

Ella

The enigma of desire

A woman walks into the room. She is in her early thirties, pretty, long black hair flowing onto her shoulders. She holds a large red bag in her hand and looks around. "I like your office, it's well put together," she says with a smile. She sits down on the couch, legs spread apart, and settles the big bag between her legs. "Hi." She looks at me, smiles, and immediately bends over and opens the bag, digs through it, removing items and then returning them to the bag. Then she looks up at me and laughs in embarrassment. "I'm looking for something . . . Never mind . . ." She leaves the bag open between her legs, leans back, and starts to cry. This is how I first meet Ella.

In this chapter, I address the psychological experience of sexual longing and desire and offer a way to think about erotic experience as a state of consciousness that connects us with material registered in the body. I examine how the Enigmatic aspects and what I term the *Pragmatic* coexist and play a dual part in the otherness of lustful states of mind. This chapter widens the scope of sexuality to include both the Enigmatic and the Pragmatic, questioning the nature of our sexual longings and bringing this inquiry into the consulting room.

In telling Ella's story, I try to get close to the actual experience of sexuality and offer a way of thinking about the material imprinted in the body. Addressing erotic longings and their relation to loss, I keep emphasizing two simultaneous levels of existence. The first level is the actual early connection with the mother. Aspects of that early connection are observed in infant research and, as mentioned, I term that actual connection the *Pragmatic*. The *Pragmatic* is related to the early experiences with the actual mother, the real interaction, the mother-baby multi-modal sensory interaction that includes patterns of arousal, regulation, touch, gaze, vocal rhythm, and so forth. But the poignancy of sexuality is derived not only from these *Pragmatic* sensory elements; the mother-baby physical tie is only one aspect of sexuality. Here I join those theorists who suggest that sexuality has its own existence as a discrete phenomenon that connects us through the body with that which is Enigmatic and beyond our conscious

knowledge of ourselves (Bataille, 1986; Frommer, 2006; Goldner, 2006; Mitchell, 1997; Stein, 1998a, b, 2008). This other level of existence, then, is related to the enigmatic connection to the mother and to the existential world, and I will often refer to it as the Enigmatic Mother. The term *Enigmatic Mother* is based on Laplanche's (1970, 1987, 1995) and then Stein's (1998a, 1998b) work on the enigmatic message, which refers to the perplexing implicit communication and transmission of enigmatic signifiers from the mother's unconscious into the baby's mind and body. My use of Enigmatic Mother is focused on the endless elusiveness and mystery of Otherness and the existential aspects of sexuality.

Sexual longing presupposes a sense of loss and a hope of refinding. In psychoanalysis, we try to help our patients understand what they "find" or what they are looking for through their sexual experience. We try to hold the unknown darkness with them, tolerate the "too muchness" of excitement, joy, horror, and shame, but I'm not certain we always acknowledge the unique accent of the sexual language. Too often, we frame sexual experiences as being related to early patterns of attachment or as a secondary precipitate of a desire for connection, but while theory tends to link sexual style to attachment style, or conceptualize it as a defense against early object relations, it seems that research hasn't demonstrated that mother-infant attachment necessarily forms a prototype for later sexual behaviors. Studies indicate forms of disturbed attachment that might affect the way various forms of intimacy get negotiated, including sexual intimacy, but findings don't assert a linear relation between attachment patterns in infancy and sexual patterns in adult life.

In discussing Ella's story, I emphasize the dialectic tension between the Pragmatic real attachment to the object and the Enigmatic existential aspects. I suggest that adult sexual states of consciousness must contain both the Enigmatic and the Pragmatic mother, and that lust brings us to a state of consciousness that integrates the levels of existence and actual experience that our theory usually splits.¹ Can we ever fully understand the way these intermingle? I believe not, but I would like to offer a way of thinking about both.

Sex and sexuality are main themes in Ella's treatment. In the first few years, we focus on her relationships with her parents, the actual Disorganized attachment to the mother and the longing for her mother's touch as a trajectory for Ella's later sexual behaviors. Slowly, we move to another form of desire that is not only about the mother and her body. Ella's growth includes the possibility for different erotic experiences to emerge, a sensation that exists beyond the object. We move from working through a Pragmatic deficit to the Enigmatic zone of sexuality, where we meet the inaccessible aspects of our own existence and encounter the stepping out of so-called "everyday mentality" and habitual modes of functioning (Stein, 1998a,

p. 594) into a different state of consciousness that is an Other to ourselves (Frommer, 2006; Goldner, 2006; Lacan, 2006; Stein, 1998a, 1998b, 2008).

Discussing Ella's constant distress, I address the longings and dysregulation that are at the heart of sexuality. I emphasize the painful "too muchness" that plagues her mind and body, and that brings me in touch with my own similar self-state. I try to hold in mind the use of the body to make contact with our patients' different self-states, searching for the Other parts of ourselves and the Other parts of others that sexuality brings us in contact with, while exploring the dialectic tension between two simultaneous levels of existence.

