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Virginia Goldner

Stephen Mitchell (1997) wrote that “Psychoanalysis and the Degradation of Romance,” the paper on which the book *Can Love Last* was based, provoked the most feedback, both intellectual and personal, of anything he had ever written. These reverberations have continued, unabated by his passing. One of the many responses to his work in this area took the form of a 3-week International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy (IARPP) online symposium (March 2003), which also addressed a paper of mine, “Attachment and Eros: Opposed or Synergistic?” (Goldner, 2004) that proposed an alternative thesis about the fate of romantic love over the long term.

Many on the IARPP colloquium took the position that although Mitchell and I used different intellectual strategies, our relational solution to the (apparent) opposition between attachment and eros was reductive because it occluded a full reckoning with the one-person aspects of sexuality. By contrast, my position argued that Mitchell’s work was reductive because he gave short shrift to the two-person aspects of romantic intimacy (especially to the importance of the third). Those primarily concerned with sexuality argued that Mitchell *underestimated* the foundational irreconcilability between eros and attachment, but my concern with relationality lead me to argue that he *overestimated* this antagonism, and I ultimately proposed a means to deconstruct this opposition altogether

C*an Love Last*, Steve Mitchell’s (2001) final book about the fate of romantic love over the long term, was published posthumously on Valentine’s Day, 2002. Some years earlier, he wrote that the paper on which the book was based had provoked the most feedback, both intellectual and personal, of anything he had ever written.

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These reverberations have continued, unabated by his passing. A panel of papers inspired by the book was presented in his honor at the inaugural meeting of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy (IARPP) in January 2002 (Gerson, 2002; Goldner, 2002; Stein, 2002; Wrye, 2002), and the following year, another grouping of papers occasioned by the book were published in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* (Goldner, 2004; Ogden, 2004; Orbach, 2004). In March 2003, a 3-week IARPP online symposium took up the topic once again by revisiting both his original essay and my *PD* article that offered another framework for formulating these issues (Goldner, 2003). Many of the articles in this current issue of *PD* began as postings on that IARPP symposium, a collective dialogue of such creativity, speed, and rigor that within days of its launch I was referring to my paper as something I had produced “back then,” because the moving target of the groupthink had already so transformed and enlarged my project as to make it seem old.

Clinical interest in romantic passion and its staying power seems now to be in the air, as writers from many clinical and academic traditions stake out their claims in a variety of venues. By way of illustration, Helen Fisher, an evolutionary anthropologist, published *Why We Love* in 2004, a discussion of the “nature and chemistry of romantic love,” and Ethel Person, who has considered these matters throughout her long career, recently revisited the topic, addressing the vicissitudes of long-term love relations in a Plenary address to the 2005 meeting of National Association for the Advancement Psychoanalysis (a paper which I discussed). Most spectacularly, the family therapist Esther Perel (2006) has just published a major trade book, *Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic*, which is indebted to Mitchell’s work. An audiobook and numerous translations are already in the works, and her souped-up Web site produces dancing visual sound bites that seem channeled from *Can Love Last*. (“Reconciling the erotic and the domestic is not a problem to solve but a paradox to manage,” writes the Webmeister in a superb rendering of Mitchell’s perfect pitch; see <http://www.estherperel.com/>)

Before Mitchell, no one questioned that the fate of romantic love and sexual passion over the long term was terminal. In the words of another great love pundit, whose erudite and ambivalent endorsement of romantic love caught Steve’s eye, the analyst John Munder Ross (1991) wrote that “love is dogged by the sense that it cannot last” (p. 461). Framing the problem as an inherent contradiction between the ordinary and the extraordinary, Ross argued that “when the ordinary exigencies of reality are subsumed by love’s spiritual heights and sensual demands it becomes difficult

... to go about one's business" (p. 460). Person (2005) made virtually the same point in the same terms: "No obsession as compelling as romantic love is completely consonant with one's everyday life and obligations" (p. 7).

Munder Ross (1991) initially put a psychoanalytic spin on the problem, writing that lovers "feel ... entrapped, distracted and controlled by their passion, eventually resenting loving and being loved [so much that they] inevitably try to wriggle free" (p. 460). But he soon lapsed into a normative 1950s vernacular, opining that romance is a young person's game because "at no time thereafter does the responsible individual have the leisure and energy to expend on love, so pressing are the demands of nest building" (p. 470).

