Opening What Has Been Closed, Relaxing What Has Been Clenched: Dissociation and Enactment Over Time in Committed Relationships

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I use dissociation and the concept of the multiple self to link Mitchell’s profound insight with Goldner’s critique. In the process, I use the idea of dissociation to think about the nature of different kinds of long-term relationships.

Near the end of her essay, Goldner summarizes Mitchell’s view, one with which she agrees: “Fueled by all these wellsprings from within, grown-up love hardly needs a ‘dose of the exotic’ to keep it alive and kicking. … It is boredom and deadness that we manufacture—by collusive, unconscious design.” Mitchell tells us that intimacy and passion become less intense over the long term (again in Goldner’s words) “not because they are safe and comfortable, but because they are dangerous and risky.” Dependence on the loved one grows over time, and so the longer the relationship, the greater the risk there is in maintaining openness to the other. In response to this increasing danger, people hole up inside themselves, sacrificing passion for the safety and security of domestic (ated) love. But, Mitchell said, if you can take the risk of feeling the real extent of your dependence on your lover, you find that you don’t know him or her as well as you may think you do. You discover that the other is forever unfamiliar in ways that you encounter unexpectedly. The loved one is not the fully known companion from whom surprises can safely be assumed to have ceased arising, but (in Mitchell’s metaphor) *terra incognita*.

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As creative and right an analysis as Goldner and all the rest of us see this is as soon as we read it, most of us also agree with Goldner that Mitchell’s argument has an unexpectedly one-person cast. As Mitchell portrayed them, conflicts over safety and openness to love and danger seem intrapsychic, almost as if the relationship itself isn’t the point, but only the medium in which the conflict is played out. Now, of course, this is exactly the kind of thinking that led Mitchell to put pen to paper in the very beginning of his writing career, and so I think we can say with a good deal of certainty that, upon reading Goldner’s analysis of his views and her amendment of them, he would smack palm to forehead, laugh, and wonder how in the world he could have managed to miss what she saw. We can also imagine that he would have been as delighted as he was dismayed, because with Mitchell the ideas always came first. His honesty, intellectual and otherwise, was uncompromising. He didn’t mind others’ disagreement with him at all, once he had decided he was right (though he had no patience with disagreement when it was disrespectful), and he was very interested in understanding those who disagreed with him. And so Goldner’s combination of admiration and disagreement, and her grappling with the problems Mitchell left untheorized, comprise a much more fitting tribute to Mitchell’s approach to psychoanalytic thinking than would a simpler idealization.

After reading Goldner’s commentary, and in the interest of making some kind of sense out of why Mitchell seemed to adopt in this one instance the kind of perspective that he otherwise argued against, I went back and re-read not only the paper by Mitchell that begins the current issue but the revision of that paper that serves as the first chapter of Can Love Last? (2002), Mitchell’s final book. In that chapter (though not in the paper), Mitchell starts with the case of Brett, who “can’t seem to find a woman with whom he can sustain his desire” (p. 31). In light of Goldner’s discussion, the placement of this clinical material right at the beginning of the book caught my attention. On the face of it, it was a strange choice. If one were to read only the book chapter and not the version of the essay that preceded it, one might very well be left with the impression that Mitchell had begun to think through the issue of maintaining romance inside a romantic relationship by considering the psychology of someone who can’t get into one at all, someone who, in the term Goldner uses, is in “defensive lockdown.”

1But whereas Goldner’s use of “defensive lockdown” refers to a mutual process going on between the members of a couple, Brett’s lockdown, because it eventually happens with every woman he meets, is what we might be more likely to call characterological.
Finding Brett at the opening of Mitchell's book on love and romance helped me to identify the theme I explore here. Brett has a different kind of problem than do those people in long-term relationships who sometimes have trouble (in another of Goldner's apt phrases) "getting back to the bedroom." Brett has a consistent inhibition. He is rigid. His capacity to stay sexually connected to a lover doesn't rise and fall according to context, as sexual life does in a long-term relationship. He is simply interested until he's not, and then the passion is over and gone; because of that, because of its rigidity, its structural quality, its (relative) lack of responsiveness to context, it is especially easy to fall into thinking about Brett's problem in terms that can sound one-person. Brett is staying at such a distance from the unavoidable and continuous oedipal themes in his relationships with his lovers that he doesn't really engage in the struggle.