Cry-baby girl

In the first dream Ella presents, she is in her childhood room on the bed's upper bunk while her baby sister lies on the bottom bunk. As Ella lies on her bed, she performs oral sex on Mendel, a 20-year-old Orthodox Jewish male. Suddenly the door opens, and her Orthodox cousin enters the room. He looks up at her, mumbles "Disgusting," and exits.

Ella's father comes from an Orthodox Jewish home. She grew up in the US as a secular girl, the firstborn, with a "hippie mother," she says. Ella is an attractive young artist. Over the past year, she has had a secret relationship with Mendel, who is ten years younger and who appears to lead a double life: as part of the Orthodox community during the day and in Ella's bed at night. They never leave her home, usually not even getting out of bed. Ella knows nothing about him; she has never been to his home, nor has she met his friends. She does not know what he does or even if he works at all. She is also unsure that what she does know about him is actually true—she calls him "the shadow guy."

The shadow is everywhere in Ella's narrative. There are many things we don't know and only feel. We start connecting with the baby that she was, with no memory to ground us, only other people's recollections, pictures, our feelings, fantasies, and ideas. Pretty quickly we recruit our bodies (Slavin & Rahmani, 2014). I start feeling my body and become aware of hers. Is it desire? Pain? Excitement? Ella talks mostly about sex. She takes me with her to visit and revisit her sexual longings. I listen to the sexual language through my mind and body. It's not a conscious choice I make, but rather her way to make sure we are both aroused and that she gets the best of me (Kuchuck, 2012).

"In the dream you give him a blow job," I say. Ella giggles. "Oh, no, it sounds terrible coming out of your mouth." I get confused for a moment and wonder whether this was not the term that she had used. "Did I phrase it differently?" I ask. "No, not at all," she replies. "That's exactly what I said, it's just so strange to hear it . . . It's easier to say it . . . Maybe even

easier to do it," she jokes, and I ask her to explain. She speaks of a sense of longing terribly for something. Longing that pushes her to a sexual act, "sometimes too fast," she says. She seeks touch, but no touch feels right. "No man knows what I need," she explains. No one succeeds in satisfying her. She feels lonely and frustrated. And she tries again and again, asks to have him close to her, inside of her, so he can know her. To have him know exactly who she is and what she needs.

Ella speaks of her desire toward men. She speaks of her father, but I cannot stop thinking about women and about her mother. I feel that she is talking to me, telling me the way she wants me to touch her while sexually stimulating me. I wonder about my own feelings. Not always consciously, I find myself focused on her breasts, paying more attention than usual to her body. She talks about Mendel, describes the sexual act, providing all the details, graphic description from the minute they get into bed and he kisses her until the minute she comes and they fall asleep.

I later learn that Ella had exchanged her longing toward her mother for a longing toward her father. I learn how she became a baby, and later a girl, who gives up on her mother, turning to admire and idealize her father and asking that he be her mother too. Referring to Wrye and Welles (1994), Elise (2002) suggests that a woman, lesbian or heterosexual, wants an erotic experience with the qualities of desire that she initially experienced in the sensuous early bodily contact with her mother. But Ella is talking about her desire toward men. It's all about men. Sometimes I think that, in order to create a safe environment, even I can only be a man, her father. After all, her father is the religious, righteous, honest man, while she describes her mother as messy, inconsistent, always in distress—a mother with a difficult childhood who has had one baby after another, a mother who is always overweight, drinking, heavily smoking cigarettes and marijuana, and feeding the children sweets and sugar until Ella herself becomes a heavy and rejected girl. Observing Ella's constant distress, I wonder how her distress as an infant impacted her mother.

Infant research focuses on the way internal processes and relational processes are inextricably coordinated and the ways internal states and interactive states are organized simultaneously (Beebe & Lachman, 2003; Meltzoff, 1985, 1990; Schore, 1994; Seligman, 1998). Beatrice Beebe shows how an infant intrapersonal dysregulation links to a maternal interpersonal dysregulation. She claims that mothers (what I call Pragmatic Mothers) of future Disorganized attachment infants cannot coordinate with infant emotional ups and downs, and cannot acknowledge moments of infant distress because they cannot bear to pay attention to their own emotional distress. The infant's distress may be overarousing and terrifying, evoking the mother's unacknowledged distress. Infant research indicates that mothers of these infants were likely to smile or display expressions of

surprise specifically during moments of infant facial or vocal distress. This type of response signals an emotional "denial" of the infant's distress. Therefore, these infants come to expect that mothers will not empathically share their distress. These infants don't feel known by the mother's mind, and the infant's ability to "know" their own mind may become derailed (Beebe et al., 2010).

