

# Introduction

## Love, the Imagination, and the Other

Love and philosophy go hand-in-hand. To philosophize is to love, and to love is to philosophize. But 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.”<sup>1</sup> How can this be? How is it that philosophy—the love of wisdom—has betrayed love itself?

The answer is complex, of course, but part of the answer lies in methodology. Love’s enigmatic nature makes choosing a proper method of study difficult. Moreover, all methods run the risk of putting the answer before the question. *What* one studies is always in some way shaped by *how* one studies it. Theories of love can “betray” love by reducing it to something other than itself. These theories adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion, explaining love in terms of a “deeper,” more “fundamental” process: love is just a complex chemical reaction (biology), a symptom of our subconscious desire to bond (psychology), or a culturally codified type of relationship (sociology). Love is never what it seems. Others “mistreat” love by pulling it apart, by dissecting its univocity and drawing distinctions along analytical lines such as *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. While such distinctions may help us highlight the different ways in which we love, they fail to account for what these loves have in common. There are ties that bind, some shared qualities between the different ways we love. But what are they? A strictly analytical approach makes this a challenging question to answer. Some philosophers are suspicious of love in principle. They claim that love

is essentially an ideology, arising for example out of an underlying set of material conditions. Wary of oppressive, culturally constructed norms, they claim love does more to reinforce bourgeois power and capitalist values than to tell us something important about what it means to be human.

I don't mean to be crass. Each of these approaches makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of love. But Marion is right to suggest that empirical and analytical inquiries tend to restrict love to the parameters set down by the method, rather than allowing love to show itself on its own terms. We cannot avoid method, but we can acknowledge it, along with its limitations and concealments. Empiricism runs the risk of bowdlerizing love, stripping away parts of it as a truly *lived* experience in favor of a reductive explanation of its so-called underlying causes. Traditional philosophical analysis risks disassembling love in a way that hides its common structures. But love always seems to exceed these modes of inquiry. As Pascal says, it has a logic of its own. Part of what makes love so enigmatic is the *surplus* of experience and meaning it generates. Love resists totalization. As a result, there is always a tension between love and method because there is no one, correct way to explain it. Love is irreducible and, therefore, in a sense, unknowable.

And yet, Marion invites us to rethink love, to try and philosophize about it without mistreating it or betraying it. His is a welcome invitation. But to properly philosophize about love we must be sensitive to the implications of method and cautious when relying on accounts of love that explain it in terms of something other than itself. While there is indeed no one, perfect, way to approach the study of love, the philosophy of love must take seriously love *as it appears*, on its own terms, without explaining it away as a manifestation of some more basic condition. For these reasons, phenomenology is a preferred method because it begins and ends with things as they appear. It starts with life itself, and ends there too. It does not search for a source, but rather, examines what gives itself in experience. It asks, "How does love appear?" In this book I employ a phenomenological method to examine one, even more pointed, question: "How does the Other become the Beloved?" What interests me is the way in which love is marked by a radical particularity; that is, the way in which we encounter an Other and how the Other is "transformed" into someone unsubstitutable, someone whose presence seems to reorder the very

way in which we experience life. How does *the* Other becomes *this* Other?<sup>2</sup> That is what I want to explore.

My hunch is that the imagination plays a large part in the answer to this question. The imagination is a powerful faculty and has received a lot of attention in the history of Western philosophy. Thinkers as ancient as Plato and as recent as Richard Kearney have analyzed the imagination's creative-responsive capacity and its ability to engage in the hermeneutic activity of understanding, interpretation, and invention.<sup>3</sup> In this book, I want to build on the work other thinkers have done and develop what I call "the amorous imagination" as part of a hermeneutical phenomenology of love in order to show how love appears as an experience of radical particularity. Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology is inspiring to me because of its careful attention to the way love appears, as a phenomenon in its own right. And his philosophical concepts are useful in developing a theory of the amorous imagination because of their sensitivity to experiences that exceed our cognitive intentionality. His accounts of givenness, the gifted (*l'adonné*), and the saturated phenomenon are especially useful in this regard. However, in Marion's description of love in *The Erotic Phenomenon* and, oddly, in spite of his own phenomenological concepts, he focuses too much on the lover's advance and does not fully explain the eventual nature of the Beloved's givenness. Marion also mentions the need for an "endless hermeneutic" to respond to saturated phenomena but leaves the idea underdeveloped. Nevertheless, Marion's ideas, especially saturation and the endless hermeneutic, provide a generative opening for a fuller account of the amorous imagination.