In referring to "oedipal themes" and "struggle," I am thinking of Goldner's riff on the recent paper by Davies (2003) in which a successful outcome of the oedipal situation is conceived not just as the acceptance that one can never win but as the acceptance that one will both lose and win. The oedipal conflict is not successfully resolved by accepting defeat but by becoming strong and self-respecting enough to accept instead a lifelong and vitalizing engagement in the themes of love and rejection. The child who knows that she is loved by a parent who often or even usually chooses his spouse—but who sometimes chooses the child, too—grows up to be a relationship partner able to thrive within admiration and love and to tolerate rejection and narcissistic wounds without being badly thrown. These are the lucky people who "remember" that they are loved even when love is not immediately present. Love is the background condition for them, the affective atmosphere within which the most important relationships take place. When their partners are rejecting, they are disappointed and hurt, but they are not left in suspense about the future. Unlike Brett, that is, people who are actually in relationships, at least those who are in relationships that are not in lockdown, find their way through this oedipal terrain—to and fro between intimacy/sexual desire and distance/hurt/relative lack of interest—over and over again, struggling with the other person (old and new, parent and lover) in different ways at different times.

It is quite a different thing to have problems in a relationship than it is to be unable to get into one in the first place, and so perhaps it's a mistake to

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3See also a recent paper in which Pizer (2004) used Davies's ideas to invent a concept he called "the paradoxical analytic triangle," a tool to use in thinking about about the interrelatedness of the loving feelings and rejections in a very long treatment.
place both the engagement of struggle and the avoidance of it under the same rubric. Not all difficulties in maintaining sexual feeling are the same. The back-and-forth of engagement tends to be more existential and contextual than avoidance, and habitual avoidance tends to be more neurotic and rigid than engagement.

So the problem I set myself here is this: How can we think, relationally and simultaneously, about both kinds of problems—about the rigidities of the Bretts of this world on one hand, and on the other the changing issues between couples in relationship? Is there a single relational frame of reference that encompasses desire as both fluid and contextual, and as structural and relatively unchanging?

As I thought about this question, I found myself drawn to the subject of dissociation, and it is to that topic that I turn now, with the intention of using these ideas to flesh out Mitchell’s basic insight and link it more soundly to Goldner’s. My digression is lengthy and detailed, but bear with me: By taking this detour, I am able to return to the problem at hand from a different perspective.

**Bad-Me, Good-Me, Not-Me**

In the terms I like to use, both kinds of difficulties—the struggles of engagement and the ongoing status quo of individual characterological inhibition—relate closely to how broad and/or deep an experience of self one can tolerate. The language that suits this kind of thinking is the language of self-states; so we might say that both the emotional oscillation of engagement and the defensive lockdown of habitual avoidance can be described in terms of the degree to which one has the freedom to move about between states of mind.

In what Bromberg (1998) called “normal” dissociation, other people’s participation interacts with one’s own tendencies, predilections, and inner life in such a way that access between self-states that are otherwise simultaneously present in mind is temporarily disrupted. This is what might happen, for instance, when someone unexpectedly shames us for something with which we are usually quite familiar in ourselves but which we don’t particularly like. Taken by surprise, we might react with heat, attributing the disliked characteristic to the other person and feeling wrongly accused. Or, in even more everyday terms, perhaps we frequently walk around with a fairly good opinion of ourselves, our good points in the foreground of our minds, our less savory aspects outside immediate awareness. But when
called on to acknowledge what we don’t like about ourselves, it is relatively easy for us to do so. It may require a spouse’s irritation, or an analyst’s interpretation, and we may be grudging about it—but we know these things about ourselves, and we can tolerate them. Normal dissociation is relative, and often situational. The need for it is less than urgent. It makes life more comfortable, that’s all. These mild dissociations are therefore remedied with relative ease, sometimes simply by a shift in the circumstances that provoked them in the first place (for a clinical example, see Stern, 2004).