Ella repeatedly describes her mother's distress. She cries in sessions and says, "My mother didn't know what to do with her cry-baby girl," and I speak of her longing but doubt that I, too, will know what to do with the crying girl that she is. She expects herself to be too much for me. Ella believes that, as with her mother, her distress can evoke distress in me and create further dysregulation. She has no capacity for self-regulation and no way to protect herself from overstimulation. Ella predicts there will be no way for interactive regulation. Ultimately, she attempts to regulate through sex. "One day a guy will know how to touch me, and then I'll feel better. I'll feel known. He will calm me down," she says.

We know that people seek sexual experience for many different emotional reasons (e.g., Benjamin, 2004a; Bollas, 1995; Celenza, 2010; Mitchell, 2002; Saketopoulou, 2014; J. Slavin, 2002; M. Slavin, 2006; Stoller, 1985): as an attempt to charge their inner objects and self with excitement and realness and aliveness; to express their aggression and hostility; to hide or expose their vulnerability; to bolster the collapsing or fragmenting self; to heal trauma through the repetition of arousal; to achieve recognition and affirmation through the body of the other; and more. At this early point of the treatment, sex for Ella is an attempt to achieve emotional and physical regulation. It is a promise—a promise to be seen, to be known. It is a promise to fill for a moment the empty parts, to retrieve all of the losses, to find all the empty boxes. A promise that is fulfilled for a moment before collapsing back to square one, leaving her even more distressed and empty.

Sexualized feminine object

It is clear here that what constitutes Ella's femininity is not her identification with her mother but the complementary relation to her father. In "Revisiting the Riddle of Sex," Benjamin (2004a) makes the explicit connection between early intersubjective failures and forms of gender and sexuality (see more in chapter 3). She speaks of *the daughter position* and of the girl who chooses the route of concealing her loss and longing for her mother, pleasing the father by adopting the role of precociously sexualized feminine object. As for many other women, Ella's femininity is defined by being the object of men's desire. Her longing to be known by the other is expressed through the longing for sexual contact, when the other looks straight into her eyes and she feels seen. For Ella, the sexual arousal potentially brings

the “moment of meeting” (Sander, 1995; Stern et al., 1998) that she needs to feel alive. Again and again, she speaks about the oral function, suckling, kissing, describing herself performing oral sex, excited by men’s lips. She asks to be seen, but eye contact is constantly missing.

“I’m not sure what it is that I need, but it’s in my body,” Ella says, painfully describing how on the previous night she went to the Lower East Side, where a young man smiled and asked her for the time. “I felt like I needed something from him,” she says, “so I went with him to the nearest bar and an hour later went up with him to his fancy hotel room. What was I thinking?” She starts crying. “What did I really want to get?” She left at midnight feeling empty and humiliated. “It’s the same story again and again,” she cries. “There was a promise there. But again instead of filling up, I emptied out. Instead of feeling seen, I felt invisible, used. He invited me up to his room, and said what he wanted most was to go down on me, and that excited me. What was I thinking?” She cries bitterly.

We go back to the lower bunk of the bed in her dream, where a baby is lying. On the upper level is a sexual woman, but on the lower level lies a hidden baby, and they both exist simultaneously. Again, Ella cries. She tells me of the massage therapist downtown. “It was the strangest experience I’ve ever had,” she says. “I came for a massage, and there was a petite Asian masseuse. And she touched me. She gently caressed my body. I suddenly remembered my mother used to touch me that way sometimes, but always stopped unexpectedly. She would suddenly say ‘that’s enough’ and leave the room. This woman I paid to touch me does it just the way I like,” she says, “and I know that she won’t suddenly leave before the hour is over. And I feel my body burning. And I come.” Ella wipes her tears. Makeup smudges on her face. “I’m messy, just like my mother,” she says tearfully.

I listen to her and think about us, her and me. About the way in which everything—the distress, the longing, the sensuality, everything—takes place between us as well, and becomes sexual. She describes how she would like me to touch her emotionally, to know her from inside, to teach her to know herself. She wishes me to be like her massage therapist, whom she knows will not leave her before the hour is over, and hopes that I will know how to touch her better than she touches herself. She wants me to teach her to touch herself, to regulate herself. She turns around and lifts her shirt. “You see?” Her back is covered with scratches. “I scratch myself,” she says. “I suddenly get upset, and it starts itching. I scratch to soothe it, but it doesn’t help.” Ella is highly aroused/distressed but can neither get any help nor self-soothe. She is trying to regulate herself but becomes more and more dysregulated. Her skin bleeds, and she becomes even more distressed. Ella is like a baby who is highly aroused/distressed but can neither get any help from its mother nor self-soothe.

Beebe’s (Beebe et al., 2010) findings show that future Disorganized dyads suffer from dyadic touch dysregulation—in a secure dyad when the infant decreases touch, the mother is more arousing, and when the infant increases touch, it’s a cue for the mother to become more affectionate and regulate the baby; for the Disorganized mothers, there is no such association. They might arouse the baby when the baby needs regulation. Ella is trying to regulate herself but becomes more and more dysregulated. Her skin bleeds, and she becomes even more distressed.