In this discourse, the equation of excess with immaturity and renunciation with adulthood is taken for granted rather than queried. As a result, the psychological reluctance to bear the intense, often threatening feelings incited by romantic love is rendered unremarkable, rationalized as a necessary consequence of the psychic and social demands of adult development. As a result, the flattening out of passion in long-term relationships comes to seem impersonal and axiomatic, when it is actually deeply personal and psychodynamic.

Mitchell's work on romantic love was meant to trouble that defensive project by deconstructing the resistances—personal, metapsychological, and cultural—to sustaining vibrant and intimate sexual relationships over the long haul. His cultural critique of marriage centered on the notion that it was the site of a faux adulthood that provided a cultural rationalization for the conflation of pseudomature deadness with being a grownup—becoming cardboard facsimiles of the adults our parents had once appeared to be.

This ideological critique, although not a central element in Mitchell's overall project, became an important theme in the IARPP discussion. As many culture critics have shown, Munder Ross's antiromantic take on marriage has the weight of historical precedent on its side. Mark Blechner (2003a), among others, argued that

for most of human history, marriage and desire were not presumed to go together. Marriage was primarily an institution designed to produce children and socio-economic stability. ... Newlyweds were often strangers, money was more important than romance, and love was not the key, but rather an impediment to a successful marriage.

Blechner went on to describe many cultures, past and present, including American subcultures, in which marital stability and sexual love were *not*

presumed to occur together. By showing that the romanticization of marriage is a relatively recent ideological development that is still far from universal, Blechner also raised the question of the coercive action of normativity. He argued that the presumption of the “healthfulness” of sustaining love, sex, and romance within a single relationship throughout the lifespan can (has?) lead us to pathologize all the alternatives, even though most people probably “fail” at the goal of sustaining erotically compelling, long-term monogamy.

Not surprisingly, Mitchell was more successful in making his case for long-term romance when he argued it on psychological grounds. Here again is his central thesis: Romance and passion degrade in long-term relationships not because they are safe and comfortable but because they are dangerous and risky. Intimate love entails profound dependency on another person whom we cannot control, a condition of helplessness that is potentially humiliating and infuriating. “Romantic passion requires surrender to a depth of feeling that should come with guarantees,” he wrote, “but there are no guarantees” (2001, p. 54). To be in love with someone you actually depend on is very dangerous indeed, he concluded, and in one of my favorite sly reversals, Mitchell (1998) tweaked conventional wisdom by describing marriage, that emblem of aging domestication, as a “hazardous arrangement” (p. 571), not recommended to the faint of heart.

Mitchell’s point was that the comforting but antipassionate sense of security that we ascribe to love in primary relationships is not a given but a mutually orchestrated numbing and dulling, unconsciously motivated by the need to manage the enormous emotional vulnerability that comes with a long-standing romantic commitment. Reaching the passion buried under encrusted habits of deflection, withdrawal and resentment can entail enormous risk, and Mitchell’s exhilarating insight was that romantic engagement over the long term requires an act of courage. He located the potential for renewal in one brief phrase: “No risk, No gain” (2001, p. 136).

My issues with this elegant and socially important thesis were taken up in my 2004 “Attachment and Eros: Opposed or Synergistic” (a brief summary of my argument is to follow). But my posthumous dialogue with Steve Mitchell was not the first time that readers stepped up to the challenge of this material and this mind. The initial volley was fired by Stein (personal communication to S. Mitchell, March 15, 1998), whose response to the paper (Mitchell, 1997) that served as the basis for *Can Love Last* was published the following year in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* (Stein, 1998), along with Mitchell’s (1998) extended reply.

Stein laid out an alternative vision of sexual passion as a multilayered, thick experience with highly complex forms of psychic action. From this vantage point, Mitchell's idea that the waning of erotic passion between long-term partners could be fully accounted for (and reversed) by addressing their defensive avoidance of intimacy seemed a rather wishful oversimplification. Her writings in this area have framed many of the issues that underlie what has emerged as the postclassical counterthesis to Mitchell's relational analysis of why passion fades in long-term love relations and what, if anything, can be done about it.

Stein found Mitchell's purely relational alternative to Freud's tragic vision of an embattled eros to be insufficient, because as it privileged "the object related over the self-directed vector of eroticism" (Stein, 2001, p. 6) and did not engage the paradoxical complexity of the relations among eros, pain, and death. ("Passion,' like 'pathos' derives from suffering, and thrives on absence, pain, lack, impossibility"; Stein, 2001, p. 2).