In Sullivan’s (1953) terms, we could say that normal dissociation takes place when the the part of me that I have come to feel as “bad,” the bad-me, cannot be experienced simultaneously with the part of me I feel as “good,” the good-me. Bad-me is the part of myself I associate with the criticism, punishment, and rejection of my caretakers in childhood (at a certain point, Sullivan said the child characterizes these caretakers collectively as bad-mother), and good-me is the part of me that was loved, valued, accepted, and praised (by all those parts of caretakers characterized collectively as good-mother). Even if I don’t like being bad-me or am worried about the consequences (a drop in self-esteem, or security, according to Sullivan), I do feel that I am being myself when I am either good-me or bad-me; so even if I am reluctant to experience good-me and bad-me simultaneously, I have little difficulty doing so. It is not as rewarding to be bad-me, of course; it may even be unpleasant. I may resent the circumstances in which I seem to have no choice but to be particularly aware of being bad-me, and at times I may feel that the pain of acknowledging this side of me is more than I will accept. But my unconscious defensive refusal to acknowledge being bad-me (which amounts to insisting I am only good-me) is usually temporary, and if it lasts longer, it is easily breached—because bad-me does still feel like me. Dissociations between bad-me and good-me are frequent, but they are hardly crucial to the continued secure existence of the personality, and so they are easily destabilized.

Now if you add to these ideas the relatively uncontroversial clinical observation that dissociated states tend to be enacted (e.g., Bromberg, 1998, 2006; Davies and Frawley, 1994; Stern, 2004), you can see that dissociations between good-me and bad-me are generally translated into treatment of the other that conveys something like this: “I am not bad-me, I am only good-me. You are bad, not me.”

If we then translate this scenario into the contemporary oedipal terms used by Davies (2003), Goldner (this issue), and Pizer (2004), we find ourselves, when we temporarily cannot accept rejection from the other, treating the other in a way that conveys something like the following: “I am the
loving, generous, reasonable, intelligent, attractive boy my mother adored, not the selfish, angry, unreasonable, stupid, ugly boy (or the inadequate boy who mother thought was “less” than father) from whom she turned away. No, the bad one is you—you are the selfish, angry, etc. one, the inadequate one, the outrageous one, not me."

Although intimate sex is not well served by these minor dissociations, it is also not likely to be precluded for too long at a time either. As wewend our way back and forth from simplified, wishful, and often angry characterizations of ourselves and our lovers to more complex and tolerant observations, we first avoid the bedroom and then slip back into it. These are the ups and downs of sex and love in a long relationship. The crucial thing that allows us to to return to intimacy each time is our reclaiming of the capacity to tolerate the experience of good-me and bad-me simultaneously, which amounts to accepting the conflict between these two portrayals of ourselves (I am neither as good as I want to be nor as bad as I sometimes fear I am); and that acceptance allows us to recapture an acceptance of our conflicting perceptions of the other in the same way.

The terms Sullivan invents to describe the aspects of ourselves that we like and dislike are very simple. (I wish he had always kept his language this clear!) But their simplicity is deceptive. Consider the degree of complexity introduced as soon as we admit into the picture the fact that all dissociations are conditional, that they are preserved or challenged by the interpersonal context in which they take place. That is, if the other is able to sense nondefensively his or her response to being treated as bad, and then bring it

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3I have written elsewhere (Stern, 2003, 2004) in more detail about the relationship I outline here between conflict, dissociation, and enactment. I know that this set of ideas immediately brings to mind the modern Kleinian view of projective identification. The differences revolve around the origin of psychoanalytic theories of dissociation in interpersonal and relational psychoanalysis. That is, a dissociation can only be enacted if the roles that constitute it are relevant in the psychic lives of both participants. The modern Kleinian analyst is generally expected to be able to experience the impact of the patient’s projections while simultaneously maintaining a purposeful, conscious analytic stance toward them. The analyst, that is, is not expected to become lost or embedded in the countertransference. From interpersonal and relational perspectives, on the other hand, it is acknowledged from the outset that the analyst’s task is to learn the nature of his quite thorough, and quite personal, unconscious involvement, which has always already taken place. There is no consistently maintained “analyst part” that somehow exists above the fray. This makes the analysis of transference and countertransference (and by implication, the understanding of problems in romantic relationships, as well) into what Mitchell (1997) called “bootstrap operations.” (For more a detailed explication of the difference between these two views, see Mitchell, 1997, and Stern, 2001, 2005).
to mutual attention, the interaction will not turn into a mutual enactment at all.

But if one's partner in the relationship is vulnerable to a reciprocal, answering dissociation ("You think I'm bad? No way, it's you who's bad"), a mutual enactment is off and running. It will end only when one partner or the other can find his way back to an internal experience of the conflict between what he feels is good and bad about him- or herself. Once he is capable of that conflict again, he quite automatically treats the other person differently, because he no longer has to control the other's perception. At that point, the dissociation, with its accompanying enactment, which was mild in the first place, vanishes, at least for the time being.

