

An Other take on the riddle of sex

Excess, affect and gender complementarity

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

This chapter represents the history of my efforts to analyze the tension of bearing the tension of sexuality in light of affect regulation and recognition theory. I do this by locating the origins of our stance towards sexual excitement in experiences in the early mother-infant dyad and continue by following the trail of this pattern into gender complementarity. The crux of this work was an effort to establish a place in intersubjective, relational thought for sexuality, and to further integrate, as in "Sympathy for the Devil," (Benjamin, 1995e), Laplanche's idea of the fantasmatic sexual with relational intersubjectivity. I first gave a version of this paper as a keynote at Division 39, "How Intersubjective Is Sex?" (also called "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell") which formulated the basic proposition that excess arises as that which cannot be symbolized or held in dialogic mental space. I was also aiming to further develop Eigen's early (1981) insight that our psyches can generate so much more than they are equipped to handle.

Excess could be seen as a link to Freud's view of the psyche as grounded in an energetic economy—but without the drive. These ideas were finally published in the paper "Revisiting the Riddle of Sex" (Benjamin, 2004b). However, some years later I took another shot at the project and collaborated with Galit Atlas, in our paper "The Too-Muchness of Excitement," first presented in 2010 and published in 2015 (Benjamin & Atlas, 2015). As Atlas and I continued to work on the clinical theory of how early dyadic interactions can result in later difficulty with arousal and excitement within the sphere of sexuality—"too-muchness"—many of my earlier theoretical speculations were elaborated and concretized. I am grateful for her collaboration, as well as her own contributions to my thinking (see Atlas, 2015, especially Chapters 2 and 3).

Both phases of work on this subject began with reflection on Laplanche's ideas about seduction and the enigmatic message, but the further elaboration of excess by Stein (2008) plays a greater role in my formulations here. Whereas my earlier work emphasized the way the constellation of passivity as femininity was constructed to hold excess by Freud (and the patriarchal culture he embodied), my later

work with Atlas emphasized the clinical sequelae of early dysregulation: the effects of unrecognized distress, abandonment and overstimulation during infancy on adult sexuality. We explored how inability to tolerate sexual arousal and the excitement affect, "too-muchness," these early problems with recognition and regulation that later appear in clinical enactments, transference-countertransference.

Both works emphasized the constant tension between intrapsychic fantasy and the intersubjective relationship in practice and theory, a tension corresponding to what Atlas (2015) calls the Enigmatic and the Pragmatic. The interweaving of these two layers can be seen in the fantasies that both mask and reveal intersubjective failures in regulation and recognition. These fantasies are shaped by the metaphors of gender that are used to process the enigmatic message. In this way I try to integrate a view of sexual fantasy with my earlier critique (Benjamin, 1998; Benjamin, 2004b) of Freud's formulation of the active-passive split in the Oedipus complex: masculine "activity" is seen as an attempt to solve the problem of excess. At the end, I return to the theme that underlay my discussion of Story of O in Bonds of Love (Benjamin, 1988), the search for a form of surrender, a form of thirdness that takes us beyond the complementarity of sado-masochism into shared holding of the excess that is sexuality.

The problem of excess—theoretical perspective

Freud's notion of sexual pleasure and pain emphasized how we seek mastery over tension; he conceived of a one-person economy in which pain is defined as too much tension (Freud, 1915). The roots of the idea of excess or "too-muchness" (Atlas & Benjamin, 2010) can indeed be found in Freud, so much so that Stein (2008) contended that "in fact the notion of excess serves Freud as a regulative idea indicating the perennial striving of the organism to rid itself of excess stimuli" (p. 50). She expounded on the way that "Freud's early writings are suffused with notions of excess, excess of stimuli causing trauma, dangerously accumulated psychic energy, unbearable drive charge manifested in symptoms." She points out how in Freud's earliest thinking: "When physical tension cannot be transmuted into affect, it becomes anxiety" (Stein, 2008, p. 50; Breuer & Freud, 1895). We may note that this formulation suggests an important link between Freud's view of tension and contemporary affect regulation theories.

But this idea of tension raises the question regarding excess: "What is it that makes for too much?" From an intersubjective point of view, pleasure and pain occur within a two-person relationship; they are psychic experiences having to do with how we register the responses of another and how the other registers us. Psychic pain in its intersubjective aspect may be intrinsically linked to failures of recognition and regulation, to arousal caused by inadequate or overwhelming responses, and this failure of the other is registered and pre-symbolically represented (Stern, 1985) by infants in their internal working model of attachment (Bowlby, 1969; see Fonagy & Target, 1996a & b).

It is important to recognize not only the failure of the other to regulate but also the overwhelming of the psyche (see Eigen, 1993; Benjamin, 1995a) by the other, or more precisely the psyche's response to the other's stimulation, in our understanding of excess. If we consider this overwhelming of the immature psyche as another take on Freud's (1926) idea of original helplessness, we can see how we are still working to grasp a primary experience and identify a through line in our intellectual history related to excess. This perspective on "too-muchness" recognizes the original helplessness and anxiety Freud first identified, as well as the implicit role of excess in his thinking but, as we shall eventually see, the translation of this helplessness into the feminine position of passivity in Freud's oedipal model served to obscure many of the primary causes of this state.

Understanding excess in the context of the need for a maternal figure to respond to and hold both excitement/desire and affect within a secure attachment based on affect regulation (see Schore, 1993; 2003; Fonagy et al., 2002) means grasping how the arousal associated with desire can become overwhelming to the immature psyche. Without the outside other, the originally helpless self cannot process arousal associated with internal tension or external stimulation. Without the mother's containment of pain and excitement, the baby cannot self-regulate. But this is a two-way process: recognition theory considers an individual's state of internal tension to be inextricably tied to the intersubjective sharing that is the basic recognition between self and other (Benjamin, 1988). There is also the matter of the mother's own ability to regulate her excitement and anxiety, and how she may communicate or make demands upon her child's ill-equipped and immature psyche for regulation and containment. To sum up: once we regard maternal responsiveness as not only satisfying needs or soothing anxiety but also sharing affect states, giving meaning to emotion, to intentions and acts, and conveying mother's own subjective states, we can formulate a more complex understanding of how failures of recognition and problems in affect regulation (Schore, 1993, 2003; Fonagy et al., 2002) relate to the generation of excess.

In this regard the "generalized theory of seduction" introduced by Laplanche both complicated and expanded the intersubjective perspective on excess. Laplanche's (1987; 1992; 1997; 2011) work on sexuality constituted an important effort to renew, in a sense to rescue from backsliding, Freud's original "Copernican" move: a decentering from the ego of self-contained mastery, founded on the idea of the unconscious as alien. Laplanche's mission was to argue for recognizing the internal otherness of the unconscious to be founded upon external otherness (Laplanche, 1997, p. 654). Part of this project entailed the recasting of seduction in terms of the intersubjective concept of the message, what the adult communicates. This is not exactly unconscious (Laplanche, 2011) but pre-conscious, perhaps best thought of as something in the adult pre-verbal transmission, requiring a work of translation by the child. The "enigmatic message" conceptualized the overwhelming of the child's immature psyche by communications from the Other, the adult's psyche: thus an implantation of something other and too much (Laplanche, 1992; 1997). Once this otherness is now implanted within the self, the

question of the Other as external is always preceded by the Other within. This idea of otherness ultimately will be seen as implicating the social ordering of sexuality and interpersonal relations (Laplanche, 2011).

In Laplanche's revised general seduction theory, the excess that is sexuality for all human infants begins with an enigmatic or compromised communication from the Other in the course of real interaction involving the child's care: the mother's sexuality experienced as something too big and not yet comprehended or metabolized by the child. Excess thus derives from the general fact of seduction: the surplus transmission, the implanting of elements of the mother's own not conscious not transparent meanings, that go along with the implicit bodily care. Laplanche contends that Freud was too concrete in thinking seduction must either be real or imagined, and missed the category of the message. Insofar as the sexuality of the mother, or other unconscious components of adult mind (hate or love one might suppose) are conveyed along with care of the child, these necessarily enigmatic transmissions stamp human sexuality with excess (Laplanche, 1987).

The formation of the sexual through alien implantation functions both as a kind of general trauma and the source of psychic structure (Scarfone, 2015). Because the child cannot translate the adult's message into a meaningful pre-conscious/conscious representation, and indeed the mother herself is not aware of her message, it functions as a demand for mental differentiation (Scarfone, 2015) and generates the part of the psyche that evolves as unconscious. In Laplanche's view, the enigmatic message, with its demand for "translation," some form of symbolic work, is constitutive of the child's unconscious in the broadest sense. Uninvited and psychically unassimilable, the excessive, enigmatic message constitutes a bridge between actual (specific) seduction and fantasy. It is not that a literal seduction becomes fantastical, but that an implicit and not directly sexual enigmatic message, perhaps carrying the "noise" of the adult's unconscious sexuality (Laplanche, 2011), takes shape within the self as a question—"what does the Other want of me"—which must be translated and processed through fantasmatic activity. In this sense the general intersubjective condition of seduction is universal and is distinguished from specific, actual seduction.

Stein's many contributions (1998a; 1998b; 2008) have suggested multiple meanings of the excessive, its relation to the enigmatic message, but also the poignancy of sex, its transits beyond representation into an experience of otherness and mystery. The mysterious and asocial effect of the sexual—its otherness—was explored by both Bataille (1986) and Bersani (1977) and associated with the loss of individuation, the experience of merger and continuity (Bataille, 1986) and shattering of the ego (Bersani, 1985; see also Saketopoulos, 2014). Both because of the obstacles to recognizing sexuality in its primal form, incestuous desire, and the potential for violating the borders of the ego, sexuality has been set apart in a separate realm of either transcendence or debasement (Stein, 2008; Rundel, 2015). The incommensurability of sexuality with other modes of social interaction marks it and makes it at best only partially assimilable—necessarily excessive (see Bataille, 1986; Laplanche, 1987; 1992; 1997; Benjamin, 1995a; 2004b; Stein, 1998a; 2008;

Fonagy, 2008), and this in turn contributes to unavoidable transmission of the message as enigmatic and alien. In other words, to grasp the alien, foreign quality of implantation requires continuous decentering work—while it might appear simply a matter of going into another room and pointing a finger at a person who did something, such thinking will never grasp the *excessiveness* of such an alien force within.