Mitchell and Stein increasingly shared much common ground in terms of their theorization of the place of passion in psychic life. Both addressed the importance of the unknown and of transgression, and they later shared an appreciation of the significance of surrender. But a fundamental difference between them remained, which Stein distilled as one in which she saw "an inherent disjunction between love and passion, where [Mitchell] took them to be conjunctive" (personal communication to S. Mitchell, March 15, 1998).

She proposed that this distinction both reflected and resulted from their different ways of conceptualizing passion and its risks. For Mitchell, the allure of passion was in its alterity (the "otherness" of the other), and its threat was in the menace of having one's dependency on a loved one shattered as a result of the lover's hurtfulness, betrayal, or abandonment. By contrast, Stein's emphasis has been on passion as an inner quest that "concerns the self, its boundaries, and whatever lies beyond them, which is not necessarily the (human) other" (Stein, 2001, p. 5). This intensely self-interested aspect of eros is, in her view, "beyond object relations," and its allure and risk concern "the existential abyss of nothingness" (personal communication to S. Mitchell, March 15, 1998) and the "plunging into oblivion" (Stein, 2001, p. 7) that she and others (Bataille, 1986; Ghent, 1990; Bersani, 1995; Stein, personal communication to S. Mitchell, March 15, 1998) have characterized as a kind of death experience.

The tension between these one- and two-person perspectives, or as Fairbairn would have it, between "pleasure (which includes pain) seeking" and "object seeking" theories of sexuality preoccupied the IARPP online

colloquium, which became immersed in the challenge of containing this opposition. Slavin, (2003) for example, speculated that Mitchell's interrogation of romantic love and its "degradation," although not fully successful, was ultimately a vehicle for him to engage in a larger, more ambitious theoretical project:

to frame a relational, intersubjective view of Freud's drive-based intrapsychic explanation of the universal clash between desire and ... attachment [and to offer] a revised understanding of the ... source of the immense danger that creates the imperative, compelling, and threatening power of transgressive erotic desire.

Dimen (2003b) evoked that unique threat in an experience-near posting:

Passion is dangerous because it is treacherous. To fall into a passion is to betray one's loyalty to primary objects and to the self one knows, the self one idealizes, to one's body. It is to endanger the other as well as the self. Here is the Faustian amorality, the asociality Freud thought was inherent to sex.

But in the IARPP discussion, as in the earlier exchanges between Mitchell and Stein, the clarity of the debate was sometimes compromised by the ambiguous and slippery nature of its key terms and categories. *Romance*, the term I have been using to introduce Mitchell's ideas, and *passion*, the term his critics prefer, can too easily be used interchangeably, their distinctions unspecified, their meanings conflated, as they were in Mitchell's writings. (This is partially an artifact of the larger argument that Mitchell had put in play, in which both terms were being positioned in opposition to another wooly category, *attachment*, which became increasingly blurry itself once Mitchell began using it interchangeably with *dependency*).

Stein's critique of Mitchell's attempt to use a purely relational strategy to resolve the (apparent) antagonism between attachment/love and desire/eros (note my use of yet another set of terms) was ultimately directed at the insufficiency of his thesis when applied to sex and sexuality. Although my critique of Mitchell gestured in the direction of sexuality, I now see that, like him, I was primarily engaged with the theorization of romantic love and, for want of a better term, romantic/relational passion. (Thanks to the

richness of the IARPP discussion, it has become clear that professional writing does not begin to capture the quotidian shadings of sexual experience, whereas other forms of writing that rely on imagination or thick description can take the reader right down into the sheets.)

I think Steve and I both glossed the specifics and complications of sexuality (while seeming to write about them), because sexuality was finally not our subject in these statements. Instead, we were animated by a powerful ideological motive—to rescue marriage (any long-term partnership) from the doldrums of the obvious. The ubiquitous notion that marriage domesticates sexuality has fostered the sense that such relationships are easy and dull, and that sexuality over the long term is not worth much serious or creative thought. In our different ways, we were each looking to rescue the marital bed from those "Spice up your Marriage" advice books by showing that long-term love relations are full of rigors and dangers and that old love can be very sexy for those willing to risk loving.