Despite its strengths, Marion's phenomenology alone is insufficient to explain in detail the relationship between love and the imagination. For that, we need something more. We need to explore theories of the imagination that do not dismiss it as fancy but take seriously its role in constructing a world and imbuing it with meaning. We need thinkers like Stendhal, Novalis, William Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. We need the Romantics. Building on Kant's account of the productive imagination, the Romantics viewed the imagination as a powerful source of hermeneutical and creative activity. From the nexus of Marion's phenomenology and the Romantic imagination the central argument of this book emerges: *through the amorous imagination, the self-as-lover creatively responds to the saturating givenness of the Other-as-Beloved, individuating her through an endless hermeneutic.*

Now is good time for a comment on my use of pronouns, and my positionality. All thinking happens from a specific location, and that location influences the way one writes, analyzes, considers, and prioritizes issues. Like any thinker, my position carries with it certain inescapable inflections, locutions, and assumptions. In the spirit of authentic engagement, I adopt an “ethics of vulnerability” in assessing my methodological decisions; that is, I acknowledge not only that I am writing from a gendered, racial, and economic position, but that this might well influence my phenomenological sense of structure and may even influence my sense that phenomenology takes precedence over hermeneutics. But as it stands (and given my positionality) it seems to me that there is indeed a phenomenological structure at play in the way in which the Other becomes the Beloved. I will at times use pronouns in describing that structure. Sometimes I will use “he” to refer to the self-as-lover and “she” to refer to the Other-as-Beloved. Sometimes I will reverse the pronouns. Sometimes I will use the same gendered pronouns to describe both the lover and Beloved. Whatever the combination, I do not mean to imply any priority, legitimacy, or value to specific gender combinations. Love is not a heteronormative phenomenon. In places where my use of pronouns seems problematic, I hope that for the reader my word choice does not detract from my overall argument. The best each of us can do is acknowledge our own positionality, its implications and its limits, and then launch into our exploration.

Let us return then to the idea of “individuation” and clarify its meaning. By “individuation” I mean the process by which an Other comes to appear with such radical particularity that she is rendered unsubstutable for the self who receives her, as a phenomenon. The individuated Other stands out from the milieu of all Others. She appears distinct, arriving with all her “thisness,” all her *haccaeitas*, such that no Other could be this Other, no Other could be confused with or replace her. Her specificity denies anonymity. The individuated Other does not appear as an abstract, universal, or unnamed call. The term *individuation* means to capture the phenomenological fact that the Beloved appears differently to me than the stranger. She appears as radically unsubstutable.

It may be helpful to distinguish between other uses of the term “individuation” to fully explain my use of the term. Some thinkers

(Emmanuel Levinas, for example) use the word individuation to describe the way in which the self comes to stand out from or apart from all that is; that is, from the “world,” the *il y a*, being itself, etc. For these thinkers, the self is individuated when she becomes a separate subject. I am not using the term “individuation” in this sense. Other thinkers use the term “individuation” to describe a kind of human flourishing. For example, many Romantics argued that to be “fully human” was to be “fully individuated” in the sense that one was free to express oneself in a genuine, authentic manner. This is not the sense in which I use the term, either. I use “individuation” according to a phenomenological register in order to describe the way in which an Other appears with such a radical particularity that she cannot be substituted for any Other; that she is unique, irreplaceable, specific, and distinct from all Others. In love, this sense of individuation plays out in at least two ways. First, the Other-as-Beloved is individuated through the amorous event and the hermeneutic engagement of the amorous imagination. Second, the lover is individuated as lover insofar as he encounters the amorous event and participates in the endless hermeneutic. In these two phenomenological senses the Other and the self appear to one another as a radical particularity. My goal in this book is to describe how all of that happens.

My account of the amorous imagination relies on three central claims. First, the amorous imagination answers the question of how the Other becomes the Beloved. Second, the amorous imagination highlights something that is missing in Marion’s account of the erotic phenomenon; namely, that love emerges not only because of the lover’s advance but also because of the eventual nature of the Beloved’s givenness, which calls for an imaginative response. Third, a phenomenology of the amorous imagination constitutes a substantive unpacking of the endless hermeneutic Marion signals toward in his work on saturated phenomena. In support of my thesis and these three assertions, this book takes the following structure.

Chapter 1, “The Philosophy of Love: A New Opening,” provides a roadmap of the overall argument, explaining in detail why phenomenology is a more appropriate method for the task at hand than other methods (such as empiricism), and provides some important context for understanding how philosophy has traditionally approached the topic of love. I briefly discuss the history of the philosophy of love

and explain why the typology of *eros*, *philia*, and *agape* is an inadequate framework for an analysis of love, and why a hermeneutical phenomenology is better equipped to examine love “as it appears.” I then go on to explain the role Romanticism plays in an account of love; namely, that it introduces the imagination into the conversation and opens a line of inquiry inviting an analysis of the role the imagination plays in individuation. After a few examples of “early versions” of the amorous imagination in Romantic thought, the chapter provides a survey of phenomenology to demonstrate the different ways philosophers have used the method to illuminate aspects of lived, human experience.