Thus in multiple senses the sexual, understood as an effect of the Other and of otherness, is *bound to be excessive, to exceed what the relational dimension can help the immature psyche contain and regulate* (Benjamin, 2004b). Consequently, the psychic demands of the excessive are ordinarily met through a form of splitting that separates the fantasmatic process of the sexual from other forms of using the object. *The enigmatic message itself, opaque and not conscious, because not symbolized, is inevitably dissociated from other psychic processes.*

If, then, we begin with the proposition that sexuality is bound to exceed what the relational dimension can contain (Benjamin, 2004b), it is nonetheless evident that the capacity to hold and process this excess through mental and physical action varies considerably. We must still track the intersubjective vicissitudes of bearing excess, which generally *derive from the uncontained and unsymbolized excitement originating in the child or the mother's reaction to the child.* My contention is that such processing of the enigmatic message and associated excess depends on the individual's early development of the overall capacity for holding excitement. This capacity begins quite early with interactive experiences of affect arousal in the attachment to mother or other caregivers.

Therefore, an abstract conception of parental sexuality, a "generalized other" who transmits an enigmatic message, is practically insufficient for psychoanalysis, as Stein (1998a) pointed out. We also must identify how that transmission is elaborated in conjunction with specific patterns of attachment and recognition. These patterns may not be universal structures as figured in the Oedipus complex. Other dimensions of affective experience that are subsequently translated into the sexual are liable to be riven with the same faults.

The excessive aspect of sexuality is thus inseparable from lack of emotional containment or affect regulation, which prevents absorption of this "alien body" (Fonagy, 2008) in the individual's psyche. As Fonagy states, "sexual arousal can never truly be experienced as owned. It will always be an imposed burden . . . unless we find someone to share it with" (p. 22). He continues: "The enigmatic dimension of sexuality creates an invitation that calls out to be elaborated, normally by another" (Fonagy, 2008, p. 22). I am proposing that the offering and acceptance of this invitation to the other is precisely what is blocked by the experience that all affective and bodily arousal is dangerous—dangerous not merely because it is inherently enigmatic, but also because it makes a real demand upon the other for recognition and regulation. At the intersubjective level of "pragmatic" (Atlas, 2015) interaction, there is a faulty connection. This fault leaves the subject unable to rise to the demands of the sexual, with its inherent challenges and aspects of otherness. The ensuing fear of the sexual and sense of too-muchness stimulates efforts at mastery, frightening fantasies, dissociation: the cure becomes its own problem.

The dilemma of rising to the demands of the sexual—the matrix of fantasies and desire—shapes the relationship of intrapsychic and intersubjective. Stein, following an early line of thought by Laplanche, argues that when the maternal object is lost the autoerotic object substitutes for the lost object that can never be refound. The idea is that the original nourishing, functional object that provides the “milk” is lost and must be replaced by a fantasmatic sexual object, the “breast.” Stein declares that emergence of excess in sexuality, its driven and peremptory qualities, is “powerfully influenced by the pursuit of a lost object that has become fantasmatic and displaced”¹ (Stein, 1998a, p. 262). We notice that Stein here introduces another meaning of excess, independent of the one that arises from the greater power and maturity of the mother or the opaqueness and unconsciousness of her desires.

The idea that the needed object of attachment is lost and transformed into the autoerotic sexual object seems to me, however, to conflate fantasy with theory, positing a generalized loss of the attachment figure. It tries to explain the traumatic aspect of the sexual in terms of an intrapsychic, one-person, view of an original lost object. But this idea of a lost maternal object appears in light of the intersubjective idea of seduction to be a re-inscription of the intrapsychic idea of the drive, as in lost gratification, and of the oedipal renunciation—not accidentally the wheel on which the gendering of excess in Freud’s thinking turns, as we shall see. Further, it is as if the lost object replaces the intersubjective mother of attachment, who in our theory is conceived to be a figure of continuity and ongoing relatedness, even while she is a source of surplus, enigmatic transmission. The idea of a lost maternal object would make sense to me as a specific, possibly traumatic experience, as insecure attachment; but this would be in contrast to the idea of an ongoing intersubjective maternal relationship in which excitement can, potentially, be recognized and contained.

Intersubjective theory conceives the connection to the mother as an external other as one involving multiple functions and interactions that correspond to the infant’s many states, including excited arousal, dysregulation, being soothed, playful and curious, while gazing, cuddling and so on. In this sense the infant does not necessarily “lose” the breast mother when he ceases to suckle, or substitute the fantasmatic for the pleasure of nursing. Rather, the experience of nursing is diffused into diverse forms, other forms of painful urgency or distress that can be soothed, but also the sense of being held and recognized by the other through mutual gaze, playing and smiling. As excited and aroused as the infant may be by the breast in the state of hunger, when the satisfaction of hunger is secure, he should be able to integrate the self-state of joyful arousal in association with agency and enjoyment of play. Initially, the action changes not from need satisfaction to autoerotic fantasy but to other forms of soothing and play with mother.

1 “The sexual object is thus not identical with the object of the function . . . [and] the object one seeks to re-find in sexuality is . . . displaced. . . . It is therefore impossible ultimately ever to rediscover the [original] object.” (Laplanche cited in Stein, 2007, p. 186)

Perhaps it is only when this double process of regulation and recognition fails that a premature process of self-soothing occurs, which prefigures and evolves into fantasmatic auto-eroticism. This prematurity, substituting for the regulation in nursing experience and the recognition of affect states of distress or playful connection, may then organize a specific way of coping with excess. In this way developmental trauma, like abuse, would arise from particular conditions of transmission, inflecting the general seduction of the enigmatic message. Laplanche accounts for such forms with the idea of "*intromission*, a violent variant of implantation that relates to the bodily interior . . . an intrusion, the emergence of the sexual in a non-metabolizable way that precludes the differentiation of psychic agencies" (Scarfone, 2001, p. 62).

In clinical work with developmental trauma, it becomes evident how the unreliability of primal satisfaction and soothing, of the functional object of need, leads to a basic template of "seduced and abandoned," or "excited and then dropped," quite apart from the enigmatic message. However, when this template of insecurity, abandonment, and lack of soothing dominates, it obstructs rather than initiates the process by which psychic structure develops in the effort to translate and assimilate the enigmatic message. In this case, the transmission of something unconscious from the mother that is unassimilable and excessive *cannot even be allowed to form sexual subjectivity as an exciting otherness*—with all the usual attendant conflicts and frustrations psychoanalysis has recognized. When affective arousal, in all and any forms not only sexual excitement, is felt to endanger the attachment and be uncontainable by the other, even within a protective "preserve" of dissociation or splitting, such excitement is not tolerable.² Or, autoerotic and transgressive activities do preserve excitement, but only within a sphere of dissociation which feels literally alien, abject, other, "perverse," or a threat to self-cohesion. As when direct sexual trauma has been experienced, arousal and safety of attachment are more drastically split apart than in the "ordinary" forms of tolerated dissociation and otherness we know as sexual. In other words, the inability to *tolerate* the otherness of the sexual and its inevitably high level of arousal manifests as the fear of "too-muchness," both in intimate relations and the transference. Clinically, this fear appears accompanied by a concomitant experience of shame (Stein, 1998b, 2008), a sense of inadequacy related to the inability to bear excess, that is, to experience desire without fragmenting, which in turn affects an individual's sense of being adequate, a "real" man or woman.

If for everyone sexuality poses a burden that requires an other to lighten it, as Fonagy (2008) contends, then how can it be borne by individuals who cannot use the other, for whom "excess" cannot be contained in any relationship? For such persons, the other with her own potential arousal and fantasies poses only a threat.

² From a relational perspective the sense of an alien, other self would be understood in terms of dissociation of self states, but the ability to negotiate the transition from one self state to another depends upon attachment and affect regulation, mediated by recognition (Bromberg, 1998; 2011).

The experience can be that of impingement, engulfment, flooding and invasion; given the overstimulation, excitement and anxiety become indistinguishable. The need for the other to contain excitement through recognition in this way leads to a further intersubjective dilemma: intense anxiety about the other's presence as a subject with her own affect, which has been experienced as dangerous rather than a source of resonance and pleasure.

Accordingly, the basic issue around dependency—needing an other who is outside one's control or influence (Benjamin, 1988)—becomes intensified. It then translates as a fantasmatic relation to an other who becomes *more* dangerous outside. This is the consequence of a primary object relation in which affect regulation fails, in which the other cannot be relied upon to be attuned, accommodating, engaged in a way that recognizes and creates mental space for excitement. The other cannot be relied upon to be responsive and recognizing of the child's communications in a way that allows the (smaller, younger) self to have agency and internal control. This other cannot therefore serve as a container for projections—as enjoying sexuality requires (Stein, 1998a; Fonagy, 2008)—but is, rather, liable to overpower the child with her dysregulated affect, with her messages, her projections. This fantasy of the unreliable maternal container, I will suggest, is what was confusingly carried into the notion “feminine passivity.”

The demands posed in general by the sexual must be worked out specifically in each pair, in the intersubjectively regulated arena of affective and bodily care with its management of arousal, intensity and proximity. The maternal message conveyed in this arena consists not only of her unconscious sexuality, but involves such content as anxieties about injury, fragmentation, depletion or over-stimulation by the infant, thus influencing the realm of the sexual. And, conversely, the skin and body eroticism of the mother, her gaze and connection with her infant, “cradle” the message and calm it down. Hence the production of excess is located within a complex configuration of relational experience. On one side, the mother's contribution, on the other, the infant's efforts: not only to manage his own affect but to influence mother so as to regulate his own anxiety and stimulation as well. These efforts to have an impact on mother's behavior, to affect the recognition process, may be seen as inversely linked to fantasmatic activity—the more effective I am the less I need to resort to fantasy to manage the arousal and frustration linked to faulty recognition. Complex, sub-symbolic representations of both the mother's and the infant's actions and affects all influence the way that messages are translated and excess is metabolized.

