

The genius of Sabina Spielrein

John Launer

For many years, I have helped to run an annual training day on management for young psychiatrists and psychologists who are about to become consultants. We usually spend most of the day doing an exercise where they turn themselves into the managing boards of two imaginary mental health institutions and compete for business. Over the years we have had fun inventing the names and characteristics of these two institutions. There were a few years when I called one of them 'the Spielrein Institute'. I chose the name as a joke—at least, I thought it was a joke at the time. I took it from a real historical figure called Sabina Spielrein. Like many people, all I knew about her was that she was a patient of Carl Jung and had then become his mistress. I knew Sigmund Freud was somehow connected with her too, but the name mainly appealed to me because it had that middle European flavour that one associates with jokes about psychoanalysts told in mock Viennese accents.

I cannot remember what eventually prompted me to do so, but one day I decided I should probably pay Sabina Spielrein the respect of finding out more about her. I read some biographies,^{1,2} and also her surviving letters and diaries.³ There was a lot of fascinating information in them about her affair with Jung, and how Freud helped the two of them to disentangle from each other while covering up for Jung. Later the two great psychiatrists notoriously fell out with each other, and it now seems this was partly as a result of Freud realising how dishonest Jung had been about what happened.⁴ Spielrein then tried—and failed—to make peace between them. Not surprisingly, there is a lot of literature by Freudians attacking Jung over the whole business, by Jungians defending him, and by feminists wishing a plague on both their houses. Setting all of that aside, it does certainly seem that Spielrein conducted herself with greater dignity and restraint over the whole business than either of the men did.

DISTINGUISHED CAREER

Apart from reading about this famous scandal, I also discovered that Spielrein was a substantial psychiatrist and psychoanalyst in her own right.⁵ She inspired both Freud and Jung to come up with some significant new ideas.⁶ Later, she went on to pursue a distinguished career of her own. She worked in Switzerland alongside the leading developmental psychologist of her time, Jean Piaget. She then returned to her native Russia where she was a colleague of the great neurologist, Alexander Luria. She anticipated some of the major ideas in child psychology of our time, in advance of the people whose names are usually connected with them, like Melanie Klein and Freud's daughter Anna.⁷ Once I discovered all of this I felt a little contrite at having used her name in a rather facetious way. I decided to make further amends by reading some of her own professional articles myself. She wrote them in the first 30 years of the last century—in fluent German and French as well as Russian—but they were only translated into English in the 1990s. Her most significant paper is entitled 'Destruction as the cause of coming into being'.⁸ It was originally published in 1912 but is the transcript of a lecture she gave the previous year in front of Freud and his immediate circle in Vienna.

I can remember vividly the moment I sat down to read the first few pages of this paper. It would be no exaggeration to say that I almost fell off my chair with astonishment when I did so. 'Destruction as the cause of coming into being' puts forward four significant points. The first is that psychiatrists and psychologists should look to biology to make sense of how the human mind works. Her second proposition, in summary, is that we are all torn as human beings between the will to survive as individuals and the drive towards procreation. This shows itself especially in our mixed feelings about our children, our sexual partners, and indeed about sex itself. The next plank of her argument is that many psychological problems arise from an awareness of this core tension in our lives. Her conclusion is that an understanding of mental disturbance, and any approach to psychological

treatment, should address this tension and how it is played out in each individual.

AHEAD OF HER TIME

As soon as I began the article, I felt I was reading something written at least a century ahead of her time. It seemed to me—and still does—that Spielrein was anticipating much of the biological and psychological research of our own era. The notion that we are caught in a tension between self-preservation and procreation is supported by advances in evolutionary understanding, including selfish gene theory and how genes contribute to ageing and death.⁹ Her idea that males and females are in continual competition to impose their genetic inheritance on each other, is consistent with emerging discoveries in the molecular biology of conception and pregnancy. This includes the field of epigenetics, where we now understand how genes from the mother and father are modified to compete with each other within the embryo, placenta, and even the baby.¹⁰ Her realisation that these genetic tensions are played out in our mental lives has been vindicated by a huge range of research into the ways that the sexes and generations relate to each other.^{11,12} And finally, her proposal that such thinking should underlie psychological treatment is a central tenet of the emerging schools of thought known as evolutionary psychiatry and psychotherapy.¹³ In some ways, she was offering a synthesis of these ideas that goes beyond anything else that has yet been written.

Spielrein's argument was completely rejected—indeed mocked—by those who heard it at the time. It then disappeared into oblivion. Remarkably, that is where it has remained. I have yet to come across any assessment of her ideas that does them full justice. Although it is nowadays common for people writing about Sabina Spielrein to say she was underestimated as a thinker, this is always in the context of showing how Freud, Jung and others borrowed and adapted some of her ideas. No-one, so far as I am aware, has ever re-examined her theory through the eyes of modern evolutionary biology, realised how prescient she was, or challenged the way her theory has been marginalised in the history of psychology. Personally I hope to redress this, and am now completing a book about her ideas.¹⁴

UNRECOGNISED GENIUS

Fortunately I am not the only person now taking an interest in Sabina Spielrein. This

Correspondence to Dr John Launer, London Deanery, Stewart House, London WC1B 5DN, UK; jlauner@londondeanery.ac.uk

month, the director David Cronenberg is releasing a movie about her, with the title 'A dangerous method'.¹⁵ Cronenberg is best known for his horror and science fiction movies, which have earned him nicknames like the Baron of Blood and the King of Venereal Horror. This movie, however, appears to be in a more measured genre. The script has been adapted from a play by Christopher Hampton, which in turn drew on her biography by John Kerr. The heroine in the movie is played by Keira Knightley, who has been tipped for an Oscar nomination for her performance.

Like nearly every account of Sabina Spielrein, the movie will dwell mainly on her notorious triangular relationship with Jung and Freud. To judge by the trailer, and comments from previews in Venice and Toronto, it is a thoughtful and accurate account of what happened between the three protagonists, although Cronenberg has taken some poetic licence in the sex scenes. For example, it shows Jung beating Spielrein at her request—for which there is absolutely no evidence. The movie will no doubt raise her profile hugely, which is all to the good, although it will probably give a limited view of her true stature as a thinker.

Yet by a coincidence—I have no reason to believe it is anything else—the movie will be coming out exactly a century after Sabina Spielrein presented her lecture to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society on 'Destruction as the cause of coming into being'. It was on 29 November 1911 that she stood before Freud, put forward her argument about the biological basis of all the struggles we face as human beings, and summed these up in the simple formula 'sex versus survival'. It would be wonderful, and well deserved, if the same date 100 years later marked the turning point in our understanding and assessment of Sabina Spielrein. Perhaps one day there really will be a Spielrein Institute in honour of a woman who I believe was an unrecognised genius.

Competing interests John Launer is preparing a book on Sabina Spielrein for publication.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

Published Online First 14 October 2011

Postgrad Med J 2011;87:791–792.
doi:10.1136/postgradmedj-2011-130489

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Correction

Borooh S, Collins C, Wright A, et al. Late-onset retinal macular degeneration: clinical insights into an inherited retinal degeneration. *Postgrad Med J* 2009;85:495–500. This article was originally published in the *British Journal of Ophthalmology* (Br J Ophthalmol 2009;93:284–9) and later published in *Postgraduate Medical Journal* as a republished article. The title in the republished article in *Postgraduate Medical Journal* should have been prefixed with "Republished review:" and the doi should have been doi:10.1136/pgmj.2008.150151rep. We apologise for this error.

Postgrad Med J 2011;87:792. doi:10.1136/bjo.2008.150151corr1