Unrecognized desire

We add another session. Now we meet three times a week. Ella doesn’t miss a session, and the sessions are very intense. Many times I need to regulate myself as I listen and visualize what Ella is telling me. I try to recognize my moments of arousal and my sexual associations as well as my dissociation when it becomes too much. I become more aware of our bodies when we sit in the same manner, unclear who is imitating whom. I notice when the rhythm of our speech becomes synchronized and when we laugh together with the same body movements. One day Ella enters with the exact same boots as mine and says that she looked everywhere for them because she wanted to walk with my gait. At times I find myself speaking like Ella, imitating the gesture of her hand brushing away her hair. And I also start envying her. I find that I envy her “messiness,” her cluttered bag, her smudged makeup, her crying. She seems like an enchanting figure, childish and needy, while I experience myself as too tidy, composed, and sporadically masculine. In those moments, I don’t like Ella. But what is this envy about? Does it carry only destructiveness and hatred, or maybe also desires and longings?

Referring to Riviere’s (1929) paper on women’s masquerade, Harris (personal communication in 2010) suggests that envy can itself be a masquerade; in particular, envy can mask women’s homosexual desire. On the enigmatic level, envy carries not only destructiveness and hatred, but also longings, particularly those so often occluded in mother–daughter bodily love (Harris, 1997).

Behind the envy, then, might hide women’s fear of sexual stimulation and desire—heterosexual desire when the object of envy is a penis, in Torok’s (1970) view, or homosexual desire when the object of envy is a woman or part of a woman (for example, her shoes). I envy Ella, and by recognizing my longing I hold not only my own desire, but also her dissociated pieces of longing for her mother’s body. At the same time, I start wondering what other meanings this longing contains. Is it only the real Pragmatic Mother that Ella is yearning for? Only the real deficits from infancy that Ella longs to repair? What is it that she is trying to experience

through these intense feelings of envy and desire, through her body and through my body? At this point of the treatment, Ella's distress prevents us from acknowledging other parts of her existence. We are in the zone of a failure of recognition and regulation, arousal caused by inadequate or overwhelming responses, and an absence of mentalization. This is directly related to the fundamental intersubjective experience of knowing the other's mind or intentions and being known by it (Atlas & Benjamin, 2010, 2014; Beebe et al., 2010; Benjamin & Atlas, 2015; Bromberg, 1991; Fonagy & Target, 1996a, 1996b; Wachtel, 2012).

Sexual tears, arousal, and touch

Ella cries. She cries almost continuously throughout each session during the first year, and I examine my concomitant experience, my emotional response to her tears. Heterosexual male analysts have written about the experience of sexual arousal when a female patient bursts into tears (Field, 1989; Gabbard, 1994; Tansey, 1994); among other issues, they refer to the male analyst's erotic response, the tears representing submission, and mention sadomasochistic excitement that embodies the power relations between the masculine and the feminine. Stoller (1979) points out the element of hostility that is central to sexual excitement, especially between men and women, saying that exciting sexual fantasies that lead to orgasm frequently include aggression, danger, and harm. I would like to look at the arousing crying woman and the aroused observer from another intersubjective point of view.

Benjamin (1988) understood feminine submission as motivated by fear of separation from the mother, a separation that feels like death. I propose that the submissive fantasy of the crying female concerns avoiding separation from the mother. It is an "agreement" between the two, where one is a helpless infant and the other experiences herself as the powerful parent, usually the mother with whom the baby asks to merge. Both participants, through differing approaches, attempt to restore a primal experience of connection, I believe, to repair a separation that occurred prematurely and left the infant dysregulated and frightened.

This is how I understood Ella's fantasy and the response it evoked in me, a heterosexual female therapist responding to her female patient's constant tears. I realized that when she cried I felt attracted to her, and most of the time I understood it as our way of touching through the body something that has no words: the sexual and the sensual in the early mother-daughter relationship, the drama of arousal and regulation. The attachment to the mother then is always there, in our conscious and unconscious connection to others. We long for what we have missed, but, as mentioned, our sexual desires cannot be based only on that level of longing. In other words, it is

not simply the actual Pragmatic object that we are seeking to connect with through sex.

In Ella's case, for years, the distress that emerged everywhere colored her sexual experiences. I had to experience the erotic and tolerate the dysregulation, Ella's and my own. I had to learn how to "touch" Ella so I wouldn't overstimulate her or myself, or dysregulate her more than she was already dysregulated. How do we do that when it comes to sexual material? A touch, physical or emotional, can be highly arousing as much as it can soothe and calm. How do we know what the right touch is? How do we know what the other longs for and can tolerate?