Mysterious and mystifying

If the excessive and mysterious aspects of sexuality derive from more than one source, still all of them center on the experience of otherness, the dependency on the other to contain, recognize and thus organize the infant's bodily experience. Patterns of misrecognition—for instance maternal intolerance of baby's eagerness and excitement that stimulate sexualization and misreading on her part—contribute

to the difficulties in translation and the sense of the sexual as “alien” (Fonagy, 2004; Stein, 2008). In my reading, the inevitable excess of the adult’s messages, the “general seduction,” can be intensified by specific relational instances of misrecognition and failure of containment (Benjamin, 2004; Benjamin & Atlas, 2015). I have therefore tried to distinguish the otherness that is mysterious and psychically productive from that which is mystifying. In other words, the sexual that is mysterious, incommensurable and therefore generally uncontained by adults should not be conflated with that which is mystifying due to an insecure attachment riddled with hyperarousal and misreading of basic needs and subsymbolic bodily signals.

My aim here is to contrast and yet hold the tension that is often lost between two different perspectives, what we might call general and specific: the *intrapsychically mysterious*—the residue of the enigmatic (Atlas, 2015) that is necessarily seductive and opaque, stimulating fantasy and creating a space for the symbolic that is universal, luring us to contact a forever elusive ideal—and the *intersubjectively mystifying*. Part of the mystification process consists of the way that failures in interpersonal regulation and containment lead to withdrawal into more extreme forms of fantasy. In the mystifying aspect, affective tension that could not be understood by the child, represented, or “bound” in dialogic exchange may later appear as though self-originating, a one-person process of fantasy creation (Benjamin, 1995a; 2004b). Of course this may be seen as a general feature of fantasmatic activity, as Laplanche (1997) seemed to suggest when he wrote “the otherness of the other person is blurred, re-absorbed in the form of *my* fantasy of the other, *my* seduction fantasy, and the otherness of the unconscious is put at risk . . .” (p. 659). But I believe this general condition takes on a further quality of alienation when the outside other is perceived as truly dangerous.

Thus, for instance, the position of passivity, which Freud associated with feminine masochism insofar as it involves being subject to the other’s drive, is only threatening or excessive because of this relation to the other. If passivity assumes such a frightening appearance this might be seen as an effect of a particular relation to an other—one that involves projection, power, degradation, thus resulting in an alienation from self, not due to something essential in the position of the drive. The adoption of a form of passivity may be seen as both a generalized culturally mandated template of gender and a specific feature of the collision between adult action or messaging and childhood sexuality, for instance when a child is forced into the position of container for the unregulating and dysregulated parent. I consider how such passivity may be an experience of having to bear unwanted levels of stimulation or excitement that an uncontained other is expressing in a dissociated way: traumatic rather than ordinary excess.

A patient, Isabelle, whom I (see Benjamin, 1995a) have previously discussed, is confused about whose excitement she is reacting to, Mother’s or her own. The mystified experience is improperly attributed and in this sense mentalization is interfered with. Excitement then becomes dangerous and threatens to disrupt psychic regulation. Transgressive elements mixed with autoerotic soothing and containing have enabled her a partial way out, a kind of manic defense. The

vicissitudes of excitement and the ability to contain arousal are linked in complex ways to the consciously known but frightening communication with her mother.

Isabelle, whose mother would dance around the room in excitement during her piano lessons, was confused about whose excitement was being expressed at any given time. Additionally, in adolescence Isabelle's mother would verbally attack Isabelle after she revealed herself in confessions that Mother had extracted from her. Mother appeared to be trying this way to extrude her sense of badness and too-muchness into her daughter. The confusion between badness in the self and the object, which protectively serves to regulate the more powerful parent, is a relational aspect that resurfaces, confused, in the child's fantasy (see Fairbairn, 1952; Davies, 2004).

In Isabelle's case, she presented with many compulsive sexual fantasies and activities, which seemed to function both to self-soothe and to imaginatively engage a powerful, protective other to whom she would submit. She was fearful that her compulsive activities had damaged her insides or exposed her to disease. Her expressed wish was that the other, whose excitement she would open herself to contain, would in turn supply her with a sense of being structured, controlled, managed—in other words, take over the regulating function her mother lacked. Unlike those patients who inhibit desire and fear excitement, Isabelle reacts to an impinging, dysregulated object by adopting the passive “feminine” position to absorb helplessness. She submits to sexual excitement with the express wish to be controlled and protected, perhaps from her own fantasied destructiveness.

Isabelle's wish was for the analyst to contain her excess, though she believed this would be impossible. Even as she felt forced to be her mother's container and failed, so would the analyst fail to process her mother-like manic reactions to anxiety, which now had assumed the form of an Other within Isabelle and were associated with the invasion of dangerous objects. As a daughter who overtly rejected this passive position with mother, she nonetheless later assumed it repeatedly with men, incurring her mother's wrath, a condemnation she now expects from me as well. She was the girl who chooses the route of concealing her loss and longing for mother as well as her need to please her father by creating a transgressive version of the role he wanted her to take: containing the difficult mother. She incorporated this action even as she sought release from it by becoming a precociously sexualized feminine object, accommodating and pleasing men.

As Isabelle began to reject this compliant role, and yet was unable to contain the vast amount of tension within, she sought analysis. She recognized herself in formulaic versions of “feminine masochism,” in which she allowed herself to be a slave to master, held but controlled. Adding to the confusion was a barely recognized link between her unmothered baby self and her longing to be known by her father, as they were allied in their task of holding the spilling-over fragile mother. This connection to father gradually became visible as part of her efforts to create a repaired, loving mother–baby couple with men.

The realization of her need for something other than sadomasochistic satisfaction to relieve the too-muchness was slow in coming to Isabelle because of her

anxiety at needing or depending on a dangerous mother, and because she felt dangerous herself. She was sure she was too much, too powerful for any analyst, her excessive desires too wild to be understood or contained. She had come to see herself as shameful and dangerous, mystified as she was by having absorbed all the aspects of aggression, helplessness and dysregulation that both parents evacuated into her. Making the distinction between her own overstimulation and that of her mother was not possible in real interaction—she had to push out her mother aggressively even as she yearned to be held and contained by her.

In encountering such forms of desire, we might indeed question whether such experience of excess should be understood in its sexual manifestation alone, or rather seen as a more complex configuration of many relational issues that include efforts to regulate anxiety and stimulation, to manage interpersonal aggression linked to her maternal attachment. Isabelle's reconstructions of history reveals a mother-child dyad in which excess (a fusion of excitement and aggression) is processed through sexualization. Her initial preoccupations exemplify the way in which fantasy explicitly takes the body as a container for the unbearable. In the absence of a transforming, regulating other, failures in affective containment coupled with overstimulation can be reworked and translated into sexual tension, and thus discharged. They may or may not reflect some explicitly sexual transmission from the other. As Stein (1998b) has put it, "it seems that the human organism has the capacity to [use sexualization] to deal with the excess . . . in other words, sexualization is a capacity, a positive achievement . . ." (p. 266). Sexual fantasy thus substitutes for the affect regulating function of the outside other; another dimension of the Other within.

In dealing with bodily excitement and regulation, then, we are always liable to touch upon the paradox of sexual excess: sexuality itself is potentially excessive and creates experiences of stimulation and tension even as it serves as a method of regulating self and other, not only through discharge but also through the containment of otherwise unrepresented, unmentalized experiences with significant others (Benjamin, 2004a; Atlas, 2015). I consider many forms of sexuality to be actions the individual takes to soothe or regulate the self, rather than primarily to engage or elicit responses from an other person. In this context, sexual discharge means using the body to solve the problem of mental excess, that is, emotional content which cannot be held in the dialogically created mental space is transposed into the register of physiological arousal and resolved at that level.

Sexuality not only originates in the opaque and unsymbolized form; conversely, it functions to contain otherwise unrepresented, unmentalized experiences with significant others. Bodily contact can be metaphorically equated in fantasy with the entry into the other's mind, the experience of being recognized or held, invaded or excluded. We may consider the gradations of the desire to reach the other, the frustrated desperation to get in accompanied by urgent need to discharge, as well as the different inflections of the wish to enter or be entered: from the wish to be held safely to the urge to break in forcibly, from the wish to be known to the wish to be cracked open. We may think of sexuality as a means of expressing the need

to get me into you, or get you into me; but conversely, we may think that the experience of excitement generates or intensifies the need to get in, as in, "Help me contain this tension; let me put this tension into you."

Thus we have a whole lexicon of experiences involving the causes and effects of uncontained sexual excitement and unmanageable arousal, in which we alternately see sexuality as an engine ("drive") motive and as a vehicle of expression. As Stein (1998a) concluded: "Sexuality [is] suitable to serve as one of the most powerful coins in the mental trade between different levels and contents" (p. 254). Analysts now work in both directions, not only "discovering sexual themes and motivations behind the ostensibly non-sexual" (p. 254), but also finding other motives in the sexual.

Excess and the mind-body split

If sexuality provides an alternate register for processing tension and managing excess, when it functions in lieu of the outside other or substitutes for communicative and symbolic processes, this can only work by dint of a split in the self. Above all, by splitting mind and body, the self can play two parts, with the body as container for experience that the mind cannot process symbolically. The body can be employed as an alternate part-self to hold and discharge the tension of split off experience with important others. Painful affect and overwhelming excitement that are left unprocessed and unrepresented in communicative dialogue can be represented in sexual fantasy and then discharged physically.

Transgressive sexuality can also be a form of encompassing pain and vulnerability, creating a scene of witnessing and containing. Thus for Isabelle, whose autoerotic activities and fantasies were initially used to process her mother's enigmatic message, the orgasm became a place to hold and have witnessed the too-muchness inside her. Feeling shut out of her mother's mind early on, Isabelle tried to get back in, seeking attention; thus she explicitly associated her fantasies of master and slave with her mother's abusive response to her confidences. She described her adolescent autoerotic habits of bringing herself to unbearable states of excitement and orgasm in which the Master's voice said, "You've got to take it"—and she did. She used the container of her own body to create a replica of the too-muchness, a positive version of shattering the ego (Bersani, 1985; Botticelli, 2010; Saketopoulis, 2014), which demonstrated her ability to survive (Benjamin, 1988). She used her physical body's submission to create a surrender in which pleasure and pain became indistinguishable.

