

Between Barthes and Merleau-Ponty: On the Possibility and Developments of a Phenomenological Psychopathology of Love

Gabriel Engel Becher

Abstract

This article proposes a phenomenological approach to the amorous experience through a dialogue between Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945)—moving beyond theories of love. Given the scarcity of phenomenological accounts that conceive of lived love as both origin and evidence of structure, expressed in the linguistic gesture, this study seeks to reconstitute the amorous discourse as a fundamental phenomenon of experience. Even without explicit ties to clinical practice, the authors, each in their own way, provide contributions toward a phenomenological psychopathology of enamoration—contributions that underpin the authorial concept of pathologies of love. Barthes, on the one hand, dramatizes the lover as a fragmented subject, caught in the tension of language, while Merleau-Ponty, on the other, categorizes the affective-sexual experience as an original mode of perception and embodied meaning. Building on this, a reorganization of Barthes's figures is proposed according to the conditions of possibility of the amorous experience: intersubjectivity, corporeality, spatiality, temporality, and affectivity. Finally, a phenomenological therapeutics of love is outlined, grounded in intercorporeality and oriented toward the maximal phenomena of lived maturation, as a means of addressing the pathologies of love. This trajectory is condensed into a conceptual map—a reading guide for the article and a synthesis of the phenomenological conditions and developments of love.

Keywords: Phenomenological psychopathology; Love; Pathologies of love; Roland Barthes; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Body; Language.

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Entre Barthes e Merleau-Ponty: sobre a possibilidade e os desdobramentos de uma Psicopatologia fenomenológica do amor

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Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma aproximação fenomenológica da experiência amorosa a partir do diálogo entre *Fragmentos de um discurso amoroso* (1977), de Roland Barthes, e *Fenomenologia da percepção* (1945), de Maurice Merleau-Ponty – para além das teorias sobre o amor. Frente à escassez de registros fenomenológicos que compreendam o amor vivido enquanto origem e evidência da estrutura, expressa no gesto linguístico, busca-se reconstituir o discurso amoroso como fenômeno fundamental da experiência. Mesmo sem vínculos explícitos com a clínica, os autores oferecem, cada qual à sua maneira, subsídios para uma Psicopatologia fenomenológica do enamoramento – subsídios estes que alicerçam o conceito autoral de patologias do amor. Barthes dramatiza o amante como sujeito fragmentado, tensionado pela linguagem, enquanto Merleau-Ponty categoriza a experiência afetivo-sexual como modo original da percepção e do sentido encarnado. A partir disso, propõe-se uma reorganização das figuras barthesianas segundo as condições de possibilidade da experiência amorosa: intersubjetividade, corporeidade, espacialidade, temporalidade e afetividade. Por fim, delineia-se uma terapêutica fenomenológica do amor, ancorada na intercorporeidade e dirigida aos fenômenos máximos do amadurecimento vivido, como saída para as patologias do amor. Este trajeto é condensado em um mapa conceitual – guia de leitura do artigo e síntese das condições e dos desdobramentos fenomenológicos do amor.

Palavras-chave: Psicopatologia fenomenológica; Amor; Patologias do amor; Roland Barthes; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Corpo; Linguagem.

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Given the lack of accounts that address affective and sexual existence from a phenomenological perspective—that is, from within the amorous experience—the development of new approaches in this field appears warranted. In this context, there is potential to integrate multifaceted humanities authors—such as Roland Barthes—into the established phenomenological tradition represented by thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The dialogical rapprochement between their writings on the terrain of love (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* [1977] and “The Body as a Sexed Being”—chapter 5 of *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], respectively) opens up fruitful and innovative conceptual avenues. After all, the geographical and temporal affinity between the two also proves to be epistemological, in the interrelations of body, language, and love.

The formulation of a knowledge of love, insofar as it must proceed from experience to make its structure evident, draws on the reflections of a phenomenological clinical practice directed toward the lived forms of love—that is, a clinical practice oriented toward the modes of pathological love. Although Barthes and Merleau-Ponty do not write from a clinical perspective, nor do they propose a formal psychopathological science, their respective epistemic systems succeed, each in its own way, in providing a solid foundation for phenomenological psychopathology.

The amorous experience unveils itself in discourse, within the maturation continuum of the amorous subject. In the affective-sexual domain, experience and language converge in a multidirectional and interdependent flow. From this relationship emerges a *map of the amorous experience*—serving both as a reading guide for this article and as the logical conclusion of the amorous journey. More than symbolically representing this contiguity, it seeks to formulate an expressive synthesis of the conditions of possibility and the phenomenological developments of love.

