



*The*  
PHENOMENOLOGY  
*of*  
LOVE  
&  
READING

CASSANDRA FALKE



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# The Phenomenology of Love and Reading



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Cassandra Falke

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in the United States of America 2017  
Paperback edition first published 2018

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-6289-2648-4  
PB: 978-1-5013-4213-4  
ePub: 978-1-6289-2650-7  
ePDF: 978-1-6289-2649-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Falke, Cassandra, author.

Title: The phenomenology of love and reading / Cassandra Falke. Description: New York :  
Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016017286 (print) | LCCN 2016029391 (ebook) | ISBN  
9781628926484 (hardback) | ISBN 9781628926507 (ePub) | ISBN 9781628926491 (ePDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Phenomenology and literature. | Marion, Jean-Luc, 1946—Criticism and  
interpretation. | Love. | Books and reading. | Literature—Philosophy. | Literature—Psychology. |  
Literature—History and criticism. | BISAC: LITERARY CRITICISM / Semiotics & Theory. |  
LITERARY CRITICISM / Books & Reading. | PHILOSOPHY / Ethics & Moral Philosophy.

Classification: LCC PN49 .F35 2016 (print) | LCC PN49 (ebook) | DDC 809/.93353—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016017286>

Typeset by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India

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## Acknowledgments

The nature of this book's subject makes it impossible for me to thank, or even recognize, all who have influenced my thinking about it. Damon, Charlie, and Sebastian have encouraged and inspired me daily throughout the process of writing. My students, in particular those who studied literary theory with me in 2012 and 2015, have helped me refine my ideas and have established the standard of clarity that I aim to meet in my writing. Don Rhea, Judy, Dennis, and the Middletons have offered the space and sense of home that I needed in order to be productive. The efficient and always pleasant staff of Bloomsbury Academic Publishers must include many people who deserve thanks, whose names I do not know, but I am happy to thank, by name, Haaris and Mary for their faith in this project. Bloomsbury's anonymous readers offered extremely helpful feedback and shaped the book's development in crucial ways. I am grateful, too, for their time and attention.

Material support for the project is easier to trace. I would like to thank the US-Norway Fulbright Foundation and East Texas Baptist University for supporting a concentrated period of work on the book in 2013 and 2014. The University of Bergen, East Texas Baptist University, and the University of Tromsø have also provided essential support in the form of conference stipends and congenial working environments.

I am grateful to the literary estates of Dudley Randall and e. e. cummings for permission to reprint their work:

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# Introduction

In Jean-Luc Marion's thinking, we are a bedazzled people. The unfurling of events, the encounter with art, the experience of flesh itself, and the meeting of another's gaze reveal our good fortune to be the recipients of innumerable gifts—more than we could have imagined, more than we can take in, a number dumfounding the question of use. For the last twenty years,<sup>1</sup> Marion has characterized our days and nights as a series of “saturated phenomena” where the event, artwork, flesh, or face that gives itself to us overwhelms our capacity to experience it and in the process reconstitutes our capacities to expect, receive, and express more givenness. In the last ten years he has named the force through which we are made and remade “love.” He calls the view that we become ourselves through our loves and hates “the erotic reduction.”<sup>2</sup>

*The Phenomenology of Love and Reading* examines the implications of the erotic reduction for literary theory. In Marion's phenomenology, love overcomes the vanity of what he calls the “epistemic” and “ontological” reductions. Assuring ourselves of our own being through cognition or awareness of *ipseity* cannot, Marion argues, provide us with any reason to *want* to be. Only loving

<sup>1</sup> Marion first wrote about the saturated phenomenon in 1992, in a contribution to a volume entitled *Phénomène et théologie*, to which Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, and Paul Ricoeur also contributed. His essay for this volume, called “The Saturated Phenomenon” appeared in English in 2000 as part of *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*. He also contributed the article “The Saturated Phenomenon” to *Philosophy Today* (40, no. 1 [1996]: 103–124). In 2001, Marion explored the concept more fully in his book *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Marion fully articulates the erotic reduction in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), originally published as *Le Phénomène Érotique* (2003), and hereafter referred to in the text as *EP*. He had also discussed love earlier in *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), originally published as *Prolégomènes à la Charité* (1986).

and the hope of being loved adds purpose to the impoverished certainty that we can arrive at alone (*EP* 21–23). Reading that is trapped in epistemology and ontology is similarly impoverished. Reading within the epistemic reduction, we may acquire knowledge, even knowledge about how to love others, but the epistemic reduction provides no bridge between knowing how to love and actually loving. The ontological reduction can account for the ways that reading changes us individually but not for the relationship between us as readers and other people.

