Introduction

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For the tenth anniversary issue of a journal named Symposium, we considered it apt to devote an issue to a discussion of eros. However, unlike at Agathon’s Symposium, where the flutegirls were banished from the room so that the men could better philosophize, we wished to dedicate the issue to the work of women philosophers on the subjects of the erotic and love.

In her beautiful prose poem, Eros the bittersweet, Ann Carson describes the “trajectory of eros” as one that “moves from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole.” Carson continues, “Reaching for an object beyond himself, the lover is provoked to notice that self and its limits. For a new vantage point, which we might call self-consciousness, he looks back and sees that hole.” “Seeing my hole, I know my whole, he says to himself” (Ann Carson, Eros the Bittersweet [Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998], 30, 32–3, 33). The classical image that persists today is of desire as lack, or absence, where the self is a hole, an insatiable emptiness that restlessly desires wholeness, whose hole drives him to become that which he can never be. Love, on this model, might be inconceivable without tragedy; its satiety is also our loss.

The notion of a cavity in the self that propels one toward the other persists in the Hegelian struggle for recognition, the desire to be desired, the failed endeavor to possess the other, which nevertheless enables the promise of a transformed mode of self-possession belonging to self-consciousness. In Freud, eros likewise remains ambivalent, riven with negativity. The intensity of desire and the thrill of love must also be a source of resentment. Love of another comprises an intolerable negation of one’s independence, which forces one to idealize and inflate the beloved in order to endure the otherwise unbearable loss of freedom entailed by erotic passion.

Although the history of feminism exhibits great ambivalence toward love, many are united in an effort to think love, sexuality, and eros beyond the notion of the self, its hole, and the corresponding problem of wholeness. Some feminists thus foreground the plenitude and positivity of desire rather than its disclosure of absence and negativity. Rather than focus on desire’s ambitions, its reaching out to consume, subsume, or unite with another, many, including some of the authors in this volume, explore the passion to give, care, nourish, enable, and “hold the body of another.” While refusing to accept the idea that mothers and
primary caregivers, for example, are purely self-sacrificing, such reflections complicate any presumption that desire is only desire to have, take, master, or dominate. Other feminists aim to tarry with the destructiveness that seems to belong to love, which is exacerbated in a misogynist culture. The essays in this volume, in diverse ways, continue the feminist tradition of interrogating representations of sexuality and institutions of kinship as part of an aspiration to expand the possibilities for human intimacy.

At the risk of relying on the classical model where desire points primarily toward the self rather than the other, however, we would like to suggest that these meditations by women philosophers on love, family, kinship, and eroticism tell us something about our own erotic impulses. They reveal not just the “is” of eros or philia, not just what love is or might be, but what we desire, what we want, what we idealize, and what we reach for. As you read these papers that explore and analyze love, sexuality, desire, and their representations, we might also listen for the desires, visions, and yearnings that animate them. We might also question those strivings, which aim not only to tell stories but to make worlds.

Many of the papers in this issue were first presented at a symposium on feminism and eros organized by the guest editors of this issue and which took place at McGill University in April of 2007. We would like to thank all of the participants who contributed to this conference and whose papers are included in this issue. Our thanks go to the commentators and audience members who helped to make the event a success. We would also like to thank les Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture for making this conference possible.