But in the case of "pathological dissociation" (Bromberg, 1998) or "dissociation in the strong sense" (Stern, 1997), the consequences for the relationship are much greater. This is the dissociation that comes into play when certain kinds of experience are specifically and continuously disallowed; this is dissociation being used in a way that is much more analogous than "normal" dissociation to defense as it has been traditionally understood. In instances demanding "strong" or "pathological" dissociation, the disallowed experience is so intolerable that, despite its presence within the very broad bounds of subjectivity, it is not acknowledged as part of the self (it is not me) and therefore cannot be articulated in awareness—it cannot be felt as one's own—without fairly severe, disruptive consequences. This is neither good-me nor bad-me; this is what Sullivan called not-me (see also Chefetz and Bromberg, 2004). Unlike the relationship between parts of me, there is no experience of conflict between me and not-me. Not-me must simply be absent, forever unsymbolized. In the most vulnerable people, whose defenses are the most rigid, this absence of simultaneous experience of me and not-me is sometimes absolute; if certain not-mes (we each have many) emerge in consciousness, requiring the recognition that I am what I cannot and must not be, the self is so seriously threatened and destabilized that experience can become psychotic. The emergence of not-mes in consciousness does not carry the same degree of danger for more stable and flexible personalities, of course, but even they are unable to access or symbolize that part of their subjectivity at will; for them, too, it therefore can be strange (Sullivan's word was "uncanny") and excruciating to find themselves faced with not-me.

Children, we know, develop their capacity to digest experience slowly, over time. It takes many years of continuous, loving care for a child to develop a sophisticated enough capacity for experiencing that he is no longer continuously vulnerable to being overwhelmed by events of everyday life.
that will eventually become routine. Prior to the development of that
degree of resilience, and especially in infancy, the child is dependent on his
caretakers to contain and symbolize experience for him. In those early
years, experience is traumatic to the precise extent that the child’s caretak-
ers cannot bear it, cannot let themselves consciously and fully experience
it. The child is vulnerable to trauma, that is, whenever the parent is forced
to confront not-me. When the parent cannot stand to feel the experience,
the child, who only knows what his own experience is if the caretaker is ca-
pable of bearing it (feeling it, knowing it), is deprived of what he needs if he
is to create his own mind; over time, this kind of experience becomes as dis-
nociated for the child as it has been for the caregiver. This is not the kind of
dissociation that comes and goes, like the temporary and relatively mild
dissociations between good-me and bad-me; this is a stable, foundational
kind of dissociation around which the personality comes to be shaped.

We hope, of course, that parents manage to experience their most un-
comfortable moments, their not-mes, without great anxiety, because then
the child himself will eventually be able to take on the same capacity. In
those fortunate instances, the experience ends up feeling to the child like
“mine,” and what could have become not-me becomes me instead. Child-
hood is an apprenticeship in the creation of mind, and one’s caretakers are
the masters of the guild.\footnote{This description is more or less consistent with
the thinking of Winnicott and Bion, but it probably has most in common with
(besides Sullivan) Fonagy et al. (2002), whose work might serve as a detailed exegesis of
Sullivan’s (1953) developmental theory of infancy and
childhood, a possibility that, as far as I know, Fonagy and his collaborators have not noted.
Sullivan wrote over and over again that the self is made of reflected appraisals. Compare
Fonagy et al., who also made this point repeatedly: “At the core of our selves is the repre-
sentation of how we were seen” (p. 348). Or “At the core of the mature child’s self is the other at
the moment of reflection” (p. 380).}  

In the model proposed by Fonagy et al. (2002), mind is conceived to be
created by the interaction of the infant’s inborn potentials (the “primary” or
“constitutional” self) with caregivers’ provision of a sensitive mirroring re-
sponse to what they believe they can understand of the infant’s affects and
intentions. It is the caretakers’ mirroring that structures the infant’s inborn
somatosensory experience into the experience of affects, and eventually
into the capacity for a deeper and more thorough reflective processing
(mentalization) of the causal mind states (affects and intentions) that lie
behind the infant’s own behavior and the behavior of other people. The dis-
tinctive aspect of this way of thinking is its jettisoning of the Cartesian priv-
ilege of internal experience. In most models of the development of self,
mind is assumed and inborn, and so the development of mental representations of self and others, and the ego structures that make representation possible in the first place, are an expansion of this inborn capacity. The radical aspect of the model proposed by Fonagy et al., and the aspect that makes it especially relevant here, is that mind is not assumed and inborn: It is created from the outside in. The mind that results is sophisticated to the degree that early caretakers’ mirroring responses correspond to the structures of the constitutional self.