But our emphasis was on the heart, not the body. In my rendering of that romantic sexual genre, I was primarily concerned with the intersubjective aspects of the erotic encounter between lovers with a history. Because I was making the case for the erotic charge of mutuality, I did not take up the full range of sexual states and moods we all experience, especially those "darker" desires and practices that feel more "driven from within," the ones we typically experience as more objectifying of self and other. ("Passion" is a dark affair," Stein (2003) wrote, "not necessarily springing from love, but possibly from many other affects ... the yearning of the body that is felt without affection or [even] direct stimulation").

Mine was a willfully relational/romantic view of the erotic, meant to show how attachment and sexuality could be mutually catalytic rather than inherently opposed. Many on the IARPP colloquium took the position that although Mitchell and I used different intellectual strategies, our relational solution to the (apparent) opposition between attachment and eros was reductive because it occluded a full-reckoning with the *one*-person aspects of sexuality. By contrast, my position was that Mitchell's work was reductive because he gave short-shrift to the two-person aspects of romantic intimacy (especially to the importance of the third). Although those primarily concerned with sexuality argued that Mitchell *underestimated* the foundational irreconcilability between eros and attachment, my concern with relationality lead me to argue that he *overestimated* this antagonism, and I ultimately proposed a means to deconstruct this opposition altogether.

Safety as a Third

Despite all that is right, even mutative, about Mitchell's core thesis, I have always been unsettled by the way he developed the idea that mutually colusive distancing, driven by the need to tamp down emotional risk, underlies the deadening of passion in long-term relationships. As someone who spends many clinical hours with couples on the brink, I found Mitchell's rhetorical emphasis on danger and risk as the wellsprings of sexual excitement) subtly shortchanged the sexual importance of safety in relationships that matter.

Mitchell did make a distinction between safety, which he saw as a necessity in long-term relationships, and the defensive *safety-operations* that can make such partnerships oppressively cozy. But his emphasis on safety-as-contrivance consistently led him to *take safety itself for granted* and thus to leave unrecognized and untheorized what is most important about it from a two-person point of view.

In my clinical and personal experience, relational safety is not primarily an unconscious evasion or retreat from engagement, it is a profound interpersonal accomplishment. The risk of being in love with the one you love is possible only in a context of safety—not the flaccid safety of tepid cohabitation, but a dynamic safety whose robustness is established via the couples' lived history of risk-taking and its resolution—the never-ending cycles of breakdown and repair, separation and reunion, winning and losing that constitute the history of authentic, noncoercive intimacy.

Romantic love in long-term relationships is not sexy simply because it is "dangerous," *but also because the partners make that danger safe*. They make good on their promise to love over and over again, despite the hurt they inevitably cause one another. I would argue that it is not "the exotic" that necessarily gets libidinized in long-term relationships, but the pain.¹ There is the pain of owning one's profound need for the other, the pain of bearing the inevitable abandonments and injuries that come with that territory, and under the best conditions, the pain that is healed by having one's suffering recognized and repaired by the one who caused it.

Adult attachment, Benjamin (2003) argued, should ideally create a container for the over-the-topness of certain kinds of sexual excitement as well

¹I am not making Robert Stoller's (1979) classic one-person argument that sexual excitement is an attempt, repeated over and over, to undo childhood traumas and frustrations. Although I believe that the libidization of pain is a ubiquitous trend in erotic life, my emphasis is on the two-person erotic potential of relational trauma and repair

as for the tragic connections between love and loss. Each dyad must build a particular staging ground, a kind of thirdness, that can encompass both ruptures and excitement because the experience of romantic love with *this particular person* becomes imbued with an affective density particular to that relationship—with its specific poignancies, transformational moments, and trauma history.

Benjamin suggested that what generally fails in couples is the building of this thirdness, and what generally fails inside us is our trust in that third. Given that we are all more vulnerable and fragile than otherwise, failure has to be ubiquitous. In this sense, the acceptance of failure and the continual rebuilding of the third is the ongoing work of romantic relationality.

There is a deep paradox in this project, as finding the courage to risk such whole-hearted relating despite its very real risks, requires creating the conditions of safety even as we push them to the limit. Couples must hold, and allow themselves to be held by a relationship while acting as individual agents within it. Under such conditions, the desire for adventure and the need for safety are transformed from one-person affairs, driven solely by the internal dynamics of each partner, to two-person experiences that coevolve over the length of a long relationship, each framing the other, held in the tension of figure and ground.