When it comes to sex, we know talking about it can be as hot as doing it (Dimen, 1999, 2003). As mentioned, a good enough mother responds to the infant's cues, arouses the infant when he is underaroused, becomes more affectionate when the baby needs regulation (Beebe et al., 2010), and, as important, is open to the process of the corrective influence of the other (Seligman, 1998). As parents and analysts, we need to softly stroke the itch rather than roughly scratching and exacerbating it. The touch needs to follow the other's cues but also be reliable, consistent. As her therapist, it was not enough to know how to touch Ella. I also had to make sure not to leave her suddenly when she was hyper-aroused or anxious.

Most of what I've described here was not, in fact, verbalized in the treatment. As mentioned, we are always dealing not only with what we do or say, but also with what we think, mentalize, and experience in our bodies. And while Ella's mind was connecting me with my longings and desires, Ella started touching her own: her longing for her mother's body, the wish for soothing and regulation and for the mother's "good eyes and soft hands." She started challenging the nature of her relationship with men, her idealization of and disappointment with her father, her inability to believe him, and the effort she still makes for him—men—to see her. Over time, Ella no longer experienced the intense distress with which she began therapy. While still working on understanding the role and many meanings of sex in her life, as well as the burning pain that she revisits repeatedly, Ella's inner voice became strong and loud, and at the same time she began asserting her voice outside of the room. She began to receive recognition as an artist and developed a strong social feminist agenda, saying with a smile, "You see, I became you. You are my tough mother. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about your secret gentle touch."

The enigma

I believe that the secret psychoanalytic touch is always about tolerating the erotic in the room, while not adding to the stimulus. In Ella's case, this is probably part of what decreased the distress and made space for other

aspects of the sexual to surface. Her growth included the possibility for different erotic experiences to emerge, beyond concrete reparation of infancy ruptures. The mother's body was the necessary foundation for Ella's existence—it was the container for Ella's own body and mind, and what allowed her to later develop an intimate relationship with a man and at the same time connect with her private desires.

Ella and I recognize how her distress prevented us from acknowledging other parts of the sexual experience, those pieces that are related to her sexual excitement, to losing her senses, desiring her own body, and connecting with something bigger than her concrete deficit. Distress limited our view to having only one baby (Ella) and one mother (me) in the room, but in fact she was also my mother and I was also her baby, and at other times we were both babies and both sexual women. We felt the original pieces of distress and dysregulation that she was trying to repeat and repair nonverbally, through her body and through my body.

Following years of high distress, Ella tells me she thinks she used to function on one sexual dimension only. In her words, "It was all about my need to calm myself down." In my words, there is no enigma; there is only the drama of arousal and regulation again and again. Emotional regulation brings to the room a different language. Ella tells me about sex with her boyfriend; she shares her erotic fantasies with me while wondering if she can share them with him as well. We create a bridge between our sexual language in the room and her ability to touch herself and teach her boyfriend how to touch her. Her language becomes more abstract; she doesn't give me graphic descriptions anymore. She talks about her own arousal, about her body, her desire, about her longing and her existential sorrow. She talks about life and death. These concepts are difficult to articulate; they are abstract, tricky, slippery. In sessions there is no sense of urgency anymore, and I'm aware of listening to the music more than to the lyrics. Maybe I should say I move to the music, as it is touching my mind and body the way music does. Words serve as signals for where we are, and as part of an attempt to make sense of the emerging feelings.

Ella talks about her hopes, the energy of desire and passion, and what I perceive as her sense of agency and access to her aggression (Gentile, 2010). She doesn't cry as much. She speaks slowly and clearly. She looks straight into my eyes. She asks her lover to look into her eyes and touch her. She listens to his breath and tells me this is the metronome setting her rhythm, his breath and her breath, and the way they synchronize. Ella presents the following dream: "I'm under water. It's quiet. I'm naked and feel peace and bliss. I look at my body and realize I'm a nymph. My tears merge with the water, and I feel deep sorrow. Slowly I start having sex with a rock. It is in slow motion. I'm happy and I'm sad and I touch myself. I have everything I need, and I long for something else. It's almost as if the

physical isn't important anymore. It's the emptiness that I meet, but a blissful emptiness. I touch nothing and everything. And I come."

Ella looks at me. "It's about everything I have ever lost," she says, and I recall our first session, when she was opening her bag between her legs, saying, "I'm looking for something." I smile. "Of course I didn't find what I lost," she adds immediately. "I think I never will. It's not a refundable loss," she says humorously. We both know she isn't talking about her actual mother only, even if this dream feels like it's happening in a womb. The rock, she explains, is the connection to the ground, to past, present, and future. Rocks are there before we are born and will exist after we die.² "They are nothing, just rocks, but they are everything we rely on, our ground to build everything on." She talks about the search for that which she can never fully hold, like the water in her dream. She describes how through sex she tries to hold that which one can never hold and at the same time get in touch with that which has always been there. Her words help me grasp something about the bridge to the unreachable parts of our being: That bridge has to be physical, grounded like a rock, and on that foundation we connect with other parts of our being, the fluid and enigmatic parts.