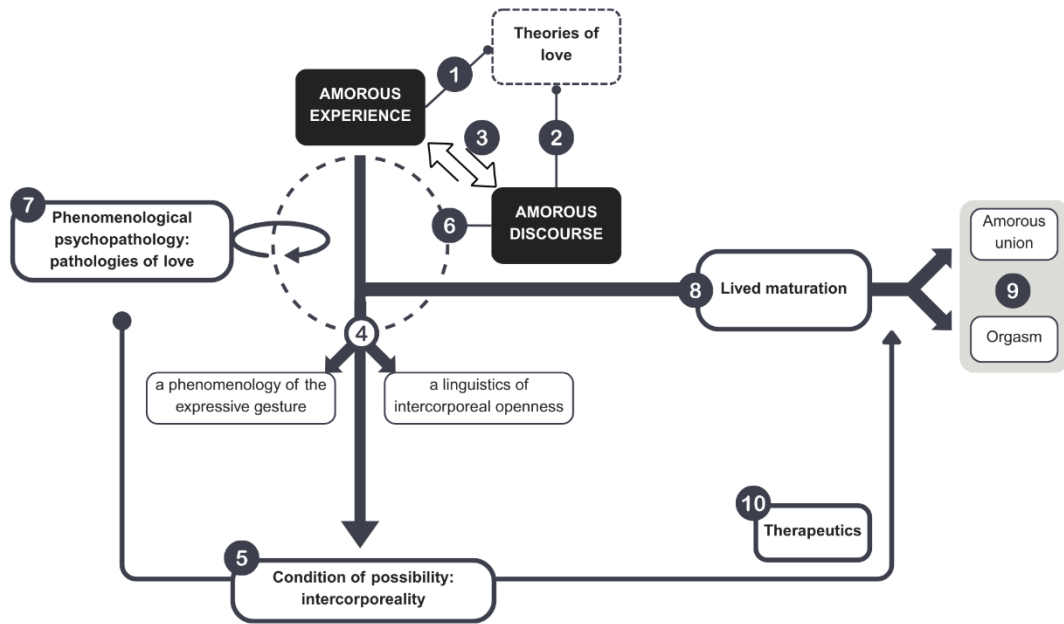


Figure 1. A map of the amorous experience and a phenomenological route through the amorous discourse in ten steps.

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1.

I want to understand love. I can only live love. Yet I need to apprehend it. So, I explain it.

Modern subjects, imbued with the Enlightenment imperative to reduce the world to the bounds of human reason, that is, *to make the world their own*, formulate explanations. The more powerful the phenomenon, the more compelling the task becomes. In the case of the *amorous experience*, this is especially so, as it allows the subject to encounter their most intimate condition—almost prior to the very possibility of any experience—through the encounter with the beloved other. Theories of love, therefore, proliferate in the modern era.

What do I think of love? - As a matter of fact, I think nothing at all of love. I'd be glad to know what it is, but being inside, I see it in existence, not in essence. What I want to know (love) is the very substance I employ in order to speak (the lover's discourse)¹.

Roland Barthes is a modern subject who lived love—one who, by virtue of being a lover, sought to enunciate love while experiencing it. He was careful not to separate the amorous experience from the experience of describing the amorous experience, thereby transforming it into language. In seeking to understand it, he distilled his

¹ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, p. 59.

ultimate aim: “I want to understand *myself*” [emphasis added]².

2.

Barthes, as a humanist, moved through theories across various fields of science without, however, confining himself to any of them. According to Pagan (2019), “although Barthes would not shy away from making use of the tools provided by particular theoretical movements, he would at the same time resist or even undermine each movement”³. Hence an epistemological problem: how should his work be classified?

Given the impossibility of standardizing it, his written work can be seen as composed of distinct moments, manifested in specific texts, forming epistemic mosaics—yet always infused with his love of *language*. At times his work is absolute and hermetic, aligned with structuralist precepts in the manner of Saussure and Benveniste (as in his works from the 1950s and early 1960s); at other times, it is literary, open, and integrated into being, the subject of expression (as in his works from the late 1960s onward). Marking his subjective turn—which is evident even in the title of his 1967 essay *From Science to Literature*—is the striking assertion: “Language is the *being* of literature.”

