ROBERT J. STOLLER

SEXUAL EXCITEMENT

Dynamics of Erotic Life

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SEXUAL EXCITEMENT
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SEXUAL EXCITEMENT

Dynamics of Erotic Life

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Introduction

This is a study of sexual excitement. It is the fifth book—perhaps more accurately, the fifth chapter in one work—on masculinity and femininity (gender identity), carrying forward ideas examined in my last book, *Perversion*. As many have noted since Freud said it decades ago, it is so difficult to draw a line between excitement one can call "perverse" and normal excitement that the word "normal" loses definition. The woman to be described in these pages exemplifies that observation, for her life has not been one of disorder and pathology nor her sexual experiences outside the range expected in our society. Only her fantasy life sounds odd, and even that impression weakens in the light of the kinds of daydreams in which most people indulge. This is not to say she is not unique or was not unhappy. She certainly had plenty of experience with anxiety and sadness; and since she caused most of it herself, she was a good candidate for analysis.

One day when she was well into her treatment, she mentioned an erotic daydream in which she was being raped by a horse while a group of silent men watched, the performance controlled by a sadistic Director. I gradually learned that this was by far the dominant scenario for her sexual excitement; by the end of our work together, we knew rather well when and how it was created. Her analysis tests an idea: she condensed into a favorite script the story of her erotic life. This led to a broader hypothesis, laid out long ago by Freud,[1] that people in general have a paradigmatic erotic scenario—played in a daydream, or in choice of pornography, or in object choice, or simply in actions (such as styles of intercourse)—the understanding of which will enable us to understand the person. I shall try to show that the function of daydreams is to state a problem that has been disguised and then to solve it, the problem and the solution being the poles between which excitement flows.

A task necessary for the success of her treatment and for understanding her erotism was to find why, out of all the stories she could have used, she invented this one; why did this plot, and not others, excite her? And since we are trying to understand sexual excitement better, we can also ask why her fantasy would not suit others as it did her.

In this book, I shall tease out, from the immeasurable tangle that makes up an analysis, the theme of her sexual excitement. I shall try to show how her prototypic erotic daydream was invented and rewritten until it took on the form necessary for her adult sexual life. I shall also describe how the analytic process dissolved the fantasy by softening the demands that underlay it.

Masculinity and femininity make a roomy subject; one can ramble therein for decades, doing research without suffering the claustrophobia that leads to careful experiments, proper statistics, and other demands of a scientific conscience. For a while, my focus was on people with chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomic abnormalities of maleness and femaleness. Then came a stage of seeing as many people as possible with any sort of gender disorder, often without biologic defect. Of course, one cannot just observe patients as if one's office were a museum; I become involved with and then treat them and their families. At that point, fascinating syndromes turn into people with motivations; the biologist contracts.

But studying adults has its limitations, even with psychoanalysis. Because the adult patient, as any analyst knows, points to childhood, I began to look more and more at children and their families. Preferring to use analysis (though I believe other therapies are effective), and having no great skill in dealing with other people's children, nowadays when studying gender disorders I treat one of the parents while colleagues treat the child and, if possible, the other parent.

Some patients were perverse. However, I was not interested in perversions per se but only in aberrations that illuminated gender identity issues. Still, one can work for just so long with perverse people before beginning to wonder about the structure of perversions.

In brief, I found that hostility—the urge to harm one's sexual object—was a central dynamic in the sexual excitement I called "perverse." There is not much challenge in looking for hostility—it is so blatant—in some of the perversions, such as sadomasochism, so I tried to test the hypothesis more vigorously with cases in which hostility was not at the surface. In the perversion called exhibitionism, for example, you will find, if you get to talk with an exhibitionist, that his purpose in displaying his genitals is not to seduce a woman into making love with him but rather to shock her. If she is upset—is embarrassed, becomes angry, runs away—and especially if she calls the police, he has, he feels, absolute proof that his genitals are important. When you learn that he is likely to exhibit himself following a humiliation earlier in the day, you will be alert to the hostile components he experiences in his excitement. For him, this sexual act serves as a kind of rape—a forced intrusion (at

least, that is how he fantasizes it) into the woman's sensibilities and delicacy. If he cannot believe that he has harmed her, the act has failed for him. (He is mortified by the woman who is amused, not shocked, at his show.) Therefore, we find that the exhibitionist displays himself to strange women, not to his wife, who could hardly feel assaulted by a view so ordinary. To show his wife his genitals would be to risk further humiliation, for he knows she would never respond dramatically to the sight, with outrage or a sense of being invaded.