We talk about this longing. "It is exactly like in my art," she says. She calls it "My sweet longings" and explains to me that this is the passion behind her creativity and ambition, and that she needs "to touch the untouchable, to have it inside of me, just for a moment, as if it always belonged to me." Ella looks at me. "I know what you are thinking," she smiles and adds, "Oh, you are so Freudian, you have only one thing on your mind. Sex." We laugh.

Longing and loss, the Enigmatic and the Pragmatic

"The deliberate loss of self in eroticism is manifest; no one can question it"

(Bataille, 1986, p. 31).

What is it that we get in touch with through sexual experience? How can we understand these parts of ourselves and others? And can we identify these levels of existence in psychoanalytic treatment?

Sexual feelings are potentially overwhelming and touch upon suffering, which is the origin of the word *passion* in Latin. According to Kristeva (1999), passion always includes suffering, the suffering of pleasure, of the excess that the body and the mind cannot contain. "Lust," Dimen writes (1999), is "both the longing for pleasure and the pleasure itself" (p. 424). It simultaneously contains suffering and joy, the uncontainable and the

unreachable. As Stein (2008) describes, the power of sexual experience has been compared to quasi-pathological yet still “normal” clinical states. She notes that such “derailed” states of mind have been described as “regressive” and “fragmented” (Wolff, 2004), “traumatic” (Laplanche, 1999; McDougall, 1995), “borderline” (Fonagy & Target, 2004), or “perverse” (Stein, 2005). Others talk about sexuality as a modality of existence (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994), or a self-state (Frommer, 2006) that holds hidden parts of ourselves. The finding of another part of ourselves that we are usually not in touch with and that is an Other to ourselves emerges as the result of a falling out of an everyday sense of self; hence the loss of the predictable self that we know and maintain in order to function in our day-to-day life (Mitchell, 1997). “Sex,” writes Goldner (2006), “trades on the thrill of discovering, over and over again, that we are unknown to ourselves” (p. 629). There is always a motion, then, as we move from losing to finding and vice versa, while constantly touching the emptiness and longings.

It is a deep form of longing that sexuality brings us in touch with. That longing presupposes a sense of early loss with yearning and hope of refinding. But what is it that we have lost and search to refind? We can think of those lost elements as always both Pragmatic and Enigmatic, which means that they are based on longing for the actual original object, on the one hand, and on the wish to connect with unknown parts of ourselves and of the world, on the other hand. On the surface, we are dealing with two different perspectives, models of the mind and languages.³ I would like to address here this dialectic tension between the existential and the actual, the void and the material, absence and presence, and the ways Enigmatic and Pragmatic levels of existence envelop each other.

Sex connects us through the body to our early Pragmatic losses, to the mother’s body: her touch, her gaze, her holding and mirroring. In Ella’s story, for example, we recognize patterns of excitement, distress, and regulation that are observed in current infant research (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Beebe, Jaffe, & Lachmann, 1992; Lyons-Ruth, 1999; Stern, 1985; Tronick, 1998) and emphasize a trajectory in development that sets the foundation for Ella’s capacity to soothe herself with touch, the capacity to receive adequate emotional responsiveness from the partner, to self-soothe, and more. This is an area in which theory and research are helpful in the consulting room, but we can recognize points at which there is a collapse of comprehension and clarity, where sexual self-states start with the mother–baby tie but lie somewhere beyond that bond, outside of a connection to an other. This is where lust contains the unknown more than the known, and, therefore, where empirical research can’t give us the complete answer.

Sex brings us in touch with a sensation beyond the body itself and beyond the object itself, with an Enigmatic loss that isn’t about the actual object.⁴

I will try to describe these enigmatic notions and start with Lacan’s assumption (following Freud) that desire is founded on lack, on what we are deprived of or what is missing and what we long for.⁵ If we accept that assumption, then, as Frommer (2006) suggests, we can understand the painful yearning that is part of the erotic as a quest to both imagine and experience what goes missing from the self and from our being—those parts which are impossible to imagine. Klein (1963), in the last paper before her death, writes about a ubiquitous human yearning for an “unattainable perfect internal state” (p. 300) related to the inability to even know ourselves and each other, to even fully know everything (Bion’s O).

Through the erotic, we encounter parts of ourselves and parts of life that aren’t always accessible or are too excessive in other ways. In order to describe these mysterious and abstract notions, I am extrapolating from Lacan’s concept of “the Thing”⁶ (1959–1960). Lacan picks up on Freud on the Thing as the “excluded interior”: that which is in the core of the human psyche but is not part of the symbolic mind. In both Freud and Lacan, the Thing is related to two simultaneously different and linked contexts: The first is the limits of language and signification, and the second the “primal object.” In the first instance, in Lacan’s words, “[t]he Thing is characterized by the fact that it is impossible for us to imagine it” (1959–1960, p. 125). It represents the “beyond-of-the-signified,” which is nonsymbolic, unknowable, and totally outside of language. In the second layer, the Thing represents what compels the search for the “lost” primal object that must be perpetually “re-found”—that is, the unreachable Other. The zone we are dealing with is unrepresentable, unsignifiable, that which is entirely outside of language and, according to Lacan, even outside of the unconscious.⁷ This, is where the inaccessible piece of the unrepresentable mother becomes the basis for our longing.