In the realm of love, it is fitting to turn to *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, first published in 1977, unclassifiable—like its author. Might it be a conceptual manuscript of reconciliation between the arts (notably Goethe’s literature, through excerpts from *The Sorrows of Young Werther*), the sciences (psychoanalysis in particular), philosophy, and mythology? An autobiographical exemplar of his affects in light of his theoretical formation? Would it be better described as a literary work? As a collection of essays on the theme of love? What can be said with certainty is that it constitutes the formal expression of the lover struggling with—and against—his language. As expressed by Marty, his editor and commentator:

What is fundamentally unacceptable to *theoria* is the weak language of the lover, the fact that truth there is no longer its own—the truth of its own language—but rather that of the lover’s language; this lover who is neither the subject of science, nor the Master, nor the academic, but who, by the very sweetness and the very ridiculousness of his name, by the weakness of his being and of his posture, can never produce statements that could be integrated into the immense list of modern statements⁴.

² Idem, p. 60.

³ PAGAN, N. O. (2019). *Barthes the Phenomenologist and the Being of Literature*, p. 18.

⁴ MARTY, E. (2006). *Roland Barthes, le métier d’écrire*, p. 205 (translation mine).

In *Fragments*, Barthes dramatizes an amorous subject, fragmented in time and space, always on the verge of collapse. He makes his lover embrace the world—through the way he speaks and, by the act of writing, also listens. In the words of Pagan (2019), “he suggests an affinity between not only Werther’s and his own amorous passion but also yours and mine”⁵. He underscores the amorous feeling as the true obscenity of the time, rather than the sexual. It is obscenities such as this that, together with Barthes, we utter—lovers that we are, *in act* and *in potency*—when we dare to grasp the possibilities of love:

The lover raves (...); but his raving is stupid. What is stupider than a lover? So stupid that no one dares offer his discourse publicly without a serious mediation: novel, play, or analysis⁶.

3.

Fragments can thus be conceived as a symbiosis between Linguistics and Phenomenology: a love manifesto of a *linguistics of intercorporeal openness* and a substrate for a *phenomenology of the expressive gesture* of love.

There is no mention in Barthes’s written work that would indicate affiliation with the phenomenological tradition. There is not even an explicit reference to the classical works of transcendental phenomenology. On the other hand, the emphasis placed on direct amorous experience in *Fragments* evokes the understanding that language, as a closed system, had been supplanted by the phenomenological comprehension of the amorous-linguistic subject. That is, one can say that in the later Barthes there are traces of a *phenomenological attitude*—upon which we will dwell from this point forward. To this end, it is necessary to refer to the *amorous discourse* of *Fragments*, from the surface of the written text to the foundations of its expression.

The author first presents the de-viation of *dis-cursus* as *action*, along with the subject of this action:

The description of the lover’s discourse has been replaced by its simulation, and to that discourse has been restored its fundamental person, the *I*, in order to stage an utterance, not an analysis. What is proposed, then, is a portrait (...), one which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak^{7,8}.

He then introduces the notion of *figure*, a term that designates the multiple

⁵ PAGAN, N. O. (2019). *Barthes the Phenomenologist and the Being of Literature*, p. 28.

⁶ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, p. 177.

⁷ Idem, p. 3.

⁸ Note, in the excerpt, the sequence of references to “action” embedded in the “discourse,” as in the use of the terms “simulation,” “utterance,” and “portrait.”

and dynamic references that will constitute the totality of the work—the fragments—stemming from the amorous discourse across the aforementioned fields (including his own experience): “the figure is the lover at work”. After all, “in order to constitute figures, we require neither more nor less than this guide: amorous feeling”⁹. He also posits language as the very essence of amorous action, both as *speech* (a gesture of the body in action) and as an *act of signification*: “underneath each figure lies a sentence (...), which has its use in the signifying economy of the amorous subject”¹⁰.

Thus, it is sustained by the tension between signifying discourse and meaningful gesture, at the core of the amorous experience depicted in *Fragments*, that we find the categorical identity between a linguistic approach (of intercorporeal openness) and a phenomenological approach (of the expressive gesture).

4.

“Could there be a subject less theoretical than the lover?”¹¹. It is precisely at this point—at the return to the substratum of experience as method, stripped of any theory of love—that Barthes’s lover can be brought into proximity with Merleau-Ponty’s sexed being. Between *Fragments* and *Phenomenology of Perception (PhP)*, given the epistemological continuity between linguistics and phenomenology, there exists a tacit dialogue. Both are concerned, each in its own way, with restoring to the subject the amorous discourse and perception in general, stripping them of the classical prejudices linked to dualistic formulations (political-Marxist and psychological-psychoanalytic theory in *Fragments*; biological-neuroscientific theory and, once again, psychoanalysis in *PhP*).