But Isabelle also spoke of how she fell in love with her lover, the one she shared all these feelings, fantasies and excitement with in young adulthood, because before she met him she had seen a work of art in which he portrayed a cactus on which, mysteriously, snow was falling: peaceful soothing white snow. She said, this is "what did it," what let her know that he could recognize and contain what was inside her, calm her. His physical strength signified his ability to hold all the excitement and pain. His recognition of both the overstimulation and the soothing

—as symbolically represented in his art—would bring her home to the part of herself that needed to be found and held (Benjamin, 1995a; Rundel, 2015).

In the absence of intersubjective regulation by the other, the excited sexual body became a split off container for unrepresentable pain and for aggression. Both her mother's aggression and her own—as well as the rage she experienced in early adolescence that she was prevented from turning back against her mother. Only later does Isabelle imagine being held safely in an other's mind, without penetrating or being penetrated, in such a way that her internal tension is regulated. Isabelle experienced the coming together of the mysterious excess and the suffering of passion with the witnessing of her psychic pain, restoring her to a home in her own mind in which otherness could dwell without consuming her.

Isabelle's story illustrates how excess is processed through sexualisation, through fantasy that explicitly takes the body as a container for the unbearable. This sexualisation takes the form of complementarity between doer and done to, enacted in the intrapsychic fantasy world, within what we might call the monadic sexual economy. This complementarity, unrelieved by the thirdness of recognition, has already marked the interactions in the mother-child dyad in significant ways. The principle movement in the monadic sexual economy is not the exchange of recognition, the communication of affect between subjects, but rather a fantasmatic seesaw of activity and passivity. There is no mutual penetration of minds, but rather a fantasy of a powerful doer and, as Isabelle put it, "the one who submits."

The monadic economy

The regulation of tension in the monadic economy takes place through bodily discharge of tension—sometimes compulsively, as for Isabelle. Dimen (2003) has proposed that discharge befits a one-person model. Freud's economy of libido, as opposed to the idea of pleasure (Lust), Dimen suggests, is associated with a kind of sexual hygiene in which discharge is "the bridge between sexuality and sanity." I would distinguish discharge from the two-person economy insofar as the point is only to regulate one's own tension, not to enjoy the other or to contact another mind. Discharge, when it is detached from those purposes, means the use of the body to solve the problem of mental excess, that which cannot be held in the dialogically created mental space.

In the dialectic of intersubjective and intrapsychic, which includes the relational reversal according to which sexuality expresses relational configurations (Mitchell, 1988), there is a place for thinking of the use of sexuality to process shared somatic/affective tension. Physiological arousal can become sexual, can be represented in fantasy, in order to facilitate transmission of tension and its regulation or recognition via communication between subjects. If we follow the infancy researcher Sander's logic, according to which greater specificity of recognition allows the dyad to contain more complexity (Sander, 1991; 2002), we might conclude that fantasy elaboration also allows more tension to be contained and processed. This can occur through the satisfaction of shared fantasies of desire,

of healing, of reparation. We need not view the intrapsychic creations of fantasy as exclusively part of a one-person discharge economy. Shared intrapsychic fantasies can rather serve as the basis for shared affect and mutual regulation or sexual pleasure.

Thus, we can think in terms of dyadic systems based on interacting intrapsychic and intersubjective economies, which simultaneously make use of both enigmatic and pragmatic aspects, as Atlas (2015) has argued. In other words, a co-created fantasy in which I do something to you, or you to me, can be the basis for intersubjective state sharing. "I get into you, you get into me" can be exciting and connecting, transforming the pain of excess into pleasure. The mutual enjoyment of fantasy is predicated on *owning* of desire, holding excitement inside the body—a capacity often debased precisely by its conflation with the feminine passive receptacle. To own one's own feelings while *receiving* an other is possible simultaneously.

But my argument is that excessive phenomena that appear as *solely* intrapsychic productions in the individual should also be imagined in conjunction with features of the original intersubjective dyadic systems that result in experiences of too-muchness. In particular, we could say that some failure in the intersubjective economy of recognition and mutual regulation leads to the need to discharge tension (to evacuate contents symbolized through the body) into the other who is unconsciously perceived purely as object-container. For instance, when the other is absent or mentally missing, this may result in excess of pain, loss or flooding, and lead to the fantasy of raping the impermeable other, as in Atlas' patient Leo (Atlas, 2015; Benjamin & Atlas, 2015). Sometimes the maternal or paternal action directed towards discharge of her or his own excess transmits a message that cannot be contained through fantasmatic sexuality alone. It readily devolves into looking towards the child as a holding Other reduced to the position of passive container. Such actions represent a version of discharge whether or not they are overtly sexual. Thus, there are ways in which adults conscript children into containing sexual energy or tension, distinguishable from concrete seduction, that nonetheless constitute in Laplanche's sense a compromising of the enigmatic message—its turn towards violation, an excess that the other produces but does not help one to bear.

Re-visioning gender, reformulating passivity

One aim in formulating the problem of excess and affective regulation within an intersubjective framework of unconscious transmission was to take another look at the historical association between passivity and femininity. In this formulation we think of the polar complementarity of active-passive as a structure that belongs to the intrapsychic economy of discharge and its fantasmatic representation: either you put the excess into me, or I put it into you. I will suggest that, accordingly, the psycho-cultural templates heretofore defining masculine and feminine in terms of activity or passivity may be traced back to the transmission and the processing

of excess. Activity and passivity as opposing stances in the realm of sexual excess can generate a destructive cycle in which the one is experienced as invasive, grabby, controlling, while the other is perceived as shutting out, excluding, uncontainable, which in turn provokes invasion, and so on—an endless cycle. Traditional gender solutions, in which the feminine passive side is viewed as the container for excess, can be seen as part of the sexual mythology given theoretical form by Freud.³

If deconstructing these gender positions reveals their origins in an attempt to solve the problem of excess, then to challenge these positions means to contest the idea that human beings cannot otherwise manage tension. So on the one hand we could say that the masculine-feminine polarity has served important functions in managing excess, while on the other, say that psychoanalysis is continually exposing how this objectifying technique falls apart: how it arises through splitting, how much suffering and pain and internal contradiction it generates. When we consider the management of tension and individual self-regulation of arousal and affect to depend on the intersubjective context of mutual regulation and recognition, we no longer take this splitting for granted.

In this light, seduction might broadly be understood as one take on the traumatic experience of helplessness in the face of over-stimulation or being left alone with dysregulated affect—Freud (1920) having suspected the relation between trauma and break in the stimulus barrier, as we shall see. I have suggested that the experience of excess can lead to a splitting between an active part-self (phallic, mental) and a passive part-self (container, bodily), as when the phallic master discharges into the feminine container that is seemingly meant, as Isabelle saw it, to bear that very over-excitement in her sexual body. The body, in this view, is not simply a literal container for discharge, but rather is symbolically, fantasmatically constructed to serve in this way. This construction of femininity or the feminine body can be analyzed as the solution to the problem of excess for the male-identified subject, who retains the active position, repudiating passivity.

I (Benjamin, 1998, following Christiansen, 1996) have related this construction of the masculine position to Freud's (1896) observation that the obsessional position of defensive activity is the characteristically masculine way of dealing with overstimulation. In other words, it rescues the child from the position of passivity, helpless subjection to stimulation. Indeed, Christiansen (1996) proposed we read this to say that masculinity does not *result* in repudiation of passivity, but rather is first constituted by that move, replacing helplessness with defensive activity.

3 Viewing Bernini's extraordinary sculpture portraying Apollo and Daphne I was struck by the powerlessness and desperation of both male and female figures locked in an eternal vicious cycle. The male god enacts a violent grabbiness, as the violated young woman evades him by hardening her body into bark, her arms reaching away and upward as they transform into branches. How deeply are our past and present sexual mythologies, our templates of masculine and feminine, shaped by this dynamic of invasion and shutting out, shutting out and struggle to get in?

In the same act of splitting, the male psyche expels that passivity into what is called femininity, a projected object that absorbs what it extrudes.

I have argued that understanding this move is a key to decoding the core fantasy that organizes gendered sexuality in Freud's theorizing of the Oedipus complex (1924; 1926). Reading Freud's texts in this way, it appears that the oedipal boy, overstimulated by the maternal message and unable to regulate his as yet unsymbolized response, strives to master it actively. He is unable to turn back to mother for containment because he fears it would restimulate his wrongful desire, or because he must identify with father. He faces the father's double injunction "You *cannot* be like me; you *must* be like me" (Freud, 1923). It has often been observed that shame and humiliation by the father are often the lot of boys who wish to hang on to their mother's soothing in a pre-oedipal way. The more impossible it is to turn back to mother, the more dangerous-seeming is this arousal, and the object who evokes it. Hence, the more fantasmatic (intrapsychic) activity, which includes alien and frightening images of the maternal, must be called upon to replace mutual regulation. Excess and the oedipal go hand in hand.

The experience of being passively overwhelmed and abandoned is meant to be overcome, Freud suggests, by using the identification with the active father to organize the ego. The sense of loss, but also impotence, shame, and confusion are meant to be soothed by this identification rather than a live maternal presence. Again, through this move, the position of being soothed is further repudiated, creating the split complementarity between active and passive as if this opposition were unavoidable, the only move there is. We might also speculate that the more intense the experience of excess—loss, dysregulation, seduction followed by abandonment—the more the themes of repudiating weakness or passivity, equated with femininity, become a feature, and dangerously associated with the longing to be soothed by mother.

Consider Freud's (1909) early exemplar for Oedipus, Little Hans. Corbet's (2009) critical discussion of Little Hans argues that Freud's emphasis on the boy's narcissistic use of the phallus as an ideal helped to dissociate and bypass the actual relational constellation in the family: the boy's fraught relationship to a scarily uncontrolled mother who beat his little sister (more likely the source of his fantasies than castration anxiety). The mother is not generic, not a symbolic object of desire, a lost object of adoration, a conveyer of generalized seduction, but a real figure. Her unreliability and aggression impair attachment and stimulate violent fantasies that likely did not originate, but do culminate in, the boy's preoccupation with his penis. In an extraordinary fantasmatic move, Freud transforms this traumatic constellation into the theory of Oedipus. He seeks to persuade us that it has to be the penis that symbolically contains Hans' arousal and then discharges the aggression and excitement (just as the horse's penis symbolizes only the father's power, not some combination with the mother's violence). This is what the phallus is for.