The propulsion from the world of a book into the world of others, which is so essential for the erotic phenomenon, helps overcome the gap between the cry in literature and “the cry in the street” that has undermined some critics’ hope for an ethics of reading. George Steiner asks in *Real Presences*, “Does the cry in the tragic play muffle, even blot out, the cry in the street?” He confesses to finding this an “obsessive, almost maddening question” and cites Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote in his notebook that “poetry excites us to artificial feelings—makes us callous to real ones.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Suzanne Keen worries in her 2007 book *Empathy and the Novel* that “the very fictionality of novels predisposes readers to empathize with characters, since a fiction known to be ‘made up’ does not activate suspicion and wariness as an apparently ‘real’ appeal for assistance may do.”<sup>4</sup> Steiner, Coleridge, and Keen are right to express this concern. The act of reading does not guarantee a future ethical action. No act in the present does. Within the erotic reduction, loving acts expand us—like rain expands a river or variation expands music—and all that follows is shaped by their entrance into our lives, if not always in predictable ways. Therefore, to whatever extent reading includes actions that are part of love, to that extent it changes us. These actions, like love itself, involve, not the assertion of will or harvesting of knowledge that one might expect in reading oriented toward ontology or epistemology, but rather attention, empathy, and a willingness to be overwhelmed.

If “the point is to love, because under the rules of the erotic reduction, nothing unloved or unloving holds” (*EP* 28), then why read at all? Should we

<sup>3</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 144.

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

not be busy feeding the hungry or kissing on the couch? Within the erotic reduction, those are indeed worthy activities that “hold,” but I will argue that reading is one as well. In entering the erotic reduction, the crucial requirement is that I am “susceptible to a decision, which does not belong to me and which determines me in advance, because it comes to me from elsewhere” (*EP* 25). Books provide an elsewhere. Reading literature, I argue, unfolds with the singularity of an act of love, and like an act of love requires us to yield our intention.<sup>5</sup>

The event of reading, like the event of loving, is singular. Just as our love for another creates a new reality as it unfolds, each reading of a particular text makes us lovers without precedent. Reading creates in us new ways of loving, and thus new ways of being. Or it can. In order for a book to work on us this way, we have to open ourselves up to an intentionality and signifying practice that originates outside of our own “egological sphere” (*EP* 102). Because we cannot anticipate the way we will be changed by an event of reading, we commit ourselves first to the act of surrender itself and, through that surrender of our own intentionality, find ourselves remade.

The first section of the book considers themes from previous phenomenological thinking about reading that might become part of what Rita Felski calls a “new phenomenological turn” in literary criticism.<sup>6</sup> This clarifies the contribution that Marion’s philosophy makes to a practice almost a century old while also reviving some phenomenological practices of reading that have been neglected. I then provide an overview of the “erotic reduction,” suggesting parallels between the ways we engage another person through love and the ways we engage with a book. I will end the book’s first section by describing what Marion calls “the lover’s advance,” the moment when we forget ourselves and love first. Modern reading is a solitary activity, and without the presence of another person who could potentially love us back, we cannot complete the erotic phenomenon. But, the alterity we find in books imitates the alterity of the beloved enough to train us in the act of loving first.

<sup>5</sup> I use the word “singularity” with reference to Derek Attridge’s *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004) and also to Marion’s description of “singular” events, e.g., in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 139.

<sup>6</sup> Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 18.