Let us consider the phenomenological assimilation of Barthes’s epistemic production as given. It then becomes necessary to link Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological system to the study of language. The very history of his thought supports this connection, since the philosopher engaged with the topic at various stages of his trajectory. Here, particular attention concerns his first phase, prior to the formulation of an ontology of language—developed in later works, such as the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964). In *PhP*, originally published in 1945,

⁹ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Idem, p. 5-6.

¹¹ PRADO, R. L. (2011). *Roland Barthes e o discurso amoroso: para além da teoria, o romanesco*, p. 7 (translation mine).

Merleau-Ponty treats language as an extension of the body, a vehicle of expression, and both the origin and evidence of the pre-reflective condition of the perceiving subject.

In line with the conception of language presented in *PhP*, *Fragments* can be seen as an instance of *speaking speech*—that is, the active sedimentation of meaning onto experience, reflecting the subject’s continuous amorous expression, always as an affective-sexual subject. The foundation of sexual being, in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, has already been extensively reconstructed elsewhere¹², in parallel with the argument of “The Body as a Sexed Being” (chapter 5 of *Phenomenology of Perception*). As a next step, and giving voice to the authors themselves, we present the *pairing* of their understandings of love—and more than that, defend the possibility, even the necessity, of a phenomenological psychopathology of *enamoration* in light of their writings. As Fernandez (2019) notes regarding Merleau-Ponty, this entails situating the psychopathological forms of human experience within a broader phenomenological project.

5.

We will then propose a *reordering of the discursive figures* in *Fragments*, taking the argumentative development of chapter 5 of *PhP* as our method. In other words, we seek to *reconfigure* the amorous discourse by reducing it to the structure of experience. Or, put differently, to offer a kind of phenomenological curatorship of Barthes’s deliberately disordered amorous speech.

We have already argued that chapter 5 of *PhP* plays a central role in establishing the *historical* and *epistemological* foundations of the sexual being. This implies that affective-sexual experience is anchored in the anthropological condition, such that its application may be secured in any field of rational knowledge. It also implies that pathological sexual experience shares in the ontological conditions of Being in general, whereby objects exist “for us” (not in themselves, as presupposed by the philosophy of the *cogito*)—in time, in space, and through the body. Beyond this, pathological sexual experience provides privileged access to the structure of consciousness. Barthes too affirms this, in his own way: “Everything follows from this

¹² Cf. BECHER, G. E. (2023). *The Foundation of the Sexual Being*. In: *Psicopatol. Fenomenol. Contemp.*, v. 12, n. 2: Edição especial, 26-65.

principle: that the lover is not to be reduced to a simple symptomatic subject, but rather that we hear in his voice what is ‘unreal,’ i.e., intractable”¹³.

Merleau-Ponty approaches erotic affectivity as an *original mode of consciousness*—that is, as an original intentionality, manifested through desire as a mode of relation to its object. He treats sexual experience as a *region* of general existence, establishing a hermeneutic relation between them. And he does so beginning with the sexual inertia of the war-wounded individual, as made explicit in the paragraph that marks the *epistemological revolution of the sexual being*:

Pathology reveals a living zone between automatic reflexes and representation in which the sexual possibilities of the patient are elaborated (...). There must be an immanent function in sexual life that guarantees its unfolding, and the normal extension of sexuality must rest upon the internal powers of the organic subject. There must be an Eros or a Libido that animates an original world, gives external stimuli a sexual value or signification, and sketches out for each subject the use to which he will put his objective body. For Schneider, it is the very structure of erotic perception or experience that is altered¹⁴.

Barthes, in the same vein, conceives love *amorously*—that is, as an adverb of *manner*. The origin of love, after all, never detaches itself from the desiring experience of the being toward its object. Barthes’s lover perceives the world in this way: he speaks amorously, lives amorously—precisely that from which Schneider is deprived.

From this follows the ultimate condition of possibility of the affective-sexual structure: *intercorporeality*—toward which it becomes necessary to reconstitute the phenomenological thesis.