In a parallel move, Freud takes the feminine role of passivity to serve as embodiment of containing excess—the unwanted, primitively feared experience of helpless

overstimulation—and this passive container becomes an exciting invitation which the phallus can act upon, control, and structure.⁴ Or so it would seem to be, to the relief of those who embrace oedipal gender roles. While phallic control is meant to have the function of managing excess, this phallic role carries its own contradictions. Discharge of excess tension into the other, though ostensibly active, also becomes reactive. For instance, early ejaculation expresses the fear of being overwhelmed by excess tension, personified as performance anxiety in the face of the feared/desired object. Containing one's own excitement through phallic control can be difficult, and lacking such control the act of discharge signifies feminine weakness. It is a leakage in the container-self of the little boy who cannot attain the phallic control of the father. The catastrophe of being uncontained and over-excited becomes gendered: It signifies emasculation.

Despite the availability of women to play the passive part, masculinity shaped around repudiation of dependency and fear of passivity is thus always precarious. And while the objectified body of the girl can take up the experience of helplessness and so become passivized, as Brennan (1992) has added, Daddy's boy can also figure as passive container for excess, being fixed in the position of mirroring and providing attention to stabilize the father. Mother as well as father can occupy the dominance position, using the child of either sex in this way. Isabelle became a container for her mother's excess, and it was her voice she was able to identify as the master. The boy may become the projective container for father's shame, a despised weakling subject to father's contempt. Freud himself continually reminded us to regard masculinity and femininity as positions that can be assumed or fled by men or women.

Still, the identity known as masculinity is meant to be associated with the position of defensive activity, dumping anxiety (Brennan, 1992), mastering stimuli by creating the abjected, containing other; as a symmetrical counterpart, the identity of femininity is to be that accommodating, receiving, and mirroring other. And containing excess is supposed to work through gendered signifiers—markers

4 As I have argued previously, this view of the feminine corresponds to the classic image of daughter, the one who Freud insists must switch to the father. Here we see the logic of Freud's (1931; 1933) insistence that this switch defines femininity. Of course, Horney (1926) had already pointed out how Freud's theory of penis envy and the girl's sense of inferiority reproduced exactly the thinking of the oedipal boy. This thinking performs a double move: the daughter as passive feminine object now becomes, via a symbiotic equation, a receptacle for the self's active discharge; also (via projective identification) she now stands in as the sacrificial masochistic self whose sexual impulse is turned inward. She will take on the role of accommodating and absorbing unmanageable tension, like a containing mother only more controllable. Another feature of this move is that the mother is split, so that her accommodating aspect is attributed to the girl and her active organizing aspect of "anal control" is reformulated as male, fatherly, and, often called phallic. This maternal side is what the boy identifies with and recodes as masculine while he abjects her sexuality, her organs: hence the disavowal of the vagina Freud took to be normal (Benjamin, 1998).

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of culturally intelligible, recognizable identities organized as a binary, which is then subject to reification (Benjamin, 1995a; Celenza, 2014). We could then say that through this reification excess becomes a problem of masculine and feminine identifications and organs. When this fantasmatically based processing of excess through identity fails, shame ensues. But as with Little Hans, the assumptions around these recognized gender meanings make it possible to overlook how these signifiers and the associated fantasies are always embedded in interactions and fantasies that bear traces of crucial early attachment failures. And thus what appears as an inevitable course of development may be seen as an intrapsychic production rooted in the vicissitudes of intersubjective breakdowns in regulation and recognition.

A vivid analysis of the gendered fantasies of a boy who has been conscripted to be a container for excess is presented in David Grossman's (2001) epistolary novel, *Be My Knife*, in which the writings of his adult male character Yair exemplify this dilemma. Yair, in letters that read like monologues on the couch, tells of his desperate desire to be understood, regulated by recognition, especially because of his fear that he is nothing but a screaming baby, a braying donkey foal, an "infantile weirdo." He warns his epistolary lover Miriam to stay back because (note the female body imagery) "disgusting rivers are flowing out of all his orifices . . . the shedding layers of his slightly overexcited soul . . ." Then again he writes, "I have been the hole, how unmasculine." When he speaks of his longing to just once "touch the target, touch, touch one alien soul," he sees himself becoming the screamer, who "screams in his breaking, reedy voice, which continues to change throughout his life." Tellingly, his invocation of feminine hysteria includes identifying himself as the container, the one who has understood this scream "not with my ears but with my stomach, my pulse, my womb . . ." It is almost as if he is forced to be a container, who understands others, but experiences this as emasculation. The oedipal gender binary is clear to him, but he just can't get on the right side of it.

Yair knows the solution to this problem of excess, but he just can't perform it. It is to contain himself phallically: "My father would say to me, the whole body wants to pee, but you know what to take out to do the job." At the book's climax, in a power struggle with his little son, Yair tries to claim the position of that phallic father whose voice appeared earlier: "You will return to me, crawling, as usual, says he dryly." He shuts his little son—his little boy self—out of the house (the maternal container) until he gives in. Yair finally does require the understanding and calming intervention of Miriam, the mother, to rescue him from the tormenting alternatives of emasculated boy impotence or punitive paternal control. Only she can actually soothe the original problem, the overexcitement and dysregulation which has caused such shame and rage.

Grossman's story suggests how a boy's sense of need, shame and loss in relation to the mother is expressed as hyperarousal, overstimulation, excess. But also, how the boy hates the position in which he identifies with both the helpless baby who cries out as well as with being a substitute for the maternal womb, which hears

and enfolds. It is a mark of weakness to identify with the womb that hears and recognizes the cry of the child for its mother, the scream of not being heard. Disidentification is necessitated by the threat of being belittled, "castrated," or seen as the crying, leaky baby by the father. The belittling of the need for maternal regulation can further impair the already shaky container function (see Britton, 1988)—receptivity, holding and responsibility for one's own regulation—thus leaving the little boy uncontained, overexcited and leaky.

This passive relation to excess can seemingly only be counteracted, as Yair's father says, by letting the penis do the job, making it the sole and powerful container, not a receptive one but one that can discharge outward. Accepting this unattainable phallic ideal as a signifier of his own lack, Yair feels himself humiliated, effeminized. He is cut off by his shame from the maternal regulation he still needs—thrown into catastrophic isolation, longing but unable to touch even one other. Thus the problem of being heard and held, the need to have one's excess contained—while struggling to escape being rendered instead a passive container—being rendered instead a passive container creates a locked in complementarity. This doer-done to relation is expressed through gender signifiers, through designated masculine and feminine identifications. I have been suggesting that the notion of the feminine is constructed to hold (both as content and container) these unwanted experiences of vulnerability and helplessness. The failure of the male oedipal position to contain excess through the defensive splitting of activity and passivity in Grossman's story implicates the pre-oedipal, a faultline in the intersubjective experience of early maternal attachment. Excess has been fantasmatically organized, but it alone cannot provide a safe basis for desire.

While the oedipal positions of masculinity and femininity are not unambivalently embraced by Freud as the whole story about activity and passivity, too often Freud did seem to take defensive activity and helpless passivity as the necessary forms of those trends. His conceptualization of passivity, as I (Benjamin, 1998) have said elsewhere, misses the dimension of pleasurable receptivity and makes it seem that the position of receiving stimulation, holding tension or directing it inward is necessarily unpleasure. That the pleasurable thing is to expel tension, evacuate through discharge, rather than take it in. But what about the pleasure Isabelle expressed, of being the one who holds and absorbs the strength of the one who can penetrate her or him? What about the active side of containing? Freud's point of view, always from the side of the (heterosexual) patriarch, sees the passive object as container, occluding the homoerotic identificatory desire to be *like* the powerful father, or to fuse with the idealized figure and be contained through his strength (Benjamin, 1995a).

Furthermore, this view of passivity based on the hetero-oedipal binary does not visualize a third possible position regarding the tension of opposites: one in which the capacity to bear excess pleasurable in a mutually created space of excitement and recognition depends on the intersubjective relation of recognition. This lack of imagining a third position, I suspect, correlates with the traumatic experience of passivity Freud depicted, as the condition of helplessness in the face of

impingement, seduction or abandonment. Bearing tension with the other, intersubjectively, was not conceptualized. This makes discharge necessary to avoid the ego-shattering, traumatic aspects of bearing excess. Attachment trauma, pain, shame and vulnerability are the unrecognized features of the masculine fear of passivity. Alternatively, they are expressed in a fantasmatic register of excitement that converts trauma into sexual excitement.

I have previously suggested (Benjamin, 1988) that the intersubjective economy requires a concept of ownership—a desire of one's own—which we arrive at through a self-conscious reversal that reclaims the feminine or maternal functions of containing and having an inside. Holding, traditionally ascribed to maternal or feminine selves, and *ownership* must be recuperated and taken into our psychoanalytic notion of the sexual subject. A subject who owns passivity, with its pleasure and vulnerability, need not *passivize the other* in the form of domination. Such a subject can have desire for another subject without reducing them to a will-less or overwhelming object who, in turn, renders him helpless before his own impulses. Insofar as being a subject is conflated with the grabby, defensively active Apollonian sexuality, it is no subject at all.⁵

As we have seen, the common flip side of phallic control is a version of male sexuality as uncontained, controlled by the object, lacking ownership of desire. In one such version, sexual excitement takes on a dissociative cast, as the subject declares that the object is so compelling and tantalizing that he cannot be responsible for his action. Agency, or activity, dissolves as the object becomes the doer/actor, the subject the done to/acted upon. The experience "I desire you," in which the subject owns desire must be distinguished from "you are so desirable," and certainly from being overpowered by the object of compulsion. This is not to say that preserved in the form of fantasy the experience "You are so attractive and so overpowering that I cannot contain myself, just the sight of you can drive me wild" cannot be enjoyable within a mutual relationship. But the mutual enjoyment of fantasy is predicated on owning of desire, holding excitement inside the body rather than projecting it into a debased feminine, passive other. To own one's own feelings while *receiving* an other is possible simultaneously.