The model proposed by Fonagy and his collaborators also results in an understanding of the therapeutic situation remarkably similar to the one I have presented elsewhere and referenced here (Bromberg, 1998, 2006; Stern, 2003, 2004). There are differences as well, though. I addressed both in a recent paper (Stern, in press).

The (pathological) dissociation between me and not-me is maintained in the same way as the (normal) dissociation between good-me and bad-me: by enactment. But because the dissociation of me and not-me is continuous and absolute, not contextual and relative, and because one’s sense of basic security in the world depends on maintaining these dissociations, the enactments that derive from the separations between me and not-me are more rigid, intense, and urgent, and less amenable to change or resolution, than the enactments that support the dissociation of good-me and bad-me.

It is the enactments of pathological dissociation that are written about most often in the contemporary psychoanalytic literature of the psychoanalytic situation. These are the enactments that can lead to impasse, and even to failed treatments. Just as in the case of the enactments that support normal dissociation, the problem in pathological dissociation and the enactments created in its image is that the patient and the analyst each can experience only one side of a conflict: the conflict is split between them like the two halves of a broken plate (Stern, 2004). In normal dissociation, remember, I am good-me and you are bad-me; the enactment becomes difficult only when the other cannot accept the way he is being treated and reciprocates by behaving in a way that conveys, in effect, “No, you are bad-me and I am good-me.” The enactment resolves, and can be used analytically, as soon as one of the participants can feel the way he is being treated and symbolize it for himself. In schematic form, an enactment, from the analyst’s perspective, might go something like this: “You’re treating me as if I’m not a nice guy (bad-me). But I am a nice guy (good-me). You’re unfair to me (you’re bad).” The enactment resolves as soon as the analyst can say to himself something like this: “I am feeling the patient doesn’t appreciate my
good points and it's making me feel defensive, and I seem to need to convince the patient otherwise. But what exactly would be so intolerable if I weren't so nice, anyway? Why do I seem to need to deny it? Whether or not I happen to think the patient is right in this particular instance, is this something about myself that I don't accept?" As the analyst accepts bad-me (for this moment, anyway), new internal conflict is created. He becomes able to see and understand the patient's feelings and to use his own response to them as a means to fuller experiencing and wiser practice.

Now let me run through the analogous situation that obtains in pathological dissociation, in which I am me and you are cast as not-me. The enactment becomes dangerous only when the other feels (and reciprocally enacts) "No, I am not what you are treating me as if I am, because if I were, I would not be myself, I would be not-me. But I am me; it is you who embody what is not—what must not be—me."

The enactment of me and not-me might be experienced by the analyst something like this: "You're attacking me as if I were some kind of monster (not-me). But I'm no monster, and I'm doing my damndest not only to get along with you, but even to be decent to you (I'm me) in the face of your insulting paranoid treatment (you're the monster)." The enactment ends only when one of the participants can say to himself, "Well, what if I am acting like a monster? Is that so impossible? Why can't I even consider it? What is that about? Maybe this is a part of me I can't tolerate." Notice that as one participant or the other comes to this point, new conscious conflict is created: Me expands and not-me contracts. The change is perhaps temporary, but over time, as the therapeutic couple works through the problem repeatedly, the selves of each participant sustain the growth.

**Enactment, Dependence, and Knowing Your Partner**

This theory of dissociation and enactment, I think, is a route to understanding Mitchell's insight in a more fully relational way and is also a means by which we can link it to Goldner's more contextual ideas.