5.1 Intersubjectivity

Merleau-Ponty presents the example of aphonia (also evoked by Barthes in various fragments), such as the incapacity for speech of a woman deprived of the encounter with her lover. What becomes evident in loss, however, is precisely the rediscovery of the intrinsic linguistic relation between sign and meaning in the act of speaking. The loss of speech is a *refusal* of coexistence; the relation of signification, within the framework of *PhP*, is a relation of expression. Accordingly, it may be affirmed that aphonia expresses refusal, and that the refusal of direct communication expresses precisely this pre-reflective condition of shared experience: *intersubjectivity*. After all, as the philosopher states, “the patient is never

¹³ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, p. 3.

¹⁴ MERLEAU-PONTY, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 158.

absolutely cut off from the intersubjective world”¹⁵.

In *Fragments*, Barthes likewise acknowledges the intersubjective condition of the structure: “I divine that the true site of originality (...) is neither the other nor myself, but our relation itself”¹⁶. And, as a prototype of the amorous situation (on the dialogical level of drama), he refers to the *scene*: “like love, the scene is always reciprocal (...): it is language itself”¹⁷.

5.2 Corporeality

A Intersubjective existence is imbued with meaning insofar as it is embodied: the body symbolizes it to the extent that it enacts and actualizes it each time. In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, the body functions as the mediator of the “double systolic and diastolic movement”¹⁸ of existence—that is, as the diachronic site of an infinite opening to the other and of an anonymous, never complete closure upon itself.

It is in the *ambiguity of the body*, at once subject for itself and object for the other, that the necessary incompleteness of phenomenological reduction is revealed, a hallmark of Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental philosophy. Barthes seems to accept this proposition literally, locating it at the very limits of the amorous experience: “Then should I not, *precisely because of my love*, hide from the other how much I love him? I see the other with a double vision: sometimes as object, sometimes as subject”¹⁹. After all, there is always something unknown in the other, something *unknowable*. It is in love—the drastic experiment of intimacy, a state of near-rupture of the bodily demarcation that distinguishes each pole of the I–other dyad—that this unknowability is accentuated. This is how Barthes expresses it:

I am caught in this contradiction: on the one hand, I believe I know the other better than anyone and triumphantly assert my knowledge to the other (...); and on the other hand, I am often struck by the obvious fact that the other is impenetrable, intractable, not to be found; I cannot open up the other, trace back the other’s origins, solve the riddle²⁰.

We may take a step further and state that the bodily ambiguity of the structure reveals itself in the linguistic condition of being: a speaking body, objectified in the act of subjective expression. In love, Barthes illustrates this through the *contact of*

¹⁵ Idem, p. 167.

¹⁶ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Idem, p. 207.

¹⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 167.

¹⁹ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, p. 42.

²⁰ Idem, p. 134.

skin: “Every contact, for the lover, raises the question of an answer: the skin is asked to reply”²¹; and through *weeping*: “By releasing his tears without constraint, he follows the orders of the *amorous body* [emphasis added], which is a body in liquid expansion, a bathed body: to weep together, to flow together”²².

5.3 *Spatiality and Temporality*

For Barthes, the *amorous body* is the double of a historical body—a body that is simultaneously fixation and flux. That is to say, as emphasized in the *amorous experience*, the *intercorporeal condition* presupposes both the temporality and the spatiality of the structure. Regarding the spatiality of enamoration, the author notes: “I inhabit no other space but the *amorous duel*”²³. As for its temporality, he distinguishes stages:

First comes the instantaneous capture (...); then a series of encounters (...), during which I ecstatically ‘explore’ the perfection of the loved being, i.e., the un hoped-for correspondence between an object and my desire (...). This happy period acquires its identity (its limits) from its opposition (...) to the ‘sequel’²⁴.

Until there is a way out: “I myself cannot (...) construct my love story to the end”²⁵.

5.4 *Affective Signification in the Figure–Ground Dialectic*

Amorous perception (as the meaningful discrimination between sexual and nonsexual manifestation, in each situation) is, therefore, inherent to the corporeal subject. In *PhP*, Merleau-Ponty characterizes it as an *atmosphere*, in dialectical relation with the totality of structural possibilities: where there is vital kinetics, there is always potential sexuality. Thus, as noted elsewhere, “existence never surpasses sexuality, i.e., it never overcomes the dialectic tension that defines sexuality”²⁶. Barthes illustrates the atmospheric vocation of the dialectic of affectivity through his definition of *humor*: “bad humor is nothing more or less than a message. (...) such moods are a short circuit between the state and the sign”²⁷. In the figure–ground arrangement, in line with the precepts of a Merleau-Pontian psychopathology, he

²¹ Idem, p. 67.

²² Idem, p. 180.