While this enigmatic longing is powerful and has its own existence, it cannot be differentiated from the Pragmatic Mother. The Enigmatic and the Pragmatic, I suggest, always coexist and play a dual part in the “otherness” of lustful states of mind. We can look at Ella’s case and the ways in which the Enigmatic and Pragmatic Mother come together, when the real body-to-body, face-to-face connection with the (m)other serves as a container for the unrepresentable. The body is a meaningful aspect of the connection to that which we cannot grasp, the unreachable parts of the mother, ourselves, and the world. In Ella’s case, as long as there is a real deficit—a longing for the absent, dysregulating mother—there is no access to other levels of existence and experience. Originally it is the maternal function, the mother’s real body, touch, gaze, voice, and so forth, that is the actual representation of everything that can’t be reached, including infinity and death.⁸ As I describe later, the known physical pragmatic body is then the container for the inaccessible unknown enigmatic pieces, both in infancy and in adult

sexual life. How can we recognize both—that which we can know and that which we cannot—in the treatment room? Throughout this volume, I try to address the ways I listen and think about what we know, what we don't know, what we wish we could know, but also what we are probably afraid to know.

The emptiness that is about everything

During a sexual act, “in a single moment something can be touched whereby one being is for another being at the simultaneously living and dead place of the thing,” writes Lacan (Muller, 1987, p. 250). Sexuality holds the tension of life and death, joy and pain, the known and the unknown, the full and the empty elements. The longing represents the hunger to fill the emptiness, to have what we miss, to touch the inaccessible in ourselves, in others, and I believe in human existence.

“She went to bed with men as frequently as she could,” writes Toni Morrison (1973, p. 123), describing her character Sula.⁹ “It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to find deep sorrow. She had not always been aware that it was sadness that she was yearning for.” Sula’s lovemaking touches profound solitude, loneliness, silence, and tears for everything she had ever lost. Waiting impatiently for him to turn away, “leaving her to the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony” (p. 123). Morrison illustrates the emptiness and the longing, the way sex connects one to the death of time, to deaths of the little things, and to a world with no symbolic meaning, unsignified. Here I’m referring not to the fear of death that I believe exists in sexual inhibition or hypersexuality, but to the mysterious level of death, the emptiness that is about everything, as Heidegger (1950) called it. Heidegger writes that what enables the jug to be a holding vessel is its emptiness, and that the emptiness, the void, is what actually does the vessel’s holding. “The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel . . . The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds” (p. 169). The void, thus the emptiness, is the container for existing material that is studied by science. The void holds the Everything, and in its space we can find life, fullness, the self, and the attachment to others. In that sense, we are dealing here not only with the tension between object versus pleasure-seeking, but rather with the ways Enigmatic and Pragmatic levels of existence envelop each other.

This view proposes an integrative approach that is based on the understanding that there are many levels of existence and that each level envelops another dimension within. Huston Smith (1976), a well-known scholar of comparative religion, claims that there is one thing common,

to all traditions, and that is the belief in great nests of being. That means that there is a universal view that each thing is interwoven with every other thing and all are ultimately enveloped with the enigmatic inaccessible, unknown envelope of our existence. Wilber (1998, p. 7) calls this scheme “transcend and include,” and in his view each level is a bridge to the other level and contains the other within.¹⁰ For the purposes of this discussion, I’m referring to the way the Enigmatic elements have to include the real body and real attachment to an Other, while the Pragmatic elements serve as a bridge to the unreachable parts of our being. Thus the unrepresentable, unknown elements always include the Pragmatic in their nest.

The Enigmatic and the Pragmatic, I suggest, are two aspects of one phenomenon, inseparable and dialectically related. Our sexual longing simultaneously connects us to the existential emptiness and to the lost parts of the real deficit. We connect with the mother’s body and to the early mother–infant relationship, and bridge to another level of existence, touching the unknown of life and death. My main point then is not a claim that the Enigmatic and Pragmatic Mother are the same representation, but rather that there cannot be one without the other, and therefore I suggest considering them as inseparable. Here I suggest that lust is a state of consciousness that integrates different levels of existence and experience, where the known physical body is the agent for the inaccessible unknown pieces, both in infancy and in adult sexual life. Since the body functions as the instrument by which all knowledge and information is received, our body and the mother’s body are meaningful aspects of the connection to that which we cannot grasp, the unreachable parts of the mother, ourselves, and the world. The mother’s body then serves as a container for the Enigmatic elements, and the early connection to the mother serves as a bridge to other levels of existence. In that sense, when this container is shaky, there can be no holding of the enigmatic elements. Sexuality then might be reduced to becoming a portal through which one tries to repair but instead actually relives distress and overarousal.