The second section of the book takes up the habits of love in which reading trains us. I suggest that reading literature can develop the habits of attention and empathy. By “habit” I do not mean something we do unawares, such as the habit of sleeping on my right side. I mean “habit” in the sense that a habit of walking a particular path in the woods creates that path and enables one to walk it more easily next time. In addition to the habits of attention and empathy, reading can also develop readers’ willingness to cede control and experience the saturated phenomenon of “the sublime, pleasure, the beautiful or love.”<sup>7</sup> Everyone, according to Marion, experiences the dazzle of saturated phenomena. Everyone can be caught off guard by love or beauty, but in his discussions of painting, Marion models a kind of intentionality that allows for our experiences of saturated phenomenon to be more constitutive. By examining Marion’s own practice here and describing what a comparable practice would look like for literature, I foreground pre- and post-reading reflection. This balances the discussion of attentive and empathetic practices that readers perform while still immersed in books and opens up an area of inquiry for ethical criticism that has been curiously taken for granted.

I should anticipate up front two objections to my argument that reading can make us better lovers. First, there are the twin perils of normativity and moral relativism. The worry over these problems assumes an epistemological virtue ethics that the erotic construction of the self avoids. Marion explains that worrying over the sturdiness or flimsiness of a moral law does not make sense within the erotic reduction because “such a law [would] mask the other by lowering him or her to the rank of a simple opportunity among others to obey the law” (*EP* 213). An approach to reading based on the erotic reduction does not aim to make a reader more adept at applying a moral law, but aims to make him or her more open to the new possibilities of love that another individual will offer. It thereby avoids the charge of ethical normativity sometimes levied against criticism that sees literature as valuable for human relationships. The ghostly opposite of normativity, relativism, also fails to describe the growth in love that this reading approach aspires to because it also presumes a law-based

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 56.

ethic, a thing transcending relationships that can be altered relative to a given situation. The reader in pursuit of love “acquires an ethical privilege,” not by meeting a preconceived ethical requirement or foisting an ethical evaluation upon a given situation, but by allowing himself or herself to be “altered from elsewhere and opened by it” (*EP* 25). Each moment of such alteration, be it from a book or a beloved, transpires as a singular and creative event. By describing our interdependence on others, the erotic reduction cannot, of course, make anyone more loving who does not want to become more loving. But, if we accept that the basis of all our lives *is* love and begin *within* the erotic reduction seeking ways to have more of the life that love offers us, then literature operates with an ethical force upon the selves that we are continually becoming.

Another objection—that we cannot really love through books the way we love through people—I fully accept. In concluding Chapter 6, I discuss the flesh and why the completion of the erotic reduction presumes the presence of an embodied beloved. The significance of this point should not be overlooked because it is the bridge that allows our actions as readers to be meaningful in the rest of our lives. We can only really love other people. As obvious as this statement may sound, it is worth making. Phenomenological explorations of literature have thus far skirted the question of what difference our bodies make to us as readers by referring to persons only as so many disembodied consciousnesses. This implicit disembodiment of people makes the case for a book’s shaping us as though it were a person *during a reading* more compelling, but then we must stop reading to eat lunch, maybe with a real friend. The erotic reduction can be fulfilled at lunch with a friend, at home with a lover, by the fjord with my (specific) boy in my (specific) lap. It can be fulfilled in an inspiring diversity of ways, but it cannot be fulfilled by means of reading. The crossings of the lovers’ gaze and the lovers’ flesh operate as powerful figures in *The Erotic Phenomenon*. As figures, their incarnated performance reminds us of the interdependence and radical passivity of love. But they are more than figures. As events, the crossing of the gaze and the crossing of the flesh are essential to the completion of the erotic phenomenon. Marion writes that “without this shared eroticization” love’s oath would remain “an abstract linguistic performance, which would not phenomenize itself anywhere

and would not individualize me any more than anyone else” (*EP* 121). The language and physical body of a book can never offer the uniqueness of the flesh through which the erotic reduction may be fully accomplished. Lacking the ability to deny our advance, lacking flesh, lacking the uniqueness of an embodied person, a book cannot help us complete the erotic reduction that it helped us begin.