²³ Idem, p. 121.

²⁴ Idem, p. 197.

²⁵ Idem, p. 101.

²⁶ BECHER, G. E (2023). *The Foundation of the Sexual Being*, p. 40.

²⁷ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, p. 169-170.

addresses the *pathological anguish* of the lover: “I hear it identify itself moving up, like an inexorable figure, against the background of *the things that are here*”²⁸.

6.

Até Up to this point, we have dealt with the affective–sexual experience in its common essence. At this juncture, the task arises of disentangling its terms, as facets of lived love: *passion* and sex, which may be said, as formulated elsewhere, to be emphatic reactions—in the imagination and in the sensible body—to the presence or absence of the object within amorous consciousness:

There is semantic continuity between passion and sex. Their unity lies in desire—the despotic domination of one field of consciousness over the others (...). Passion and sex are thus born of structural lack. They flow from the subject–object asymmetry. They tend, in Cartesian fashion, toward separation²⁹.

As such, they emerge from the utmost objectivity of the subject who evokes them: from the surface rather than from depth, from generality rather than from particularity. Barthes asserts this in *Fragments*, in a phenomenological manner: “The feature which touches me refers to a fragment of behavior, to the fugitive moment of an attitude, a posture, in short to a scheme (*schema* is the body in movement, in situation, in life)”³⁰. This movement is reaffirmed by the author, in the passage between casualness and love: “I encounter millions of bodies in my life; of these millions, I may desire some hundreds; but of these hundreds, I love only one”³¹.

Thus, the transition from mere encounter to lived love requires overcoming the impersonality of objective traits, which motivate idealized passion or sexual attraction, toward supreme personalness. As Barthes notes: “I love the other, not according to his (accountable) qualities, but according to his existence”³². Passion and sex, points of support for embodied love, can serve as driving forces toward sublime love: “Of course, love requires a release switch (...); the bait is occasional, but the structure is profound”³³. As the philosopher Ortega y Gasset, another theorist-lover, defines: love is “an ontological state of being with the beloved”³⁴.

²⁸ Idem, p. 29.

²⁹ BECHER, G. E. (2024). *Notas sobre o amor vivido*, p. 74 (translation mine).

³⁰ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, p. 191.

³¹ Idem, p. 19.

³² Idem, p. 222.

³³ Idem, p. 190.

³⁴ ORTEGA Y GASSET, J. (1957). *On Love*, p. 31.

There may, however, be obstructions along the path, deviations experienced in the amorous discourse—stages of fixed and exclusionary domination of desire over the totality of consciousness. We will call these states *pathologies of love*, psychopathological types of enamoration, borderline positions of the amorous structure that threaten its dialectical unity. Barthes also speaks to this, inviting the reader to acknowledge the essential *fragility* of the enamored subject: “it is in the amorous state that certain rational subjects suddenly realize that madness is very close at hand, quite possible: a madness in which love itself would founder”³⁵.

7.

In the intercorporeal becoming lie the epistemological foundations for a phenomenological psychopathology of love. From this follows the need to link its practice—and to uncover its unfoldings—to the common path between Barthes and Merleau-Ponty, in the wake of the pathologies of love.

To this end, it is necessary to return to the origin of *Fragments*, to the author’s justification regarding the historical duty of its publication:

The lover’s discourse is today of *an extreme solitude* (...). Once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the ‘unreal,’ exiled from all gregariness, it has no recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an *affirmation*³⁶.

Its premise is the *affirmation of a negation*, that is, the positivity of the discursive gesture as evidence of a deeper lack. It is the sociological imperative to verbalize love in response to the amorous impoverishment of the subjects of a given era. It is the methodological nod to the epistemogenesis of a particular field from the recesses of its terrain. It is, therefore, the very principle of a *phenomenological psychopathology of refusal*, as evoked by *PhP*. In short, one may say that Barthes would adopt Merleau-Ponty’s proposal for dividing *hypocrisy* into the psychological and the metaphysical levels, according to the depth of its structural inscription: “with my language I can do everything: even and especially say *nothing*. I can do everything with my language, *but not with my body*. What I hide by my language, my body utters”³⁷.

From this perspective, *Fragments* is the most refined example of embodied

³⁵ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, p. 120.

³⁶ Idem, p. 2.