Ownership implies a notion of sustaining tension rather than eliminating it—holding over discharge, surrender rather than mastery. It is not necessarily the same as "containing" a feeling *for* (on behalf of) the other, which one may do without owning it in oneself. It develops within an energetic economy in which self-regulating action and mutual regulation are synchronized in a matrix of recognition. It is, of course, possible to play with complementarity and discharge without holding to rigidly fixed gender positions. It is possible to bear excitement

5 How ironic that this version of male sexuality should have been made iconic by the 45th president of the U.S. who openly spoke of "grabbing pussy." How extraordinary that as I write this, it has been met with a massive opposition—the largest demonstration of women in history and a defiant reversal in which "Pussy" speaks up, "grabs back," and declares women's rights to be human rights.

and feeling in the sense of receiving, witnessing, and holding without "doing" anything—a different experience of passivity. In the experience of sexual union, both partners are able to receive as well as transmit to each other, alternately or simultaneously.

"Perversion" and the abandoned child

My patient James, a film instructor and director, begins the session declaiming confidently his views of the film *American Beauty*, which he has watched with his class. He tells me that he now truly understands how perverted the protagonist Lester is, because he can identify with him. He worries that I don't really understand him, James, and don't realize how much he feels like Lester in his marriage. I have my own take on this film, and he is right in assuming that I won't be agreeing fully with him.

As I recall the film in my mind, I reject simplifying Lester's identification with and overstimulation by the passive, tantalizing friend of his teenage daughter in terms of the usual meaning of "perverse." Lester's wife is impermeable and sealed like the shining veneer in her perfect house, symbolizing impenetrability. He cannot get in to her mind or her body and his wish to enter her can only appear as attacking or messy, invasive and disgusting. Throughout the film Lester fantasizes compulsively about the daughter's cheerleader friend, an intentionally tantalizing nymph. But this irresistible stimulation shifts dramatically in the moment when she reveals to him that she is actually a virgin and a neglected child whose parents pay no attention to her. Suddenly, as if waking from the dream, Lester recognizes that this un-parented girl is a person with her own center of feeling. He finds himself needing to feed and take care of her, as if she were the little child and he the mother, giving her a bowl of breakfast cereal. The bright lights of overstimulation are shut off, and feelings of abandonment and grief bring about an identificatory connection to the girl as his abandoned child-self. I think my patient is warding off the same identification.

James now rebukes me that I do not sufficiently recognize his aggressive and perverse character or the destructiveness of his fantasies about women. He reacts strongly against my interpretation, which takes the form of a response to his comments on the film, along the lines of what I have just stated: that in the end Lester actually uncovers his identification with the abandoned baby part of the girl. James objects strenuously, telling me I am a "sucker" for Hollywood endings, calling me naïve and gullible. He (defender of Freud, Lacan, and critical of my American style relational analysis) is far more capable than I of taking a hard look at Lester's character. Indeed, I now find myself feeling doubt, wondering if I am really "soft" on aggression, afraid to confront him or myself with destructiveness. Maybe I am, as he says, "gullible," ready to be gulled.

However, as I listened to the contempt infusing James' assertions, I sense intuitively that there is more than defensiveness in my urge to argue. I feel that tell-tale sign that my patient is trying to pin something on me that is shameful

and it represents an important part of the enactment between us. I remind myself that this session falls only a week before a scheduled absence on my part, and I begin to think about the word "sucker": who is the "sucker," who is the needy baby missing the breast? We are seemingly in a reversible complementarity where he is struggling to feel like the powerful one and make me the naïve helpless one, an obvious gender binary. I wonder if it is I who cannot face my fear of the dangerous man, in this case, my patient's extremely contemptuous father who used to deride men who were dependent upon women as suckers for a warm body.

I suggest to James that in this debate we are enacting the very matter at hand: perhaps it would feel more masculine and powerful for him to be the one who can tolerate the "hard" truth of Lester's depravity. I am thinking that as he persists in identifying with a powerful though perverse father who despises the baby in himself and others, he needs to have me hold the position of that baby. So I describe my own self-questioning: was I the one who was in the position of the baby, the "sucker" who still needs a mother, who is dependent and gullible? This would mean that he, with his hard clarity, surely did not need me to be his mother, did not feel abandoned; instead, he could impress me with his masculinity. He could keep at bay his feelings of helplessness when I am the one leaving him, he could protect himself with his "bad boy" aspects of independence and transgression (I do not think or say at this time: am I incapable of being a *hard enough* self-contained father to make his wishes for passivity feel safe and exciting (see Grand, 2009)? Can I be the idealized father he could never have, not in identificatory love, not even in erotic fantasy?).

James seems to be momentarily taken aback by my clarity, my turning of the tables. The power position, the protective self-state he assumes must lie in repudiating the needy baby self has been destabilized. As this self-state gives way to openness, he seems affected by my thinking about him and surviving his attack. He considers whether he is afraid to face the contempt of his father and his fear that he can't deal with being and wanting too-much, the problem he shares with Lester. The despised neediness, the longing for someone to soothe him, becomes less shameful as he experiences me as a thinking mother/father who is not destroyed and can hold his anxiety. Yes, he agrees, he is enacting something familiar, something that reminds him of his father which he had thought he had seen through, but now seems still to be very compelling.

James and I were familiar with the feeling that his father shamed him for being close to his mother, but this moment had revived in the enactment a fear of being overwhelmed and ashamed connected to his mother's frequent absences and her anxious response to his father's overbearing behavior. As part of the story we could begin to recognize how much his father's need for soothing—a need he turned to drinking alcohol to fill—was part of his own experience of excess, how much James had to contain for his father's sake. It became palpable how he sought to keep from being overwhelmed by his shameful need and potential abandonment at the beginning of the session, taking safety in a boisterous and defiant declaration of his identity with the "pervert." The part where Lester is murdered

by the man in whom he evokes an eroticized little boy's need for a father is still lurking in the background, an unsymbolized fusion of trauma and excess in homosexual desire (Botticelli, 2015)—one that forms as a fantasmatic wish to actually be the passive boy (girl) with the penetrating, exciting father—to be like the passive girl who tantalized him.

Over time James becomes able to acknowledge his fear of being humiliated if he acknowledges the baby part of himself that has at times been so urgently, desperately needy that he imagines “break and entry” into the female body, so that he has only just avoided sexual trouble with his students. He can see that for him masculinity is a conglomeration of aggression and power, dangerous and perverse. To embody it is to be excited and in control—phallic, potent—and protects him from feeling weak and vulnerable. He can be what he would never want to have, and have what he would “rather die” than be (Butler, 1997). We can begin together to understand the part of himself that continues to attack and block with shame what we have long known of his pain around the missing mother of attachment and holding, the desire for tenderness from his father.

The experience in the early attachment relationship becomes especially relevant in relation to clinical treatment of patients whose sexuality developed in response to maternal unpredictability, overstimulation and abandonment. Later oedipal templates of dominance and submission, seduction and betrayal are superimposed upon an earlier experience (an example of *nachtraeglichkeit*)—one of being left alone to deal with internal and external stimuli. In some cases, the analyst is paradoxically asked to hold within her mind a child who is frightened that being taken back into a maternal mind from which he has been ejected will be overwhelming. The difficulty in the enactment—as with James—is that the analyst becomes derogated as she holds the self-state that needs connection and unconsciously makes demands on behalf of that part.

Further, if the analyst is not tuned into the primal level at which fear of arousal is embodied, her empathy in any area can become an enactment of the feared overstimulation. The analytic situation will then not only expose the patient to the risk of being attached and then dropped, but will also awaken the shameful need that the patient originally tried to get rid of. Thus Atlas (2015) in her work on too-muchness describes a patient who, fearing her affective response, apparent in her voice, face, and bodily state, to his story, scolds her: “Stop that fucking feeling!” He adds, “I can't stand it when you suddenly sound moved. Don't be offended, it has a physical effect on me; it's uncomfortable, even disgusting.”

Fear and loathing in the consulting room

Atlas and I have discussed in greater detail (Atlas, 2015; Benjamin & Atlas, 2015) her work with Leo, whose analysis brings together the ruptures of early attachment and the preoccupation with sexuality and masculinity. Leo might well be reading from Yair's playbook. Pushed aside by a younger brother born soon after him, with no safe attachment as baby, no ability to defend his masculinity by being

the mother's boy (and lacking a supportive father), Leo relinquished his desire. He has repeated dreams of a woman who beckons, then leaves, which he takes to mean that he once had a chance but "screwed up," losing his love object. Leo says: You have to be careful, because if you just make one wrong move, you've lost her, the one you love is gone.

Leo talks about the impossibility of relaxing and enjoying the breast (maternal and sexual) because he must always be ready for the moment when the breast arrives, he must be active and gratify *it* by suckling from it. "I have to be in a constant state of hunger, ready for action." This active function, we note, is a kind of premature renunciation of the part that comes first—being soothed and satisfied—a passive baby position, which would displease the mother who has patience only for the active male. In effect, Leo must tolerate being constantly dysregulated, must bear without help the state of constant hunger, his own internal tension. But in his mind this state explicitly represents the essence of masculinity: "If I'm not hungry, that means I'm not a man, because men are hungry all the time, and any real man would have had sex with her by now." He expresses the fear that the woman will find out that he *needs* her breast, that he wants to suckle and play with the breast, and that he will lie back like a paralyzed baby in the face of this longing. "It is so unmasculine." The assumption is that a real man is not supposed to need the breast, but rather to control it.

Thus Leo shapes as a gender struggle the traumatic experience of having to manage his own excitement without holding, of being first offered the breast then denied it, seduced and abandoned. The problem of surrendering to sexual excitement is linked with anxiety about needing the other to make the bearing of excess possible, the imperative to avoid shame by self-regulating. As Atlas notes, Leo's ruminations on sex are suggestive of the humiliation that the fervent, excited infant experienced when the breast was suddenly taken away from him.