His idea—his fantasy—of what is going on includes, then, the following features. He has done something hostile to a woman; he has been the active force, not the passive victim as he was earlier in the day when someone humiliated him. He has converted this trauma to a triumph, capped by his success in becoming sexually excited. In choosing a stranger as the object of his performance, he has protected himself from experiencing her as fully human. In other words, he has reduced her to a fetish. This idea that he is powerful, a dominating male who causes fear as he subdues a woman by the mere sight of his genitals, is, then, an illusion he has brought into the real world. He seems to be running great risks: he may be caught and arrested, his family and job put in jeopardy. But the true danger that perversion is to protect him from—that he is insignificant, unmanly—is not out there on the street but within him and therefore inescapable. It is so fundamental a threat that he is willing to run the lesser risk, that of being caught.

The search for the dynamics of perversion occupied me for a while. When I was no longer sure who was perverse and who not, that truism led me to study sexual excitement—not just in the perverse, but sexual excitement in general. And so this book, a main purpose of which is to show that the same factors, though in differing degrees and with different scripts, are present in excitements labeled perverse and in those considered normal.

Some of my thoughts on the dynamics of excitement started years ago (before I shifted from an ordinary analytic practice to one primarily involved with gender disorders), especially with the analysis of the woman—Belle—on whom this book is focused. In the years since her analysis ended, my ideas have become clearer. They are tentative and need testing, especially by other analyses, but they are, I hope, a useful start. A weakness in the development of these ideas is my leaving latent the theme of affection, tenderness, and love. Instead, perhaps blinded by the obvious, I have stressed the role of hostility in those people (most people, I think) who can become excited only if they have wounded—crippled—their capacity to love. What might have been—the ability to be intimate, friendly, generous, steadfast, and tender, and yet passionate

—is not considered herein. Still, my description makes sense only if we know we are considering an aberration: too many people have perverted their erotism.

Please concentrate on this; Genet has it right:

> Though it was at my heart's bidding that I chose the universe wherein I delight, I have at least the power of finding in it the many meanings I wish to find: *there is a close relationship between flowers and convicts.* The fragility and delicacy of the former are of the same nature as the brutal insensitivity of the latter. (My excitement is the oscillation from one to the other.) Should I have to portray a convict—or a criminal—I shall so bedeck him with flowers that, as he disappears beneath them, he will himself become a flower, a gigantic and new one. Toward what is known as evil, I lovingly pursued an adventure which led me to prison.[2]

Most of us, most of the time, feel of one piece. We do not notice the seams, though artists and analysts—by nature and profession—are more alert than many others (except, perhaps, psychotics) to the fact that the whole cloth is nonetheless made up of well-joined parts. Although some speak of ego, id, and superego, of inner objects, or of object representations, I want to underline what analysts since Freud and Melanie Klein have endlessly shown: that our mental life is experienced in the form of fantasies. These fantasies are present as scripts —stories—whose content and function can be determined. And I want to emphasize that what we call thinking or experiencing or knowing, whether it be conscious, preconscious, or unconscious, is a tightly compacted but nonetheless separable—analyzable—weave of fantasies. What we consciously think or feel is actually the algebraic summing of many simultaneous fantasies.

This position puts me on the side of those theorists who feel that psychoanalysis deals with meaning, not energy, and who insist that psychic energy and its resultant, psychic structure, are only metaphors, that meaning alone is the constant essence of mental function. Sex is not cathexis.

In accordance with this emphasis on meaning, I shall often talk of scripts, scenarios, scenes, daydreams, and fantasies. The connotations of these words overlap,[3] so let me indicate how they will be used. The generic is fantasy, the private meaning we give to each element of mental life. A fantasy can be conscious, preconscious (available to consciousness if desired), or unconscious (out of consciousness and not retrievable just by willing it there).[4] A script or scenario is a story line —a plot—complete with roles assigned to characters and a stream of action. When a script is conscious, it is, if private, either a spontaneous,

unwilled emergence or a daydream. If published, the daydream takes such forms as novels, nonfiction, plays, films, music, or paintings. Unconscious scripts can be deciphered by means of psychoanalysis, unearthed from their hiding places in character structure, neurotic symptoms, sexual behavior, posture, clothing—in any behavior.[5,6]

In my analytic practice and writing, I stress, as do all analysts, the recovery of unconscious or subliminal fantasies. But I try also to describe psychic function in ordinary rather than in technical language. The temptation to use the vocabulary of theory is great, because it seems more scientific than everyday speech. It is historically connected to Freud's great discoveries of unconscious thought, intrapsychic conflict, defense, and symptom formation and contrasts with the raucous, exuberant, unscholarly thinking of some who write about scripts and interpersonal transactions. Still, the language and study of scripts can yield knowledge not acquired with our more intellectualized thinking.