Chapter 2, “The Lovers Emerge: Marion, Saturation, and Individuation,” outlines Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology, noting its limitations but focusing on its generative openings, in order to lay the groundwork for a phenomenological account of how the Other is individuated through the amorous imagination. I explain Marion’s phenomenological concepts of givenness, the gifted (*l’adonné*), and the saturated phenomenon and explore their usefulness in analyzing love and the imagination. The chapter also provides a detailed analysis of Marion’s account of individuation in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, highlighting parts of his description that are most compelling and identifying less-convincing descriptions that seem either to leave something important out of the picture (i.e., the imagination) or call for further development (i.e., the endless hermeneutic). The chapter ends by accepting Marion’s invitation to explore the process of individuation and claiming that a phenomenology of love should include a fuller account of the endless hermeneutic and the role the imagination plays in transforming the Other into the Beloved.

Chapter 3, “From *The Other* to *This Other*,” conducts a focused study of the imagination in order to examine the central role it plays in individuating the Other. It explores five key features of the imagination—its productive and reproductive capacities, its creative-responsive activity, its hermeneutical structure, its embodiment, and its unique mode of consciousness—and describes how they work in tandem to individuate. Anticipating objections that such an account focuses too heavily on the imagination as a purely mental activity, I provide a brief phenomenological description of the enfleshed imagination and argue that the fact of the imagination’s embodiment supports the thesis that the amorous imagination is a hermeneutical, individuating faculty.

While the imagination may individuate other Others (friends, family, etc.) the focus of this study is on the Beloved.

Chapter 4, “The Amorous Event and the Endless Hermeneutic,” brings together the discussions of Marion and the imagination and returns to the thesis that the amorous imagination is the site of the endless hermeneutic, a hermeneutic that serves to individuate the Other-as-Beloved. Marion’s account of the erotic phenomenon overemphasizes the lover’s advance and underemphasizes the Beloved’s saturation. Drawing upon the previous discussion of the imagination’s power to individuate, I argue that a phenomenology of love should describe the saturated phenomenon of “the amorous event” as well as the endless hermeneutic, both of which implicate the amorous imagination. The chapter details the structure of the amorous event, which is given as a call, response, and distance and separation and then examines what an endless hermeneutic might look like, concluding that the amorous event invokes the amorous imagination.

Chapter 5, “Toward a Phenomenology of the Amorous Imagination,” provides a phenomenological sketch of the amorous imagination as the individuating site of the endless hermeneutic. Where the preceding discussion identified *the fact that* the amorous imagination is at play with and responds to the amorous event, my phenomenological sketch provides a descriptive account of *how* the amorous imagination individuates. Chapter 5 provides a catalogue of features of the amorous imagination, such as its productive capacity, its narrative function, its impressional affectivity, and the structure of amorous imaginings themselves, in order to show how, through the amorous imagination, the lovers participate in an individuating, endless hermeneutic.

Chapter 6, “The Dark Side of Love,” explores the ways in which love can be distorted, suppressed, negated, or misapprehended when the imagination goes too far. It looks closely at the problems of solipsism, narcissism, idolatry, violence, and death as dramatized in medieval and Greek mythology and Romantic literature, as well as some ideas on how love can avoid these dangers.

By the end of the book I hope to have shown something of the relationship between love and the imagination. The degree to which I am “right” about that relationship will turn more on whether my descriptions resonate with the reader than whether my arguments are cogent or convincing. As a phenomenologist, my intention is not

so much to put forth “an argument” or “to make a case” as it is to “point out” what’s there, to “look at and see” what has always been there but may have been covered over by other methods or modes of analysis. Along the way I will cite literature and poetry as well as lived experience in order to invoke their affective resonances. I call upon the depth of meaning latent in symbol and art in order to direct the reader toward their own experiences of love, not to instruct the reader on proper ways of loving. But I must admit: I think love is important, important enough to consider critically, philosophically. It is not to be dismissed, even in an age of cynicism where there is a strong antiromantic bent. There are few experiences that imbue life with as much meaning as love and for that reason alone it seems to me worth reflecting upon. But I might go a bit farther and say that for many, including myself, life seems flat without love, there is a dullness and an ache that accompanies its absence. And in its presence, life can take on new meaning, depth, and texture. In love, life can become enchanting.