Of course we would expect that this threat of being dropped at the drop of a hat turns into an attempt to control the analyst, to manage her as a source of stimulation, which in turn is felt by her as an invasion. This kind of complementarity can easily lead to impasse, and the therapeutic couple does seem to hover on the verge of one at many a moment. Leo is anguished that he will never be loved by his analyst, that she will be repulsed by his excessive sexual preoccupations. At the beginning of the analysis he announces that he is disturbed by her breathing, especially when she breathes deeply. "You're breathing," he reprimands Atlas occasionally. "That means you're preoccupied with yourself." And he adds: "Maybe your breathing shows that you're having a hard time, that you need air." Later he says it points to the fact that he is "too much" for her and she will try to escape shortly. Atlas reported that initially, although understanding his fear of being abandoned and his own wish to escape and need for air, she was quite dysregulated by what felt like an intrusion, leaving her no space to breathe; and so at times she did indeed imagine getting rid of him.

In this oblique way Leo expresses a stifled longing for a feminine container that is strong enough, a wish in the form of a reproach: someone should be able

to hold him without needing to escape. Yet he also believes the lonely baby's longing for connection is too intense, too dysregulating and dangerous for the mother, and so he must find some other form of discharge. Faced with this absence of intersubjective regulation, he turns to the fantasmatic, autoerotic position of discharge: he can calm the overstimulated excited self through a representation of the little boy in homosexual erotic pornographic fantasy, escape from the tantalizing object in being the one who controls the satisfaction.

A significant turning point in the treatment occurs towards the end of the first year, when Leo accuses Atlas of trying to prove to him that she is "worth something." He says she has a father complex exactly like his older sisters do, that she is trying to show that she is as good as a man, can think like a man. Listening to him it dawns on Atlas that although his observations obviously contain many projections and rest on stereotypical notions of masculine and feminine, there is something true in what he says. Her relationship with him is defensive, devoid of feelings; she is hard and constricted when she is with him, not soft and tender. She realizes that she uses her mind constantly, making a point of displaying that she is the one who knows. "I suppose my behavior, which he experiences as masculine, was one of the ways for me to survive with him, not to be too 'feminine', not passive, not needy, not someone that can be penetrated and attacked." Atlas tells him that she would like to explore why her feminine parts do not emerge in their relationship, and as she says this begins to grasp in her own mind that this must be the way she avoids being afraid of him. At some point she shares this thought with him as well and asks if it is possible that he, too, is afraid she might attack and hurt him.

Leo responds, Yes, he is fearful of exactly the same things. She allows as how they are both afraid, and that her way of protecting herself is not very effective, because "just like the other women in your life I, too, transmit to you that I might humiliate you at any given moment, and the only way not to get hurt is to be what you call 'a man'." When Atlas says: "We are both vigilant because the two of us believe we can hurt each other," she hears him sigh in relief. For the first time both analyst and patient have room to breathe.

In other words, the helpless needy position, the vulnerable feminine position, is one Leo believes each partner must try to avoid, as whoever occupies it is shameful, destabilized and going to be hurt. Like James, he pushes back when he feels his analyst might put him into that position, trying to escape this hated vulnerable baby self he cannot rid himself of. But it is also threatening, when his analyst occupied the vulnerable position and he plays the destructive part. As we see, a complementarity can develop around dominance and powerlessness, leading to an impasse in which each partner feels frightened of being wounded, subject to being dropped, in danger of being invaded or controlled. Each partner is trying not to be too "feminine," passive, or vulnerable, as the therapist recognizes when she reviews her own behavior. The underlying need for soothing and understanding might have been missed had the therapist not opened up this impasse by acknowledging her own fear and reflecting on her own defensive efforts to be the

controlling subject in the masculine position—a revelation made possible by the patient's efforts to think about his own experience of the analyst, to risk challenging her aggressively, and her ability to absorb the impact while still thinking.

Initially Leo rued the fact that he could not imagine compensating for the maternal absence by using the phallic ideal as a container, by being a man who can potentially control any love object by dint of masculine power. This ideal figures in his fantasy when he imagines how a real man would take charge. The idea of being always ready and in control, always ready for the breast, seemed like the only way to have a woman without feeling too needy, too babyish, too repulsive and humiliated—the only release from too-muchness.

Eventually, though, Leo comes to believe he need not live up to this idea of control, that he may in fact do the wrong thing, “miss his chance to catch the ball,” and still be a man—challenging the internal assumption that there is only one chance before something or someone will be taken away. And the therapist is allowed to breathe and miss her chances to “get it.”

Leo's treatment also exemplifies the need to work with the problem of excess through the articulation of attachment trauma, the intersubjective failure in the early dyad. This failure in turn relates to the language of gender signifiers: what it means to be a man or have a woman express the dilemmas of containing excess. Leo is eventually able to tolerate seeing his analyst as a woman, and experience himself as a subject of sexual desire without being overwhelmed and so fearing the activation of the abandoned, emasculated boy. He becomes able to bear sexual tension without fantasizing that the woman, who is both the projected image of that helpless boy and the unresponsive mother, has to be taken, submissive and under his power.

Excess in the analytic relationship

As we have seen, the effort to counter the shame of being overwhelmed and dysregulated, expressed as emasculation, takes the form of striving for phallic control. The fantasy of masculinity masks a lack of self-regulation and holding, a grasping in the face of feeling flooded by too much stimuli with no secure attachment to modulate tension. The turning of tables and self-protection through intellectual superiority represent a kind of “masculinity as masquerade” that both partners are tempted by. Leo's efforts to symbolize his plight using metaphors of sexuality and gender, are of course the kind of symbolic work psychoanalysis was originally designed to make use of, and with his proficient use of this language analysis progresses. But this should not obscure for us how these symbols foster an escape into the cultural binary of active-passive that also works to mask the origins of excess in early maternal failure. This, I would argue, is exactly the occlusion that was fostered by the psychoanalytic adherence to the oedipal model as the only meaningful basis for analysis.

My suggestion is that we understand the sexual anxieties expressed by Leo in terms of intersubjective failures in the original dyadic systems that resulted in the

inability to hold the excess that is sexuality. These failures must be re-enacted as ruptures and repaired in the treatment. The experience that the other is absent or mentally missing, which results in too much pain, loss, or flooding, is actively countered by the experience that the analyst survives and contains the excess with her thinking, feeling subjectivity. Excess contained is not the same excess. We can distinguish between the enigmatic message delivered alongside adequate care from the compromised message full of "noise" (Laplanche, 2011) in the context of being uncontained.

Insofar as the lack of early mutual regulation has created this dilemma of being unable to self-regulate, the patient feels shame at his inability to contain himself. The shame of excess is about the exposure of weakness involved in identifying with the baby parts that need maternal care. The working-through of this shame in the clinical relationship requires the reliving of the painful self-states and analyst bearing it with the patient—that may involve allowing potentially shameful aspects of desire to be attributed to her with the inevitable impairment of affect regulation that shame involves. The fears that ricochet between patient and analyst take a complementary form—being too much, abandoned and shamed, or being the one who shames and abandons—and so are unformulated and dissociated. The analyst must watch for signs of her own self-protection and shame as signals of the emergence of excess.

Both Leo and James enact with their analysts the shame of revealing their dysregulation, their fear of excess, perceived as the passive feminine position which each partner would try to avoid. In a typical reversal, the female analyst came to embody the position the patient feared—the position of being exposed and holding the extruded baby longings—unless she defended herself with the (masculine) activity of thinking. In Leo's case this thinking, at first a mark of the danger in the mother-baby couple, was transformed by both partners thinking and reflecting on the enactment together. In James' case, the mother assuming the role of thinking felt protective of the couple, and likewise enabled the move into shared thirdness. In both cases, working through this enactment, the couple could together transform the feminine position into the active part of maternal holding by articulating what had been repudiated, the excessive.

Freeing the feminine position from debasement went hand in hand with alleviating the pressure to contain the shame with a phallic defense. In this way the analytic couple is able to move out of the complementarity—reinforced by gender—in which someone has to hold the shamed position. The movement into a position of thirdness in which fear is recognized allows the analytic couple to confront the problem of excess and the attendant longings for a soothing, reliable maternal figure.

We can see clinically how helpful it is to theorize the fault lines in early affect regulation that shape our ability to bear the excess and otherness of sexuality, and the perpetuation of these faults in the efforts to repair them through gender fantasies. In a rereading of Freud's theory, I have reintroduced the intersubjective context of early attachment, tracing the reified gender positions to efforts at

mastering otherwise unmanageable excess. With this in mind, we can anchor clinical analysis in an intersubjective framework that focuses on the way in which excess has not been contained relationally, as well as revealing how gender fantasies strive to compensate for such relational failure. By adding to our general understanding of attachment and affect regulation the role played by gender signifiers in shared fantasies of repairing the self we may clarify an important dimension of how the enigmatic message is processed. In the analytic relationship we can try to move through the complementary oppositions organized by these fantasies (see Celenza, 2014) into a thirdness of mutual regulation and recognition that contains the too-muchness.

We can trace that movement in my work with Isabelle, who, like Leo, could not imagine that I would be able to "take it." This was her version of destroying the object; that is, in her mind the conviction held sway that I was too weak to ever handle her intensity, her too-muchness. I had to survive her dismissive attachment, her dissociation of any need for me, which in her mind was a protection against being helplessly subjected to the noise of her mother's messages of a weak mother figure. In her state of suspicion, she perceived even affective resonance on my part as a sign of this boundary dissolution, activating the fear that I would be unable to hold her dangerous impulses and feelings. And, indeed, this suspiciousness was often painful for me to contend with. The enactment around her fears could be seen as a reaction to the mother evacuating her rage, anxiety and shame into her. But rather than being in touch with her fear of the other's discharge, as Leo was when he feared the breath, Isabelle protected herself by defiantly asserting her sexual power. For although she rejected and rebelled against her mother overtly, her defense, perhaps syntonetic with her role as feminine daughter, had consisted of her ability to *be* the container, to bear any pain, any penetration or invasion. Hence she challenged me to be as strong as her masculine ideal, strong enough to penetrate her.