³⁷ Idem, p. 44.

amorous language, as the expressive constitution of meaning through the linguistic gesture—in the case of psychopathology, as the consolidation of pathological forms of love arising from the languor of amorous discourse. In these terms, amorous discourse may be understood as a mode of discursive–existential suffering, a subtle psychopathological type: enamoration. Merleau-Ponty asserts that, in the patient, “perception has lost its erotic structure”³⁸. In the enamored body, the *privileged sign* of existence in general, the crisis of intercorporeality is revealed.

The five essential phenomena of the pathological obstruction of amorous discourse are, therefore:

- I. Pathological enamoration is captured through figures in *hypostasis*: “the strength of love cannot be shifted (...); it remains here, on the level of language, enchanted, intractable”³⁹.
- II. The other, the target of amorous discourse, is *unattainable*, “annulled by love”: “by a specifically amorous perversion, it is love the subject loves, not the object”⁴⁰. Consequently, alterity is an inexhaustible source of *panic* for the lover—in the polysemy of the term: it is a referential totality, but also a pathological metaphor.
- III. Through a vicious degeneration of the discursive flow, everything refers back to the amorous affect and to its object. The lover, in this sense, is *hyper-hermeneutical*: “*Everything signifies*: by this proposition, I entrap myself, I bind myself in calculations, I keep myself from enjoyment”⁴¹. At the same time, the lover *speaks idly*, errs in discourse, utters signs imprecisely.
- IV. The lover has *ideas of escape*: “All the solutions I imagine are internal to the amorous system: withdrawal, travel, suicide (...): I order myself to be still in love and to be no longer in love”⁴².
- V. The lover lives in *ontological solitude*: “The lover’s solitude is not a solitude of person (love confides, speaks, tells itself), it is a solitude of system (...). I can be understood by everyone (...), but I can be heard (...) only by subjects who have *exactly* and *right now* the same language I have”⁴³.

8.

Now, in the direction opposite to pathology, we must confront the notorious Barthesian dilemma: “Why is it better to *last* than to *burn*?”⁴⁴ Because love is affirmed as a *value*, and, as such, it guides *personal maturation*. Hence the amorous

³⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 158.

³⁹ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, p. 24.

⁴⁰ Idem, p. 31.

⁴¹ Idem, p. 63.

⁴² Idem, p. 143.

⁴³ Idem, p. 212.

⁴⁴ Idem, p. 23.

subject navigates through time: on the one hand, he is *consumed*; on the other, he is *historicized*.

As for the former, the pathologies of love can be conceived as forms of *structural immaturity*. Barthes points this out from a linguistic perspective: “It is as if (...) the madman and the lover refused (...) to submit to adult language”⁴⁵. In a psychopathological register, he reports in the first person: “I do not suppose that things can develop, be exempted from desire’s a propos. *I am not dialectical* [emphasis added]”⁴⁶.

As for the latter, the amorous subject is understood as capable of intentionally inhabiting the intersubjective world and, in the dialectical succession of intimate and reciprocal relations, in the rhythmic alternation between presences and absences, constituting himself as a subject: “Such is love’s wound: a *radical chasm* [emphasis added] (at the “roots” of being), which cannot be closed, and out of which the subject drains, constituting himself as a subject in this very draining”⁴⁷. That being said, Barthes would subscribe to the idea that the true love story, a particular metonymy of a person’s life as historical totality, is a history of love stories.

9.

A Mature amorous experience is, above all, the structural pillar of the very definition of love: the preservation of personal identity in the act of surrendering peacefully and profoundly to the other. Fulfilled love is, therefore, a kind of arrival. Now, the plenitude of amorous fulfillment, in the Hegelian sense of *self-recognition through the other*, unfolds into two correlative and synchronous phenomena. These are the two phenomenal faces of love, states of supreme intensification of love in the ambiguity of the body: *amorous union* and *orgasm*.

9.1 Amorous Union

In *Fragments*, Barthes conceives amorous union as the dialectical thrust of the structure toward the pole of the spirit, as the near-surpassing of the immanent condition of the linguistic body—that is, as the maximal degree of its pull toward pure transcendence, in the very moment of the discursive act: “I-love-you is active. It

⁴⁵ Idem, p. 205.

⁴⁶ Idem, p. 163.

⁴⁷ Idem, p. 189.

affirms itself as force—against other forces. (...) Or again: against language”⁴⁸. Moreover, in the Hegelian manner, he treats union as an “undivided repose”: “This union would be without limits, not by the scope of its expansion, but by the indifference of its permutations”⁴⁹.