In an ongoing love relationship, what is our dependence on our partner, after all? Don't we come to rely on that person (among other things) to be the same as he or she has been, to deal with us in the ways with which we are accustomed, ways that perhaps we have come to need? Why might we need this familiarity? Mightn't our lover's familiarity allow us to preserve our own? Mightn't it be the case, as Benjamin (1988, 1995, 1998) tells us,
that we need our lovers to recognize in us what we recognize in ourselves (and to leave unrecognized in us what we prefer not to see)? Mightn't that recognition from the other give us the reassurance that we are who we want to believe we are and that we will continue to be—and that we are not who we prefer not to be? Mightn't our lover's sameness, in other words, allow us predictable, reliable experiences of good-me and bad-me? Mightn't we be involved, that is, in long-term enactments of good-me and bad-me, enactments that preserve the stability and comfort of both partners? And mightn't our familiarity with our lovers, in just the same way, reinforce their sense of who they are aren't, their sense of self?

Oh sure, I might have to put up with certain rather predictable discomforts. It may make us feel and act angry, for instance, to think that we live with someone who will never acknowledge being in the wrong, and the expression of that anger may be pretty uncomfortable, making us feel guilty. We may, in fact, blame the other person for that, too, right along with their unwillingness to acknowledge responsibility. But this discomfort is a small price to pay, perhaps, for having a reliable means of reassuring ourselves of being good-me. (I'm not bad, you are.)

These enactments take time to fall into place and become habitual, which is one reason for the immense sense of freedom and excitement everyone has at the beginning of a new relationship. We are raw and open at the beginning, and the themes of oedipal struggle occupy us fully and intensely. (Does she like my hair? I think she likes me! She's incredibly exciting, and it's so wonderful that she seems excited by me! Is she angry at me? Does she love me? Maybe she really wants to be with him.)

The hopes, fears, exultations, and despairs at the beginning have a special intensity, but as painful as those first weeks and months can be, they are also one of the most exciting parts of life. Lovers are less intimate at the beginning than they will be later on, but ironically they also can be less defended. Their openness to being affected by hurt or admiration (for instance) may be greater than it will become. They are more free to be completely delighted with one another. They know each less well, love each other much less deeply, and yet in certain respects are perhaps at their most thoroughly available to one another.

But what happens to that ongoing struggle, to involvement and change and engagement, as we come to depend on sameness, on the enactments that develop over time? The answer to that question we already know from Goldner: Struggle dims. There is less and less change, life stays close to the baseline. We reassure ourselves that the other's mind is completely mapped. We become locked into patterns of enactment.
Of course, this is an extreme characterization. Goldner’s is more subtle. She recognizes that, in most relationships, the struggle does go on, even if it dims, and there may be as many moments of spontaneity as there are pallid repetitions of the familiar. The point I want to make is that, to the extent that we become dependent on characteristic enactments of good-me and bad-me, the vitality of the struggle and the excitement it generates diminish over time.

Of course, if these points make sense for good-me and bad-me, how much more must they be true for me and not-me? How much more dependent must we be on our partners and spouses to maintain the enactments that protect us from an exposure to what we cannot be, must not be? The least fortunate people, in the service of protecting themselves from the experience of the uncanny, tolerate continuously relationships that are deadly and boring or hateful and destructive.

It seems reasonable to say that relationships in defensive lockdown are more likely than others to be cemented by enactments of pathological dissociation, those in which the relationship must stay the same if the mes of its participants are to remain safely isolated from their not-mes. Relationships in which the oedipal struggle is alive and kicking (probably the majority), on the other hand, are at least partly maintained by the security offered by habitual enactments of normal dissociation. It is primarily these relationships we would expect to be most open to change, to giving up the old ways, because breaking up their enactments should lead to nothing more dire than discomfort.

**Back to Brett**

But what about Mitchell’s patient, Brett, the man with whom Mitchell (2002) began *Can Love Last?* What about the people who can’t get into relationships in the first place? Brett, remember, started relationships with great excitement and passion but could sustain those feelings only temporarily. As he lost his passion, he also began wanting to see other women, who were often unavailable, and the first relationship would end. He was tortured by this pattern, which he felt helpless to change. Said Mitchell, “Brett’s difficulties derived from his inability to integrate love and desire. This is a very common problem” (p. 33). It is with this seemingly traditional formulation that the book began.