In some respects, what I have tried to rework in this chapter is what would have been talked about in the classical tradition as the split between Oedipal or genital versus pre-Oedipal, oral, anal, or phallic sexuality. Freud and the classical analysts who followed him understood that sex was used for self-regulation, but they would have conceptualized that as pre-genital or narcissistic (autoerotic). Their analytic goal was to help the patient develop toward an Oedipal form of sexuality that included object relatedness. Here I have tried to transform the theory of sexuality from one of linear developmental progression from primitive to mature into a theory that maintains the dialectic tension between two non-hierarchical modes, and rethink the dialectical tension between attachment and sexuality, and

between linear/rationalistic and more mystical leaning traditions within psychoanalysis, addressing these splits that the field maintains.

Finally, as I believe every writing is on some level an enactment of its content, I am aware of the motion between Pragmatic and Enigmatic contents, as well as of patterns of sexual arousal and regulation that are part of this chapter. Writing about the inaccessible parts of existence, the mysterious and enigmatic pieces of sexuality, inherently includes vagueness and abstract contents. In the same way, writing and reading on sexuality, I find that most papers tend to use words as a way to regulate the reader and writer and protect from the erotic through the use of distanced and “professional” jargon and the overintellectualized presentation of sexual material.

While writing, I found myself struggling with these same feelings—swinging from feeling overaroused and exposed to using ideas as a way to distance, process, and regulate. In retrospect, I notice the movement between moments of sexual stimulation and arousal to use of theory, between focus on the body to use of the mind. And while I’m aware that this was an unconscious way to relive the contents I am writing about, I believe we often experience the same movement as analysts trying to regulate ourselves and our patients when the erotic pervades the analytic space.

Notes

1 These binaries are linked to the split between attachment and sexuality, the sensual and the sexual, and other related binaries—especially the one between intrapsychic and interpersonal—but also between the pre-Oedipal and the Oedipal, dark and light, innocence versus perverse, tenderness versus aggression, and more (see more in Aron & Starr, 2013). The split between attachment and infantile sexuality that psychoanalytic thinkers across orientations often identify (Salomonsson, 2007, 2012; Zamanian, 2011) goes back early in the history of psychoanalysis to the tension between external and internal reality, which was explicit in psychoanalysis ever since Freud abandoned the seduction theory. Our field has for a century now steadily moved away from the concept of infantile sexuality in favor of attachment as the central component in psychological development (Diamond et al., 2007). Bowlby (1982) suggests that attachment and sexuality are two separate but overlapping behavioral systems. He does not focus on the connection between sex and physical pleasure, but rather on attachment as a separate behavioral system. Attachment is perceived as a fear-based system, distinct from sexuality. Andre Green (1995) is one of the figures most identified with the proscribing of empirical work on infancy and the observational approach to attachment, holding the belief that any interest in work on early dyads, infant observation, and attachment is not psychoanalysis. While the anti-infancy group seems driven by politics and sectarian battles in psychoanalysis, the other side seems often theological, eschewing sexuality rather thoroughly, or retaining sensuality for a pre-Oedipal position and sexuality for the Oedipal phase.

- 2 It’s not an accident that God is described as a rock (Aron, personal communication in 2012).
- 3 I’m drawing on a variety of psychoanalytic traditions, some of which are rooted in Freud’s energetic hydraulic model, as well as in a psychological, intersubjective hermeneutic model.
- 4 I believe Freud insisted that he was talking about psychosexuality and was not willing to limit his ideas to sensuality, because he repeatedly understood and ignored the pull to reduce the sexual to something less enigmatic and foreign (see Zamanian, 2011).
- 5 This is in contrast to Deleuze (1994), who claims that desire does not emanate from lack but is rather rooted in abundance.
- 6 “The Thing” is *la chose* in French and *das Ding* in German. The term has a long philosophical history from Aristotle to Heidegger, unknowable in itself. It is originally related to the pleasure principle and to the mother, which is the object of incest. It’s the forbidden good, the primordial unforgettable lost object.
- 7 The way I understand it, outside of the unconscious means that it is part of existence but not necessarily an active part of the mind.
- 8 See Kristeva (1982) and the connection of the maternal body to the abject. Kristeva notes that abjection is fundamentally related to death and to the place where meaning collapses, where “I am not.” She differentiates the symbolic meaning or knowledge of death from the nonsymbolic *experience* of one’s own death, and notes that abjection represents a revolt against that which gave us our own existence or state of being, and is therefore related to the mother’s body.
- 9 Quotation from *Sula* by Toni Morrison, from Slavin (2011).
- 10 See the dialectic in the mystical tradition of Cabbalah, where materiality contains spiritual space and spiritual space contains materiality, both ways. Even physical sex is always for the purpose of bringing about God’s unification—a cosmic spiritual primal scene.