Once embedded in this passionate history, dependency can fuel, rather than dampen the drama of desire. Through the relational action of mutuality, dependency can transmute from a secretly shameful one-person need into an enlivening, conjoint state of risk, that can now transform to that lack that is desire. Think of it this way. Where the fear of abandonment or narcissistic injury keep us out of the bedroom, the risk of rupture where there is hope for repair draws us in. Isn’t *this* the dialectic that makes sex in authentically intimate relationships so hard and deep? Make-up sex, in Seinfeld’s terms?

Mitchell’s strategy was to enigmatize the familiar as a strategy to revitalize the erotic—all versions of the question, “Do you *really* know her?” But I would ask whether we have to find the foreign in the familiar, to make old love brand new, in order to make it sexy again. Perhaps in long-term love relations there is another erotic trajectory at work. It is not necessarily the (re)discovery of the lover’s ultimate alterity that turns the heat on, but the (re)finding of that *deeply known* person we love and need, and the thrill and relief of discovering that they are also reaching out for us, that turns on the tap.

Fairfield (2003) saw the continuous recycling of this “you’re still here after all!” moment as a relational eroticization of the child’s “fort-da” experience. I think this is an excellent analogy. Think about the reunion moment

in all those empirical studies of childhood attachment. When the mother leaves the child alone with the good-enough stranger in the lab situation, the secure child is the one who is able to risk revealing the enormity of her fear and dependency. She fights for her mother's return through angry protest and refuses to be fobbed off to the candy-coated surrogate. The secure child is the one who bears the pain of knowing that only his one and only can restore him to himself, even though his beloved (mother) was the very person who asserted her implacable, independent will to leave against his urgent need for her to stay.

Although such a mother cannot be domesticated, because she just keeps coming and going, she also bears and metabolizes the child's protest as part of the fabric of her intentionality. When finally reunited, the child's palpable joy and profound relief demonstrate that he is not afraid to show how much he loves, needs, and still trusts her. It is only after their mutual recognition of the suffering he endured at her hands, combined with the shared emotional release of their reunion, that each can return to themselves. How much more romantic can you get?

To my mind, this is the relational template that can fuel erotic intensity in long-term relationships, healing the (gendered) split between safety and eros. Instead of the housebound mother who *has* to be there, or the exciting father who *happens* to be there, the (m)other we fall in love with over and over again *wants* to be there. Each time the partners reunite after separation, loss or emotional injury, they bring news of the outside back into the safety of home, which is now imbued with its own shimmering poignancy, just because we have gone away.

Unlike the electrical charge of a foreign body, romantic surrender with the *one* you love and hate occurs in the shadow of the depressive position. As Davies (2002) argued, this kind of passion is held in the tension between idealization and de-idealization, as partners engage the dialectic between the ecstatic highs of mutual adoration and the excruciating lows of narcissistic disappointment and loss. Love hurts. But it can also fuel the transformation from the "white heat of the new" into what Davies called the

smoldering embers of the late-night fire ... which, as fans of [these] fires know, can throw more heat over a longer span of time than the blazing fires of the night before, which burn themselves out, leaving little more than ashen rock [p. 12].

In returning to the well, safety and adventure oscillate as each partner provides a secure base for the adventure of sexual exploration, freeing the "oth-

erness" of one's own desire to encounter the strangeness of the lover's sexual subjectivity. Yet even this characterization is too orderly, as the object and environment mothers that Winnicott's infant (and our propriety) segregate will not keep their hands off each other once passion makes its claim. Thus, the familiar and the novel, the body you know and need, and the one you discover and destroy, interpenetrate in the heat of erotic simultaneity.

Sexual Passion: Intersubjectivity and Psychic Multiplicity

Sex trades on the thrill of discovering, over and over again, that we are unknown to ourselves. Indeed, one of Mitchell's central insights was that the telos of sex is about the move into the unknown. We might think of this dialectic between the familiar and the exotic, the known and the unknown, as an eroticization of Mahler's practicing subphase: our lifelong "love affair with the world." But unlike toddler explorations, what makes for sexual adventure is not only the novelty of the Other, although that always helps, but the "otherness" of the self.

The transformation from one's ordinary daytime self into the transgressive self-state of the erotic subject is central to a sexual state of mind. The switch-points that call forth that state of internal otherness are products of the psychic action of our multiple, distributed, and decentered minds. Psychic multiplicity, the everyday action of dissociation, along with specific features unique to erotic life (such as the lack of social narration to situate sexuality in children's psychic lives; see Davies, 2002), result in the segregation of sexual self-states from other self-experiences (the me I know vs. the one that finds me).

