 52; Gschwandtner, “Ethics, Eros, or Caritas,” 74.

⁹ “It goes without saying that we owe it to Emmanuel Levinas to have ingeniously reconfigured phenomenology so as to let it finally reach the Other as saturated phenomenon.” Jean-Luc Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 366-67, fn. 88.

¹⁰ See e.g., Jean-Luc Marion, “The Intentionality of Love,” Prolegomena to Charity, trans. Stephen E. Lewis, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). Although I am sympathetic to Marion’s broader project, I agree with Marion’s critics that his critique of Levinas misses the mark. Still, Marion’s desire to go beyond ethics to love and to account for the profound way the subject and Other are given to each other in and as love resonates with me. Marion’s mistake is nonetheless instructive.

¹¹ Ibid., 87.
The Erotic Phenomenon, Marion builds on this description, providing a fuller account of love through three “erotic reductions,” each of which reveals a new set of insights about the phenomenon of love as it gives subjectivity, assurance, and meaning to the lovers.

Marion’s erotic phenomenology provides a compelling account of the givenness of the subject-as-lover and the Other-as-Beloved, but his overall description of the amorous event is incomplete. He does not adequately explain the way in which the lovers give themselves over and over again, each time as a singularity and saturated phenomenon that demands an endless hermeneutic. He neglects the disruptive, retemporizing nature of love’s encounter. He mentions but does not fully explain the anguish and assurance that is the “I love you,” an assurance that is always incomplete and yet-to-be-accomplished. He does not mention the way in which the Beloved’s death haunts the lover because of the Beloved’s radical singularity: the Beloved is the only Beloved that will ever be this Beloved. And most importantly, he does not explain how the amorous imagination functions – not as a “mere mental faculty” – but as transcendental site that generates its own phenomena, phenomena that “happen” between one subjectivity and another in the context of love, or how through the amorous imagination the subject-as-lover avoids the violence of knowledge by creatively and hermeneutically responding to the saturating givenness of the Other-as-Beloved. Marion puts philosophy in position to renew and rethink the Romantic idea of the imagination. He clears a space to provide a phenomenological account of the amorous event and lays the ground for the amorous imagination as an experience – a phenomenon – that gives itself between the lover and Beloved, between one subjectivity and another. Indeed, there is much more to be said about love.
SCOPE

This project is limited to the following topics:

(A) The Imagination in Enlightenment, Romantic, and 20th Century Thought:

I will reference the history of the idea of the imagination throughout my project, beginning with 18th Century British empiricism, continuing through the Romantic Period, and up to 20th century phenomenology. I will build my argument in light of prior conceptions of imagination but I will go beyond them by providing an up-to-date and focused phenomenology of the amorous imagination. I will rely on Kant’s account of the productive imagination and Romantic authors like Stendhal and Novalis to exemplify the creative imagination at its philosophical and aesthetic height, as well as John Keats, who warns us of the creative imagination’s darker side. My project will include 20th century phenomenological accounts of the imagination including Husserl’s description of the imagination as an act of consciousness, Heidegger’s interpretive appropriation of Kant’s productive imagination in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, and Ricoeur’s idea of the creative and narrative capacities of the poetical imagination.

(B) Jean-Luc Marion’s Saturated and Erotic Phenomena

Marion is the primary voice of my project. In *Prolegomena to Charity* and *The Erotic Phenomenon* Marion conducts a phenomenology of love. I will build on his account, adding a phenomenology of the amorous imagination as a possible answer to the question of knowledge and love, and as a theory of inter-subjectivity between lovers. I will also rely on Marion’s account of the gift and givenness insofar as it relates to love and especially his idea of the saturated phenomenon (focusing on flesh, face, and event). I will appropriate and develop his idea of the “endless hermeneutic” as a response to a saturated phenomenon. I will examine the contemporary debate regarding Marion’s failure to distinguish between ontological and derivative hermeneutics.
and analyze the implications of hermeneutics for saturated phenomena, the amorous event, and the imagination.

(C) A Phenomenology of the Amorous Imagination

I will provide a sketch of the amorous imagination. I will deduce from my description the transcendental features that provide the conditions for the possibility of love as expressed through the amorous imagination. I expect to discover a rich connection between the phenomenon of the amorous imagination and its relationship to the structure of subjectivity, time, hermeneutics, and transcendence. Drawing on Marion’s idea of the saturated phenomenon, I will explain how through the amorous imagination lovers do not attempt to know each other but instead engage in on-going creative acts of meaning affirmation (what I call, understanding) that reorient the lover’s sense of time and like John Donne’s compass, ground the lover’s subjectivity such that “Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end where I begun.” I will not only describe the phenomenon of the co-imaging lover’s hermeneutical process, I will also examine amorous imaginings as phenomena themselves. Amorous imaginings have their own structure. Paradoxically, they are generated by and given “within” the lovers but are constructed as a result of and in response to the Other-as-Beloved, who remains always “outside” and beyond the lover. This unique kind of inter-subjective experience contributes to something like what Badiou calls a truth procedure: through their amorous imaginings the lovers declare to one another and to themselves a new truth – the truth of Two – which overturns the previous distinctions that governed their lives before, when they were but One. My account will include a running commentary on the history of the idea of the imagination and make use of Richard Kearney’s Poetic of Imagining and The Wake of Imagination, Edward S. Casey’s Imagining: A Phenomenological Study, Mary
Warnock’s *Imagination*, and Brian Elliott’s *Phenomenology and Imagination in Husserl and Heidegger*, as well as primary selections from Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, and Marion.