## Introducing Marion

Jean-Luc Marion needs no introduction in the world of philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Since 2004 he has been a Professor of Catholic Studies and Professor of the Philosophy of Religions and Theology at the University of Chicago. He preceded that with eight years as the Director of Philosophy at the Sorbonne. He was elected an *immortel* by the Académie française in 2008. He is the author of twenty-seven books covering Cartesian thought, the history of philosophy, theology, and phenomenology as well as articles, edited collections, and conference papers on these topics running into the hundreds. Brian Robinette calls him “one of the most important and theologically fertile thinkers within the phenomenological tradition,” and Ian James credits him with “redefine[ing] the terms of philosophical debate in France in the wake of deconstruction and the ‘death of the subject.’”<sup>9</sup>

In spite of his recognition as a philosopher, the value of his work to literature has not yet been recognized among English readers. Whereas his phenomenological predecessors Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Paul Ricoeur have received the attention of literary scholars, Marion has not. In part, this lack is attributable to Marion’s youth. A student of Derrida and an academic successor to both Lévinas and Ricoeur, Marion represents a new generation of phenomenology.<sup>10</sup> It naturally takes time for discourses that

<sup>8</sup> For more a more detailed introduction to Marion’s work, see Kevin Hart, “Introduction,” *Jean-Luc Marion: The Essential Writings*, ed. Kevin Hart (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Brian Robinette, “A Gift to Theology? Jean-Luc Marion’s ‘Saturated Phenomenon’ in Christological Perspective,” *Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 1 (2007): 86; and, Ian James, *The New French Philosophy* (London: Polity Press, 2012), 18.

<sup>10</sup> For a biographical overview of Marion’s relationships with these three predecessors, see Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2005), 3–12. For

begin in one discipline to move to another, and Marion's most relevant works for literary studies—*In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, *The Crossing of the Visible*, and *The Erotic Phenomenon*—have all been written within the last fifteen years. It also takes time for work to move from one language to another. Of the sixteen books by Marion now available in English, twelve of them have been released since the year 2000.<sup>11</sup> Although several translators are now committed to making Marion's work available in English, the processes of translation and republication necessarily takes time. Additionally, whereas Ricoeur and Derrida wrote explicitly about reading, Marion had not done so before his publication of *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, which appeared in French in 2008 and in English in 2012. And, although he has taught phenomenology and painting at the University of Chicago, there has been no institutional link between his phenomenological writings and the practice of literary criticism as there was for Derrida and Ricoeur. Nevertheless, it is uncharacteristic that literary critics have not worked more at the theoretical level with the new generation of phenomenologists. As Kevin Hart notes, "Literary criticism, which has never been shy of gleaning from adjacent disciplines, has not yet taken what it needs from the current generation of French phenomenologists, even when we are told that phenomenology is without limits and therefore perfectly able to be at home in talk about writing and reading literature."<sup>12</sup>

Another possible reason for the silence about Marion in literary criticism is his association with a "theological turn" supposedly leading phenomenology away from its origin. In 1991, the French Heidegger specialist Dominique Janicaud accused Marion, Lévinas, Michel Henry, and Jean-Louis Chrétien of committing "treason [against] the reduction" that initiated phenomenology by opening phenomenology up to the possibility of a force or being beyond our perception.<sup>13</sup> Janicaud says that this force or being is assumed to be the

an account of his intellectual relationship with them, see James, *The New French Philosophy* and Hart, "Introduction," *Essential Writings*.

<sup>11</sup> For a bibliography of Marion's work, see Hart, *Essential Writings*.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Hart, "Afterword," *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 2 (2009): 298.