On the IARPP colloquium, Stern (2003) elaborated on this point in his discussion of "the extent to which love and sex must be experienced as different self-states." He asked us to consider a range of possibilities along a spectrum leading to dissociation. Is the love-sex separation unconscious, the reason for it uncomprehended? Or is it compartmentalized, perhaps even an informed choice? Can the person experience love and sex within the same state of self some of the time, perhaps moving freely between the various self-states in which love and sex are experienced? Or must there be some kind of rigid, unconsciously regulated switchover to a walled-off state when "sex" begins and then back again later on?

Although erotic subjectivity is not only, or even primarily, *intersubjective* in the whole object "I-thou" sense, it is always *intrasubjective* in that

sexual excitement involves an encounter between a familiar subjective “I” and a lesser known “me” or actually multiple “me”s. Each erotic self can be called forth by an incipient fantasy triggered by an image, a particular touch, an interior sensation or affect, an unconscious memory, by a dirty word, an experience of the other’s experience, and so on.

These cues and their evoked subjectivities constitute the beginnings of an erotic script that involves a crowd of body parts, part-objects, and self-objectifications (an erotic relationship between an I and a me) meeting up with the lover’s counterparts. The aroused sexual subject, already a different self from the workaday I, and already somewhat “in character” as the object or subject of desire, as reluctant or insistent, tender or hostile, related or self-absorbed, or some contrarian melange—is the one who co-convenes the erotic situation with the outside other.

As the *mise en scène* unfolds and the crowd gathers, the resulting condition of sexual passion both entails and produces an intensification of shifting self-states. Each erotic grouping of parts and wholes must surrender to the story, enacting the scene with the single-minded conviction of a method actor. Turning up the houselights, even for a passing thought, breaks the spell.

Benjamin theorized how the vulnerability, risk, and trust entailed in the intersubjective sexual situation creates a context for its deconstructive, fantastical action. She has shown how lovers can attune kinetically at the intersubjective level while turning inward to access an intrapsychic domain of fantasy, thus keeping them linked, even as their various unlinked states have their hour upon the stage.

Sustaining passion of this kind is fraught with risk. As Benjamin (2003) elaborated on the IARPP symposium, the self-regulation required to manage the emotional arousal of sexual intensity is “fundamentally an intersubjective problem.” Any increase in tension (what she and Stein referred to as “excess”) requires the regulating and recognizing presence of the Other. When this has been inadequate in one’s history, or fails in the present, the transformational can become traumatic. “Excess” defaults back into a one-person problem, to be managed by the dampening of excitement or by the breaking of connection.

Elise (2003) made a similar point in her discussion of relational risk.

Bion defined passion as the condition of two minds being in deep emotional contact. ... A continuously evolving, lifelong passionate contact with a partner is an extremely challenging endeavor, and it has about as much safety, stability and guarantee of permanence as a

trip into outer space. To risk "the totality of one's self being unbearably shaken" (Stein 3/3) or to sustain "the desire to shatter existing psychic structure in the presence of a particular relational experience with the other" (Frommer 3/4) are not for the faint of heart.

Sustaining passion in a context of emotional intimacy is thus a very high states affair (at both the *inter-* and *intrapsychic* levels). Familiarity does breed contempt, in the sense that there is no way to completely avoid being overwhelmed and abandoned over the course of a long relationship and certainly no way to avoid the commonplace experiences of hurting and being hurt. In cases of sexual alienation, issues of relational trauma, both in and out of bed, need to be worked through so that safety can be once again presumed and then happily forgotten.

Sometimes one or both partners will need to deconstruct their erotic sexprint to bring forth deeper wellsprings of desire. As Frommer (2003) discussed, this quest can often activate shame and fear, resulting in erotic inhibition. (I am disgusted by what I like/want/need.) Safety and risk-taking are both critical here if the couple is to move into the space where those smoldering embers start to catch, after which the erotic register of the body can once again take possession of the process.

Sexuality as Transgression: The Trope We Cannot Do Without?