In one early session Isabelle complained about my way of responding and referring to a consultant who had been "penetrating," she demanded that I finally "say one thing that touches me, that hits the mark." As I demonstrably remained cool and verbalized my sense of her fear, that no one would ever be strong enough to hold her, Isabelle became visibly calmer. It was then that she was inspired to reflect aloud on the link between her mother's verbal assaults, which she had to endure for whole nights at a time, and her fantasies of taking an extreme amount of pain and stimulation in sex, of submitting to the master. Somewhat soothed by my recognition she began to grasp that the pain she was asking me to hold for her was linked to what she had to hold for her mother. She was then able to recount her fantasies of submitting, of "taking" whatever was given, of letting herself be shattered (Bersani, 1985), replicating the traumatic assaults with the aim of repairing them in the sexual interaction. Her move into a space of shared thirdness allowed me to reflect along with her, beginning to understand how her sexuality had been shaped both by the need to hold the excess, to creatively imagine a way to repair and heal the self that was overwhelmed by it.

When she returned after this session, Isabelle remarked for the first time on the peaceful quality of the space in my office. She was able to experience this containing space around her, not impinging or abandoning, and be silent for a moment. She then began to associate:

That little patch of light . . . As a kid I would go to a special spot by the river, walk through those trees alone . . . find some peace . . . My mother had no peace, ever. It was a long walk to get to that spot . . . or going to all kinds of extremes with myself . . ., it was my private escape where I didn't have to mirror or reflect the ones around me, a peaceful place equivalent to the place of orgasm.

It was these associations that led her to recall the peaceful snow on the cactus of her boyfriend's painting.

A short time later she reiterated this view of safety, escape, orgasm, and peace:

Paradise is a place where I wouldn't be invaded . . . like in the most ultimate climax sexually, I lose myself. It can also be self-destructive, like when speed hits your bloodstream, escape. I am so far outside and within myself, I can't be invaded.

The association between the excess of orgasm and the peace of solitude in nature at first seems paradoxical, and yet losing her mind seems to correlate with freedom from invasion, and thus with finally calming the affect storm of overstimulation and dysregulation. Perhaps moving from her use of dissociation, the "escape when there is no escape," into something more like real safety.

Orgasm functions not only as discharge of excess but as a means to be at one with the self, not divided by the need to protect oneself from or reflect the other, a letting go into dedifferentiation, a place of creative regeneration of self (Rundel, 2015). We might also see it as a means of moving from submission to surrender. Isabelle's experience is reflective of Ghent's (1990) usage of the term surrender, which denotes a form of letting go of mastery and control that allows us to transcend the terms of dominance and submission, a letting go in which the person does not give over *to* the other—although perhaps *with* the other.

Having allowed me to recognize the yearnings for home and healing in her fantasies of submission facilitated for Isabelle a surrender to the space of aloneness in the presence of the other. In this intersubjective holding space the excess was transformed, translated into a desire for an experience of the self at peace, at one, with the outside and the inside. In this version of thirdness the other does not have to be excluded nor is invasion feared, there is no master, no one who submits and takes it. Ghent suggested that submission was a look-alike, a perverse form of surrender. We might imagine that giving over to the other is the form taken by longing for giving over to the rhythmic Third in the presence of the other (see also Benjamin, 1988).

In my understanding, surrender relies on the space of thirdness, going beyond complementarity to encompass and perhaps reflect on the fear of excess together. With Isabelle and Leo we see a congruence between the affective calming—the exhale, the experience of space—and the symbolic formulation of the fear involved. Keeping in mind the two aspects, rhythmic and symbolic, we create a space of thirdness in which we connect to the painful reality. Uncovering the traumatic failure of mutual regulation, we gradually modulate the pattern in which the too-muchness of excess takes the form of dominance and submission. This complementarity in turn is enacted in the analytic relationship. As the couple becomes able to work through the enactment of this complementarity, the space of thirdness gradually develops.

Trauma, surrender and the Third

I will suggest that in the space of thirdness, when excess is differently held and processed, what has appeared as passivity can be refigured as surrender. In the reappropriation of passivity, the internal experience of submitting to the complementary active partner is transformed into surrender; to a process of exploration and recognition. When we are able to alternate freely between complementary positions such as activity and passivity, when we can move in and out of symmetrical positions, we are relying on an orientation to a shared Third, to a dance jointly created and recognized as belongs to both of us (Benjamin, 1999; 2002). This orientation to the Third changes the relational pattern. Surrender is also one way of formulating this third position in relation to activity and passivity. How would the renewed integration of what we have called passivity change our imagining of sexual subjectivity? I have suggested that there is a space in which the reversal of the active-passive complementarity takes us out of the power relation and into a form of thirdness, the surrender to a process of mutual recognition.

What happens when the potentially traumatic experience of passivity is held, enjoyed, represented because it is felt as surrender, not to the other but to a shared process. Surrender can be distinguished from what appears or is labelled as passivity but is actually a feature of traumatic experience with isolation or excessive stimulation. I have suggested through my reading of Freud and Grossman that the attempt to bind, master, and represent such traumatic experiences has shaped our images of masculinity and femininity. Clinical work supports the need to explore the experiences underlying these gendered sexual signifiers that have structured yet limited previous theoretical understanding.

In erotic life as in analysis, when we open ourselves to the sexual fantasies associated with the gender complementarity we uncover their traumatic or shame-filled origins. It becomes possible to experience the thirdness of mutual recognition not as the erasure of these parts of our mental life but the possibility of their expression and communication. Seeking this form of repairing the self. Grossman's Yair reveals his screams, cracks and holes, reaching for an other who will help him overcome the damage of shame that has left the self in desperate isolation.

His dramatic imagery of sexual wrongness already incorporates abraded, alienated longings for recognition to calm the excess, as his epistolary love-letter "therapy" seeks to use the erotic as a site of sexual healing.

Returning to the analysis of excess and its relation to passivity, we can see how the erotic can become therapeutic when trauma, passivity and psychic pain are integrated in the relation between self and other. The film theorist Kaja Silverman (1990) has offered an interesting illustration of this issue. She was pursuing the question, what happens when defenses are stripped by trauma, when phallic masculinity fails to protect men and women from the insinuation of death. Silverman, trained in literary criticism, takes up the notion of trauma as it appears in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920) and uses it to discuss the collapse of phallic masculinity in films about World War II, as exemplified by "The Best Years of Our Lives." As you recall, Freud (1920) portrays the protection from trauma as provided by an internal shield, a psycho-physiological barrier, rather than by another person(s). For Silverman, the idea of this protective shield becomes a metaphor associated with masculine armor and phallic self-holding. She compares its breakdown with the breakdown of the organizing gender constructs, the dominant fictions. The film portrays a double trauma: the individual men returning from the war have suffered trauma or shock, and the cultural schema of masculinity did not protect them. The fabric of the "phallic fiction" was torn, failed them. They lack any collective representation of suffering to enfold them.

The film shows how their wounding and symbolic castration results in a kind of gender reversal, in which women now gaze upon the spectacle of male lack. This spectacle is eroticized, but not as humiliation or fetishistic denial. Without a fetish to embody and displace the wounding, the film nonetheless depicts the sexual excitement of this role reversal. As the woman undresses the veteran Harold Russell who actually lost his arms, his hooks now removed, she is aroused and will make love to him. The ex-pilot who suffers flashbacks and nightmares exchanges a gaze of mutual recognition with the woman who gazes on the scene of his social displacement.

We might consider how the scene of gender reversal seems to derive its erotic charge from an intersubjective process. The recognition of pain and vulnerability, the wound to the phallic version of masculinity offers a release: a letting go of the destructive illusion of the phallic contract, which prescribes stoic loneliness and denial. In the film, the couple faces the abyss of breakdown together—as described by Bataille (1986), the breakdown is like the vertiginous experience of death in a different form, one which allows us to share its dizziness together. With this acknowledgment of the reality of loss and breakdown, the lovers in the film interrupt the circuit of defensive activity and perverse passivity. The sign of the wound functions as the opposite of a fetish, it signifies the possibility of overcoming disavowal, representing vulnerability, witnessing pain and suffering—the intersubjective moment of surrender.

The film suggests a vision of trauma transformed into a therapeutic erotics of recognition, whose energy derives not merely from reversing the old gender

opposition, but from reclaiming what it sacrificed. Eros in this version begins with mourning the loss of the intact body and the ideal of manhood, to which so much has been sacrificed. It is mourning in the presence of an other, a depressive solution, accepting passivity, loss and death. Breakdown of the phallic fiction opens fissures in what would otherwise remain the seamless wall of repetition. It becomes possible to witness suffering and thereby bear mourning, to own desire and enjoy passivity.

In this way a relationship is formed that absorbs the too-muchness of pain and longing: there is a chorus of “voices”—different self-states joining each other—that becomes a rhythmic Third as well as an acknowledgment of loss to which the couple surrender. And in this surrender they find a transcendence of suffering. This surrender involves using the erotic to bear passivity, helplessness and vulnerability.⁶ The distinction between passivity and surrender becomes possible as fear of passivity gives way to the joint creation of interpersonal safety, each person’s gift to the other of a holding presence and an understanding witness. The witness who bears it with us ensures that vulnerability will not plunge us back into traumatic excess. But this can only occur through a depressive awareness that strength derives not from denial but from acknowledging helplessness, damage, and the overwhelming of the psyche by suffering.

This vision is significant for our larger understanding of what is therapeutic and transformational in erotic life. The integration of passivity and bearing of excess in surrender to an erotic Third—the dance of love—allows us to metaphorize psychic pain rather than act it out through a sadomasochistic complementarity. When erotic partners can transcend the fixed complementary positions of active v. passive, the helplessness of excess and the holding of the enigmatic message can be borne and integrated by both sexes, by any version of sexual identity, straight or queer; gender conventions no longer need be used defensively. Rather they can become conventions of play, forms of expression, available for use in our fantasy elaboration of the inevitable enigmatic and excessive elements that mark sexual life.

6 I notice there is a formal parallel here to the idea I (Benjamin, 1995c) formulated regarding Eros, where I suggested that in light of Freud and Bataille we might imagine destruction as helping to cross the sea of death that separates us. That is, the erotic is a form in which we can sustain the paradoxical tension of the Third, where recognition takes up what is otherwise felt to be too painful or destructive for the self.