**THEORY AND METHODOLOGY**

My project will rely on three methodologies: history, philosophical analysis, and phenomenology. I will weave the three together throughout the dissertation but some chapters will emphasize one methodology over another. For example, the early chapter on the creative imagination will use history to highlight the development of the idea of the imagination in Western thought from the Enlightenment to today. The Marion chapter will rely on philosophical analysis to present the “problem” of love and explain what is at stake in providing an account of the Beloved and inter-subjectivity. This chapter and the chapter on the amorous event and the endless hermeneutic will involve philosophical analysis and evaluation of Marion and Romano’s theories of hermeneutics. The chapters on the amorous imagination will rely on phenomenology. By performing an “amorous reduction,” bracketing thorny metaphysical problems, and turning my efforts toward rigorous descriptions of amorous experiences I hope to discover insights about the structures underlying subjectivity and what it means to be-in-the-world in relation to the Other-as-Beloved.

**CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD**

This research is important for several reasons. First, it provides a systematic, philosophical analysis of Marion’s idea of love and the imagination. Second, love plays a central role in the way we make meaning and therefore warrants serious philosophical reflection. At the risk of sounding trite, love matters to everyone. Third, philosophy rarely if ever accounts for the role of the amorous imagination as a way of engaging the Other-as-Beloved. This dissertation will attempt a
phenomenological investigation into the amorous imagination and its role in loving the Other. Finally, and perhaps more broadly, there is a current trend in philosophy to recover and reconsider traditional ideas like love, beauty, truth, and justice (See e.g., Deleuze and metaphysics, Marion and love, Badiou and truth, etc.) These ideas have lain relatively dormant while 20th century thinkers explored the philosophical landscape of post-structuralism and post-modernism. This dissertation will contribute to the emerging, contemporary philosophical conversation that attempts to reconceive classical ideas while also considering what we've learned from post-modern discourse.
CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1: Introduction: Phenomenology, Romanticism, and the Possibility of Love: I introduce the historical treatment of love by philosophers as either an idealized concept or a psychological disposition. I explore philosophy’s failure to account for love and examine two “openings” in the history of ideas that make possible a new philosophical inquiry into love: Phenomenology and Romanticism. I provide short treatments of phenomenology in Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas and outline the contours of the Romantic imagination in Stendhal, Novalis, and (maybe) Shelley. I state my thesis and explain that a phenomenology of love requires an account of the hermeneutical role of the amorous imagination. I define my terms: amour, the amorous event, the amorous imagination, hermeneutics, saturated phenomenon, etc., and provide a chapter overview.

Chapter 2: Mirrors and Lamps: A Brief History of the Imagination: I give a historical analysis of the idea of the imagination in Western thought. Using the “mirror and lamp” metaphor, I explain that before Kant philosophers viewed the imagination as a mirror reflecting phenomena back to the mind (e.g., Hume and prior sense impressions, Plato’s Forms, etc.). I summarize Kant’s account of the “lamp” of the productive imagination as a mysterious, transcendental power that brings together the categories and sensibility into a synthetic unity. Kant marks a fundamental shift in the history of the imagination. I then turn to the Romantic imagination, examining two Romantic accounts of the imagination in Stendhal’s On Love and Novalis’s Hymns to the Night. Stendhal and Novalis represent early examples of the amorous imagination already at play. I summarize Heidegger’s interpretive appropriation of Kant’s productive imagination in terms of ontology and explain Ricoeur’s theory of the poetical imagination as a way of creating new meanings and reconfiguring our narrative selves. I briefly reference post-modern theories of the imagination before setting out a set of unresolved and related questions that I will address in later sections: (a) Is the imagination always solipsistic? (b) What is the relationship between what it “outside” (the Other, the given, the world, etc.) and what is “inside” the imagination? (c) Is the imagination essentially a reduction to the Same, the ego, or the I and therefore always an act of violence? (d) What is the imagination’s hermeneutic function, especially with regard to love? (e) How do embodiment and imagination relate?

Chapter 3: Marion and The Erotic Phenomenon: I provide a Marion primer, covering his theories of givenness, l’adonné, the saturated phenomenon, and hermeneutics. I preform a close, critical, and generative reading of The Erotic Phenomenon. I build on the phenomenology of the Other toward a phenomenology of the Other-as-Beloved. I pay special attention to Marion’s descriptions of event, flesh, and face as saturating in terms of quantity, relation, and modality, respectively. I detail Marion’s argument in The Erotic Phenomenon as to how the self is individuated through the erotic advance, and how the Beloved is individuated through the phenomenon of the crossing gazes. I critique Marion’s description, arguing that he does not provide an adequate account of the flesh, over-emphasizes fidelity by placing it in the realm of Being, does not explain the role of hermeneutics in the erotic phenomenon, and neglects any mention of the imagination as a pivotal faculty in individuating the Other-as-Beloved. I point out Marion’s accomplishments in describing the phenomenology of love and his insight into the

“endless hermeneutic.” I tee-up the contemporary debate surrounding Marion’s treatment of hermeneutics and recast the question of hermeneutics in terms of a phenomenology of love. I argue that the question of hermeneutics in the phenomenology of love must take seriously and account for the role of the imagination.