<sup>13</sup> Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2000), 27. The volume contains Janicaud's "The Theological Turn in French Phenomenology," originally issued in French as a report to the International Institute of Philosophy in 1991 (trans. Bernard G. Prusak), which makes the accusation, and responses from Marion, Ricoeur, Henry, Chrétien, and Jean-François Courtine.

biblical God with no phenomenological verification. This accusation need not condemn these thinkers to isolation from literary theory. Indeed, over the last decade, literary theory has opened itself up to the “post-secular turn” heralded by Habermas and attended to by scholars of theology, feminism, and political theory.<sup>14</sup> The phenomenologists Janicaud denounces as theologically motivated were in fact receiving attention from literary theorists even before that. Just at the time that Janicaud issued his complaint in France, Jill Robbins and Robert Eaglestone in America and England were fruitfully exploring the relevance of Lévinasian ethics to reading literature, and Ricoeur was patiently producing work that illuminated a hermeneutic circle between literature and life.<sup>15</sup>

There are signs that literary scholars have renewed their attention to the connection between literature and the rest of life that the concepts of saturated phenomenality and the erotic reduction can provide. The assumption that literature was part of an influential cultural matrix in the past is commonplace, but scholars are increasingly open to reexamining reading’s relevance for life in the present. Marion’s generation of French thinkers depart from the “linguistic, textual or discursive paradigm of (post-) structuralism,” and seek instead to engage with those elements of life that exceed language’s limits and persist in spite of their unsayability.<sup>16</sup> Like the new French philosophers, literary theorists are shaking off linguistic confines. One might even say that there is a sense of relief and playfulness in critics looking for the actions and possibilities language cannot contain, as when Joshua Landy writes that “all of us could do with returning to the wisdom of Wordsworth, Schopenhauer

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008): 17–29. For an overview of the trend away from secularity, see Gregor McLennen, “The Postsecular Turn,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 4 (July 2010): 3–20.

<sup>15</sup> On Lévinasian ethics and literature, see Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999); Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). See also, Donald R. Wehrs, *Levinas and Twentieth-Century Literature: Ethics and the Reconstitution of Subjectivity* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013); and Colin Davis, *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). Ricoeur’s work in the years surrounding Janicaud’s accusation includes *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991); *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). For a summary of Ricoeur’s influence in literary criticism, see Sophie Vlacos, *Ricoeur, Literature and Imagination* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> James, *The New French Philosophy*, 5–12.

and company, lovers of art, who eschewed semantics in favor of pragmatics. We could do, in other words, with ceasing to talk about what a text ‘says’—if indeed there is such a thing—and beginning to talk about what it *does*.<sup>17</sup> Marion’s work provides a wonderful connection between new discourses in phenomenology and new discourses in literature because it clarifies the basis from which all our doing arises, which is love.

An approach to literature informed by Marion’s phenomenology must begin with a focus on givenness. The givenness of what we are and what we experience provides the grounding of Marion’s philosophy, and he points out that phenomenology has always had gift as its foundation. For him, givenness precedes both knowledge and being, and the phenomenological reduction (wherein we step outside of the “natural” belief that we can separate the perceiving self from what it perceives) begins with the recognition of givenness: “No givenness without reduction, no reduction that does not lead to a givenness.”<sup>18</sup> In terms of literary criticism, accepting the givenness of a text implies two things—first, a charitable acceptance of a text as gift and, second, a recognition of the otherness of the text as both unavoidable and productive. Charitable reading has roots in both philosophy and theology. Within philosophy, the principle of charity suggests that a reader construes an author’s argument in the most reasonable and positive terms and then engages with that strong version.<sup>19</sup> Theologically, charity underpins all virtuous activity as the spirit of God acting through believers. Charitable reading thus implies a generous construal of a text’s meaning and form performed in the confidence that such an interpretation flows from and contributes to the love we enact in the rest of our lives.<sup>20</sup>

Thinking about a text’s givenness also calls to mind its essential otherness. Every gift originates from elsewhere. For a work of literature, this “elsewhere”

<sup>17</sup> Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Marion, *In Excess*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> For philosophically oriented charitable reading, see Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> For more on theologically oriented charitable reading, see Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001). See also Cassandra Falke, “Good Reading: An Ethics of Christian Literary Theory,” and Jessica Hooton, “After Theory, After Modernity: Reading Humbly,” both in Cassandra Falke, ed. *Intersections in Christianity and Critical Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).