Although we depend on the fiction of sex for permission to unravel, we also depend on our implicit knowledge of sex *as* fiction to make the leap into its incoherencies. Yet despite this open secret, we still want to take sex at its word. On the IARPP symposium, for example, there was a strong inclination toward the position that sex would forever elude definition and categorization, symbolization and meaning making, that it would always frustrate our normative, narrative grasp. The emphasis tilted in the direction of hyperbole, with sexuality and its risks described as "shattering," "catastrophic," "traumatic," "diabolical," and "deathly."

These aspects of the erotic situation are immensely important and profound, and they probably account for its privileged position in both culture and theory, because it is a domain unlike all others. Indeed, thanks to the IARPP critique, I have come to see how my relational argument did come out too neat and tidy, as if with the right kind of loving, we could easily have all the adventure and erotic otherness we crave right here at home. That

stance, an orientation Stein (2003) dubbed “slightly sanitized and amicable,” ends up, in Blechner’s (2003b) view, “driving us into explaining more than relational theory can bear.”

I do agree with the view that there is “always some kind of fundamental disconnect [something irreconcilable] between attachment and sexuality” (Stern, 2003), even though I have been arguing the opposite position over many years and in many venues. And therein lies one of the problems that the IARPP discussion ultimately enacted as well as critiqued: the near impossibility of sustaining the tension between these perspectives, despite everyone’s commitment to dialectics. Attachment theory puts the search for security above all other psychological motivations, whereas psychoanalysis privileges desire. Although this split was resolved in the abstract by Fairbairn’s move, “libido is object seeking,” the issue is not settled at any level, not intellectually or politically, not emotionally.

Yet what is to be gained, when there is clearly so much to lose, by splitting these fundamental needs and experiences? There is sex as an individual quest and momentary death experience, and sex that brings us back from death (loss) into a sense of home. There is sex that is driven (if I might) by the need to unravel, to leave our bodies and minds as we know them, to make the leap into oblivion. And there is sex driven by the need to reach for and be reached by another, to find and be found deep, deep inside. Why would we elevate one above the other, or reduce one to the other (as Steve did by presuming that new and “old” sex operate on the same frequencies and via the same mechanisms)?

Moreover, why do we continue to default to prejudices, both obvious and subtle, when thinking and writing about sexuality? Why are we still inclined to pathologize nonnormative sexual practices and desires, privileging long-term monogamy over recreational sex or other unconventional long-term sexual and romantic arrangements? Or, starting from the other side of the split, why do we tend to trivialize good sex between long-term partners by viewing it as so fleeting as to be uninteresting and thus consider it not worth the work of new theory? (This collection does much to rectify that last problem.)

The cultural splits between the secret pleasures of the night and the earnest encounters of the day, between the “self-interested” and “other-seeking” genres of sexuality, between the Real and the depressive position, between relational containment and self-interested excess, between the linear work of theorization and the creative work of evocation that are both necessary when we try to put sexuality on the page—all of these polarities need to be deconstructed rather than reinscribed.

But in the spirit of keeping it interesting, I am going to hold to my side of the argument by taking aim at the mythicization of sexuality as foundationally transgressive in my closing move. In our infatuation with the erotic-as-the-Real, we should remember that although Freud positioned sexuality as fundamentally antisocial and transgressive, Foucault argued that it had become emblematic of a new form of docile subjectivity, produced by an all-encompassing matrix of regulatory practices, including psychoanalysis, which he considered to be the founding confessional discourse of our therapeutic society.

The antagonism between eros and attachment is not only a central tension in the discourse of psychoanalysis, it is also a key trope, a defining feature of the psychoanalytic perspective, despite the object-relational turn. Both Stein and Mitchell, for example, who emphasize opposing aspects of the one- and two-person visions of sexuality, share the view that sexuality cannot (must not?) be domesticated by the attachment paradigm and instead must serve as its foil, perhaps even its spoiler. Is this the foundational Book we psychoanalysts can never throw away? Or are we also enacting a cultural trope that positions sexuality as the site of unrepresentable excess and defiance?

Mitchell (2001) was quite explicit in arguing against attachment as a metaphor for adult love relations, going so far as to call attachment "the great enemy of erotism" (p. 83). "We learn to love in the context of the contrived and necessary safety of early childhood," he wrote, "and [adult romantic] loves seeks perpetually a kind of safety that screens out [the very elements that fuel the erotic:] the unknown, the fantastic, the dangerous" (p. 46).