We all agree, of course: It is a common problem. The problem here is not the observation, it is the terms in which the observation is couched. With
the background of dissociation theory, I would now say that Brett was hardly unable to get into relationships: He got into them all the time! (I'm reminded of Mark Twain's famous quip that quitting smoking was the easiest thing he'd ever done, that he'd done it hundreds of times.) The problem was that Brett was able to allow relationships to go only one way: He was stuck in a rigid pattern with his partners, and the particular nature of this pattern made relationships too dangerous once a certain level of intimacy was reached. Mitchell tells us that Brett felt so distressed and helpless about this problem that it was his primary motive to enter treatment, so I think we can speculate pretty safely that what lay behind the relationship pattern was the avoidance of not-me, not bad-me. If Brett had been able to stand experiencing whatever stopped him from taking relationships any further than he did, he would have gone ahead and experienced it, because he was suffering over the problem and badly wanted it to change. If it was self-experience (bad-me) that he was turning away from, it seems likely that his motivation would have allowed him to own both sides of the conflict between good and bad inside himself. He would have been able to disrupt the enactments that had maintained the dissociations, because the worst consequence would have been the experience of part of himself he didn't like. Because Brett couldn't do any of this, though, as badly as he might have wished to do so, we imagine that it was something more dreadful that Brett was keeping at bay, something that did not feel to him like him at all.

Perhaps, just for the sake of illustration, Brett's mother was intensely exciting but was herself so terrorized by her loving feelings that Brett's infantile expressions of love and his need for hers simply fell outside her range of perception, off the radar. In this scenario, that is, Brett had a version of what André Green (1983) calls a "dead mother," one in whose eyes and mind the baby is unable to find himself. Mother's dissociation of her loving feelings, and her enactment of the same deadness to love she herself had experienced as a baby and child, provoked Brett's own dissociation. No child can grasp his love and his need for it in the absence of a response to it.

So, in this scenario, Brett's loving feelings become not-me. He perpetually looks for his exciting mother, and he finds her over and over in his lustful adventures, but these new mother-women face him with the dilemma that they often can love, and they provoke Brett's inchoate affection for them and his desire for the return of this feeling, for what his mother could neither experience in her own life or offer to him. The long dormant desire, if Brett were to be forced to experience it now, would fall into the realm of the uncanny—dreadful, frightening, or even loathsome.
So as soon as Brett begins to feel slight stirrings of affection for the women he meets, or the whiff of a desire for their love of him, he loses interest, begins to characterize them as dull, and feels like moving on. We do not know from Mitchell anything about the response of the women Brett sees, but we can guess that Brett’s growing feeling that they are dull and boring dampens whatever affection they might have been in the process of developing, thereby closing the circle and giving Brett that much more reason to be afraid the next time around. If Brett is to find his way into a relationship that lasts, one with mutual love, it will only be through the repeated appearance and transcendence of just this kind of enactment between him and his analyst. In a successful treatment, Brett would become more and more able to tolerate a conscious internal conflict between his love and his desire for love, on one hand, and his terror of putting himself in the position of feeling those very things, on the other.

The only difference between Brett and the unfortunate souls I referred to earlier who maintain relationships of the most hateful and destructive kinds is that the enactments Brett gets into do not lock him into relationships, they end them. So we can say, in answer to the problem I set myself at the beginning, that although the problems in basically loving and satisfying relationships often derive from the enactment of mutual dissociations of good-me and bad-me, problems such as Brett’s, and those damaging relationships that seem to be maintained on some other basis than love, are likely to be the outcomes of the enactment of mutual pathological dissociation—the mutual dissociative sequestering of me and not-me. In fewer words: Through dissociation theory, I have tried to find the resonance of Mitchell’s theme (safety and adventure) in Goldner’s (the continuing oedipal struggle), and vice versa.

One final caveat, however. I don’t want to leave the impression that in long-term relationships the healing of pathology is the only route to the discovery of terra incognita in the other. There is also such a thing as courage: courage to challenge the status quo in the interest of “more life” (Corbett, 2001), courage to formulate and think about the stories we are always implicitly telling ourselves about our lives, courage to imagine all those other stories, about our partners and ourselves that, merely because we are so attached to the stories we do tell, we are continuously in the process of occluding. The danger accompanying this kind of open and accepting experiencing, as Mitchell said, is the danger of sacrificing security, and it is true more often than not that, over time, security does trump desire. But it is not always that way. When it is not, when freedom and desire win, it is because we are willing to put ourselves at risk by experiencing more readily and deeply than before what we don’t like about ourselves—or, in the most sig-
significant instances, what we have not until this uncomfortable moment even been able to imagine is ourselves.

REFERENCES


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