Chapter 4: The Amorous Event and the Endless Hermeneutic: I analyze the contemporary debate regarding Marion’s hermeneutics. I put Marion in conversation with Claude Romano and Richard Kearney. I summarize Romano’s eventual hermeneutics and his insights regarding the way in which events give themselves as personal, reconfiguring, inexplicable (that is, non-causal), and opening phenomenon. I summarize Kearney’s theory of carnal hermeneutics. I build on Kearney and Romano’s hermeneutics and Marion’s phenomenology in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, arguing that *amour* is a saturating event that exhibits the qualities Romano describes and emerges through the medium of embodiment. This observation has significant implications for subjectivity in line with Marion’s account of love in *The Erotic Reduction*. I expand, nuance and adapt Marion’s work in order to describe the amorous event (not just the erotic phenomenon). I argue that *amour* is a recurring, saturating event that calls the lovers to respond through an endless hermeneutic. I explain that the endless hermeneutic is (a) about understanding, not knowledge; (b) a carnal hermeneutic, and (c) a creative desire for excess. I directly argue my thesis that through the amorous imagination the subject-as-lover creatively responds to the saturating givenness of the Other-as-Beloved, acknowledging that the lover can never know the Beloved and choosing instead to affirm the Beloved’s meaning by engaging in an endless hermeneutic. I conclude by arguing the endless hermeneutic plays itself out through the amorous imagination, the existence of which is itself a condition for the possibility of love.

Chapter 5: Toward a Phenomenology of the Amorous Imagination: I provide a phenomenological sketch of the amorous imagination and its role in love, individuation, and the endless hermeneutic. First, I distinguish between perception, memory, thought, and imagination. I provide my own observations (inspired by Romanticism) of the phenomenology of the imagination, emphasizing the imagination’s role in creativity, hermeneutics, horizons within the subject’s lifeworld, and transcendence. Second, I distinguish between (a) *amour* as the phenomenon of the amorous event, and (b) amorous imaginings, themselves phenomena that constitute the lovers’ engagement in the endless hermeneutic. Third, I describe the amorous imagination. I argue that the amorous imagination is the transcendental condition that allows for the possibility for the lovers to engage in the endless hermeneutic. It is the “space” in which the lovers respond to the call of the Beloved, it is a move to traverse but not fill the distance between Lover and Beloved. I argue that the amorous imagination functions in several ways: it (i) synthesizes, (ii) retemporalizes, (iii) constitutes, (iv) beautifies, (v) narrativizes, and (vi) assures.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Love and Philosophy: Some Reflections: I summarize my argument, tie together loose ends, acknowledge there is more work to be done, and signal toward other projects (a more detailed account of the amorous imagination, a close examination of the phenomenology of love and death, the dark side of the imagination, etc.)
BIBLIOGRAPHIC METHOD

I’ve used traditional methods and sources to research my topic. My bibliographic searches are textual, thematic, and author-focused. I have and continue to draw from both primary and secondary texts to explore the ideas and locate them within the broader philosophical discourse. I started my research with a preliminary survey of philosophers or philosophical texts that take as their central concern the idea of love, focusing on works by Marion and Levinas and collecting their inter-textual references. I’ve also consulted experts in the field for their advice on secondary sources. Using bibliographies from primary and secondary sources I began to develop a list of relevant texts that constitute the core of my research base, including texts in the original French.

Additionally, I’ve searched and will continue to search the Penrose Library in the University of Denver’s Anderson Academic Commons, the Taylor Library at Iliff School of Theology, and the Auroria Library where I teach, at Metropolitan State University. I’ve cross checked my searches on various databases including Google Scholar, Prospector, WorldCat, and the Philosopher’s Index. I’ve relied upon critical series resources and bibliographies published by University of Notre Dame, Cambridge University Press, Ashgate Press, Indiana University Press, Bloomsbury, SUNY Press, and Rutledge. I’ve also consulted the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

I used Boolean searches to generate my list of potential resources while looking online or in library databases. For example, I searched for related author’s materials using phrases like, “(Jean-Luc Marion OR Marion) AND (Emmanuel Levinas OR Levinas); or (Emmanuel Levinas OR Levinas) AND (Heidegger OR Iragaray OR Husserl).” To search for thematic connections between authors and ideas I used phrases like, “(Jean-Luc Marion OR Marion) AND (lov* OR other* OR imagin* OR saturat* phenom* OR ero*),” substituting relevant terms and
experimenting with different combinations of words. Finally, I’ve used DU library’s Compass search engine to research specific terms, and made ample use of the resource librarians.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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