But Mitchell seems to have mistaken the necessary and obvious contrivances of the attachment situation for the profound and subtle dimensions of parent-child relationality that are its true determinants. Research demonstrates that attachment security seems, in fact, to thrive in the dynamic vitality of mutual recognition, rather than in the ministrations of an omni-available mother completely identified with the child's needs. (See Benjamin, 2004). Consider too that attachment security depends not only on sensitivity and reliability but also on the mother's capacity to absorb protest (Holmes, 1997) and on her "mind-mindedness": the ability to see and respond to the child as an autonomous, sentient being with feelings and projects of her own (Coates, 1998; Meins, 1999).

Romantic coupling creates an attachment situation comparable in intensity to the original attachment drama, with its unmodulated urgencies and deep comforts. Couples are not two independent operators tied together by mutual transferences and the untapped mysteries of sex. Re-

search and theory from all quarters show that adult romantic partners are bonded with the same monumental intensity and for the same hard-wired reasons as mothers and babies. "Throughout the lifespan," wrote Schore (2005), "we are biologically connected to those with whom we have close relationships. At the psychobiological core of the intersubjective field between intimates is the attachment bond of right brain/mind-body states" (p. 18). "Attachment is affectively burnt into the brain," wrote brain researchers Stuss and Alexander (1999, p. 218), and in an equally memorable turn of phrase, Schore concluded that "proximity to a loved one tranquilizes the nervous system" (p. 19).

Thus, adult attachment is not a metaphor, an analogy, a template or a prototype—it is "it"—the real thing. If you've been living and sleeping with your partner for 2 years (it should be no surprise that we only attach to those we touch) you are bonded, wound around each other, nervous system to nervous system, and your psychic state is now joint property. You may not be happy, it may not be good, but like the song says, we "love the one we're with." That's just how it is.

Marriage and romance *used* to be separate institutions and experiences, but now they are not. Indeed, separation anxiety, which never fully abates when we are without the one we need, is overheated by a culture in which emotional and practical security can *only* be found in the instability of a romantic attachment. No one can hurt you like your partner, Mitchell argued. But this is not primarily because no one knows you better, or because the work of transference makes that barb land right on your sore spot (both true), but rather it is because your partner (whether cloth or wire) is your home base. "Just as Bowlby surmised," wrote Hazan and Shaver (1999) in the standard reference volume, *Handbook of Attachment*, "romantic bonds are the prototypical adult instantiation of attachment ... in [every] technical sense [of the term]" (p. 336).

Mitchell's position that the deadening of romantic love was not inevitable, but defensive—that the risk of hurt ignites the need to deny our vulnerability—is *exactly* the point made by attachment theorists, who define insecure attachment styles as successful defensive strategies designed to manage and minimize the anguish of rejection and inconstancy.

What makes the circumstance of adult romantic love uniquely dangerous is that one's secure base, the person who heals/regulates you, is also the one who hurts/frightens you. No matter the particulars or pathology, everyone's romantic partner is a source of comfort but also of danger, the cause *and* solution to our pain. In mother-child relations, this unsettled contradiction, which usually reflects unresolved maternal trauma, can result in

the child’s disorganized attachment, an experience of “fright without resolution” (Main, 1995, p. 410) the horrifying specter of the toddler simultaneously fleeing and approaching the mother—running backward, freezing, etc. But in adult life, this highly fraught circumstance characterizes the ordinary conditions of romantic love. Thus, Mitchell was both right and wrong. It is not that long-term love relationships are dangerous *rather* than safe, it is that one’s love object = danger *and* safety.

In Mitchell’s framework, attachment got positioned as that nice, maternal practice that gives babies a good start. As a discourse, he saw it as appropriate for the brightly lit, plush-carpeted living room, or better yet for the lab situation and the empirical tradition, but as useless in the dark bedroom or movie or bathhouse. All of us prefer the view that there are no research categories for what we do in the wetness of the rough and tumble sexual situation, the “how did we end up over here, upside down against this wall?” kind.

Framing sex as oppositional to attachment sets up the sharpest clash between mommy’s domesticated comforts and hidden controls and our illusory defiance of her in those brief excursions into the fourth dimension. The wish to split eros and attachment, to put the environment mother in the kitchen and object mother in the dungeon, comes from our need to constitute sex in a defiant relationship to provision and need. We are afraid of being castrated if we let ourselves know that we are playacting the diabolical but will soon want mommy back, even if it is now in the form of watching the news. By splitting sexuality off from dependency and need we can deploy sex (in theory as well as in life) as a manic defense.

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