In his clinical work, the analyst deals with meaning, but when he wonders where meaning comes from, he considers historical, cultural, economic, parental, and other external sources; conditioning (though he does not call it that) or other related forces that impinge directly to modify the brain and peripheral nervous systems; and physiologic anlagen ("drives," "instincts"). These then take form in meaning: intrapsychic states of information-processing experienced as fantasies. From Freud on, analysts have tried to mesh these four factors into a general theory of psychology; that effort has been the business of metapsychology, but it has so far, I think, had no great success.

And so I have not reviewed the analytic literature on theory concerning the major subjects discussed in this book, such as sadomasochism, exhibitionism, or dissociationism—the belief that consciousness is not unitary, a study that antedates psychoanalysis. To do so would blur the focus on clinical matters. More important, I disagree with the emphasis in analytic theory on using undefined terms (such as "psychic energy") in constructing explanations. I cannot bring myself to such talk as "exhibitionism is the cathexis of the self (self-representation, etc.) with narcissistic libido." That seems such an awkward way to say that in exhibitionism one is strongly concentrated on oneself, hardly a stunning insight even when decked out with "cathexis" (especially because, at the rock bottom of theory, cathexis *is* narcissism). We should not use our analytic vocabulary to cover weaknesses we almost sense in our data or concepts.[7] I prefer to let clinical material be the major voice.

Cautions concerning writing style. First, I try to make myself visible to the reader, both in the way I am as a therapist and as I am when thinking about psychoanalytic theory. This can distract you from the

argument and to my idiosyncrasies. I do this, despite the obvious risks, for a research reason. As in my earlier books, I am still concerned about whether psychoanalysis is a science and whether and how one can do psychoanalytic research. Most analysts believe analysis is a science. I do not, so long as one essential is missing that is found in the disciplines accepted by others as sciences: to the extent that our data are accessible to no one else, our conclusions are not subject to confirmation. This does not mean that analysts cannot make discoveries, for scientific method is only one way to do that. But it does mean that the process of confirmation in analysis is ramshackle.

Second, there is no way to calibrate the primary research instrument of psychoanalysis, the analyst, so the audience has no reliable way to judge the accuracy of our work.[8] I worry that we cannot be taken seriously if we do not reveal ourselves more clearly. To do so, however, may lead to messy reporting (and confuse the readers, whose own fantasies may make them feel they are peeking in on forbidden scenes). No one but the analyst can know how much the uncertain process of fixing and editing the data renders this reporting enterprise a fiction. In regard to research, says David Shakow, "Love, cherish and respect the therapist—but for heaven's sake don't trust him."[9] Artists lie to tell the truth, and scientists tell the truth to lie.

The problem of reporting accurately on how one collected one's data as well as the problem of the true form the data took before being subjected to the cosmetics of editing is now acknowledged in the hard sciences. Historians and philosophers of science show us how often great discoveries *preceded* careful data-collecting; how the process of data-collecting can be slanted to guarantee a needed discovery; and how —in really sticky situations—people (Newton, for instance) fake their data. Our only defense against the rascals, including the inspired ones, is persistent application of the scientific method, which strives (as its practitioners sometimes fail to do) for incorruptible techniques of confirmation.

If only we could let the raw data stand free, even on shaky legs. But this throws a strain on the researcher as writer, for publication is a part of research, not an after-product; the moment I think about, let alone write about, what happened, data become opinions. Certainly in psychoanalytic reports, style becomes content.

Third, picturing the readers of this book as being both psychoanalysts and nonanalysts, I need to keep the different backgrounds in mind. At times, therefore, ideas or findings obvious to an analyst will be earnestly discussed rather than taken for granted. On another page, I shall wrestle with a subject that fascinates analysts but may seem

esoteric or trivial to others. (Usually, that is dealt with by burying it at the book's end.)

A few words about recording the data: I took shorthand notes (rather than tape-recording) to show the movement of the hour, writing exact quotations only for dreams or remarks by either of us that I thought, for whatever reason, were interesting enough to need literal transcription. These notes were the basis for the longer reports dictated onto tape each day. From these, years later, this study was built. (The manuscript in each draft and proof has been read and corrected by Belle, who has found it an interesting experience now she is no longer a patient.)

Subjective states of sexuality fall into two categories: gender identity and erotic desire. Inside us, the categories are merged, of course. But to ground the argument of this book, I shall separate the two in the first chapters, laying out hypotheses about their origins and dynamics. After a chapter on sexual excitement and another on gender identity, we can turn to the particular, the analysis of Belle, a rather normal woman by the standards of our society, who allowed me to know the script that underlay her sexual excitement.

In this way, I hope to suggest the dimensions of an area of behavior not yet systematically studied: *erotics.*

PART 1

Hypotheses on Sexuality