9.2 Orgasm

Within the spectrum of expressive gestures of amorous union, Barthes mentions the embrace. Yet no form of amorous encounter can be as significant as the experience of orgasm—satisfaction in the form of flow, the fusional overcoming of desire, as lack, for the sake of love. The orgasm may be said to be the epiphenomenon of the corporeal radicality of love.

For Barthes, at the moment of orgasm, “everything is suspended: time, law, prohibition: nothing is exhausted, nothing is wanted: all desires are abolished, for they seem definitively fulfilled”⁵⁰. The issue of fulfillment reappears in *Fragments* as exceedance of totality. In other words, as evidence of the intentional projection of the amorous subject toward the intersubjective encounter—a subject who experiences fulfillment, following the path of the orgasm that does not empty, but rather fills, toward the *reciprocity* of love: “I pass beyond the limits of satiety, and instead of finding disgust, nausea, or even drunkenness, I discover... *Coincidence*”⁵¹.

10.

“How does a love end? – Then it does end?”⁵². With the prelude of a bewildered Barthes, we move toward the final stage of a phenomenological journey of love: a successful denouement, an organized and dual way out of pathological enamoration—without depriving the subject of his inexorable amorous condition. After all, regarding this ecstatic movement, Barthes affirms, hopefully:

It is possible for me to emerge from that ‘tunnel’ which follows the amorous encounter. I see daylight again, either because I manage to grant unhappy love a dialectical outcome (retaining the love but getting rid of the hypnosis) or because I abandon that love altogether and set out again⁵³.

⁴⁸ Idem, p. 153.

⁴⁹ Idem, p. 228.

⁵⁰ Idem, p. 104.

⁵¹ Idem, p. 55.

⁵² Idem, p. 101.

⁵³ Idem, p. 198.

It is, therefore, a matter of considering the possibility of a *therapy for-love*, always as a centrifugal force, from *in-namoration* to *ex-namoration*; a matter of assuming, essentially, the amorous attitude itself as the condition of possibility for this therapy, “by means of which the amorous experience assumes something of the same function as an analytic cure”⁵⁴.

Its phenomenological basis, as we have seen, is interpersonal. A relation of care, oriented by openness, situated in the clinical practice, and grounded in the ethics of love. In equivalent terms: the condition for the subjective overcoming of pathological love is precisely the reestablishment of the intersubjective possibility of loving. Its method could be none other than the therapeutic circulation through amorous discourse. That is, the amorous cure must be contained in the guided sharing of the linguistic gesture, insofar as “it is by language that the other is altered”⁵⁵.

Even though Barthes and Merleau-Ponty are not primarily concerned with the detailed investigation of the diagnostic act and the therapeutic project through the description and analysis of cases, it is possible to find, within their works, traces of a genuine categorical interest in the pathologies of love, as well as in their modes of redemption. An example, taken from *Fragments*, corresponds to the fetishistic structure (i.e., the inclination toward the preferential election of the inanimate object or the partialized body as a source of sexual arousal), a clinical form of the *psychopathological essence of sexual perversion*⁵⁶:

I am searching the other's body (...) as if the mechanical cause of my desire were in the adverse body (...). Certain parts of the body are particularly appropriate to this *observation* (...), the incomplete objects. It is obvious that I am then in the process of fetishizing a corpse. As is proved by the fact that if the body I am scrutinizing happens to emerge from its inertia, if it begins *doing something*, my desire changes; if for instance I see the other thinking, my desire ceases to be perverse (...), I return to an Image, to a Whole: once again, I love.⁵⁷

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The pathologies of love are, in an authorial derivation from the phenomenologies of Barthes and Merleau-Ponty, forms of the *lived dis-corporification*

⁵⁴ Idem, p. 124.

⁵⁵ Idem, p. 26.

⁵⁶ For a detailed account of sexual perversion as a psychopathological essence, cf. BECHER, G. E., HORTÊNCIO, L. O. S. *Sexualidade: Uma leitura fenomenológica da perversão sexual*. In: TAMELINI, M. & MESSAS, G. (2022). *Fundamentos de clínica fenomenológica*. São Paulo: Editora Manole.

⁵⁷ BARTHES, R. (1978). *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, p. 71-72.

of the *amorous discourse*. They are the anthropological evidence of the lover's fall into silence or into noise. They are the psychopathological manifestations of the affective-sexual subject in the process of losing his expressive meaning—a vital challenge to the intercorporeal condition of being. Why not synthesize the pathologies of love as lived states of the *de-composition* of the *amorous structure* into body and language? *Re-composition*, not by chance, inhabits the very act of love.

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