The problem with sex

It is November 29, 1911. In a hired lecture hall, the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society is holding its regular weekly meeting. As usual, Professor Freud is in the chair. He has a great deal on his mind. His movement is splitting into factions. Last month, he had to expel a group of dissidents—the followers of Alfred Adler—for placing too much emphasis on the role of biology in mental illness. The previous day, one of the most eminent psychiatrists in Europe, Eugen Bleuler, sent him a resignation letter, arguing that dogmas and expulsions were more appropriate for a cult or a political party than the advancement of science. Storm clouds are gathering too in Freud’s relationship with his own chief disciple, Carl Jung. Their disagreement is not about biology, but about the place of religion and mythology in understanding mental illness. Things are not looking good, and possibly the movement may not survive. The speaker that evening, a young Russian Jewish woman, is a new member and has only just qualified as a doctor. Probably, Freud has invited her to speak in order to try to build bridges with Jung...

The young woman in question, Sabina Spielrein, had an unusually close connection with Jung, being in succession his patient, research assistant and lover. When she was a teenager, she appears to have had a severe bereavement reaction to the death of her only sister from typhoid. This included depression, hysterical behaviour and manic rages. Her parents sent her from Rostov-on-Don to Switzerland, where she saw several psychiatrists, ending up in the care of Jung. Using a mixture of word association techniques and rudimentary psychoanalysis, Jung elicited her private obsessions with beatings and masturbation. After treating her for some months, he encouraged her to work with him in his psychological laboratory, partly as a kind of occupational therapy. The following year she entered medical school. She continued to see Jung—ten years her senior, and already married—also entered a sexual relationship. Their letters, and Spielrein’s diaries and journals, testify to an intellectual and emotional relationship of Wagnerian intensity. Freud knew all about this, as Jung had reported Spielrein’s case history to him in correspondence. He had sought Freud’s advice about managing her strong emotional attachment to him, and after some evasion, had eventually confessed the degree of his involvement with her. Freud had been indulgent. ‘In view of the kind of matter we work with,’ he wrote to Jung, ‘it will never be possible to avoid little laboratory explosions’. When it became clear that Jung’s affair with Spielrein was untenable, Freud mediated between them—again, by letter—to help them disengage and avert a scandal.

There was nothing surprising in any of this. In the early days of psychoanalysis, there was a determined opposition to any form of sexual hypocrisy, and at times the boundaries of this became unclear. Several of the other early analysts had sexual relations with patients. Some patients came to see their initiation through both verbal and carnal intercourse as abuse. Others, like Spielrein, experienced it as liberating. The analysts concerned, all doctors, seem to have avoided any legal or professional sanctions. Freud would also have been unperturbed by Spielrein’s psychiatric history. As historians have argued, the dramatic way that intelligent young women presented themselves to doctors at that time was largely due to the oppressive social and family circumstances in which they had to live. In the hands of psychoanalysis, they sometimes recovered with miraculous speed, in part because their analysts simply spent time listening to them, and validated their frustrations and their sexual desires. Freud’s early circle also resembled in some ways a modern ‘users movement’. Its members shared their private lunacies and lusts openly with each other, in lectures, letters, and thinly disguised case histories. One reads these disclosures with both shock and admiration. If we no longer share confessions of our own inner turmoil...
with each other in this way, it may be because we have learned how explosive this can be—but it may also be through a loss of nerve.

All of this may be fascinating, but it is less fascinating than what Sabina Spielrein argued in her presentation on that Wednesday night in Vienna. Spielrein raised the question of why sexual desire gives rise to pleasure, but also to fear and disgust. ‘One feels the enemy inside oneself, in one’s glowing love which forces one, with iron necessity, to do what one doesn’t want to do: one feels the end, the fleetingness, from which one vainly tries to flee.’ In order to make sense of this contradiction, Spielrein proposed that every human being is fated to manage a conflict between two fundamental instincts. On the one hand, there is a wish to survive and prosper as an individual: something that requires independence and homeostasis. On the other hand, there is an evolutionary drive towards propagation, where the self is dissolved in another person, and death is foreseen. Having presented her thesis in terms of biology and psychology, Spielrein elaborated it with references to literature and mythology—including Tristan and Isolde, Adam and Eve, and tales from the Talmud, where sex and death are symbolically intertwined.

What Spielrein had presented was audacious. In the words of one of her biographers, it had ‘all the elegance of a new theorem in mathematics or physics’. She had also understood, with remarkable clarity, that psychoanalysis would only make sense if it could be realigned with the theory of evolution. Sadly, Freud’s response to the ‘little girl’ (in his words) was dismissive. He clearly cared little for her biological theory, and criticised her reliance on mythology. ‘I must say she is rather nice and I am beginning to understand’, he subsequently wrote to Jung, with what sounds like a laddish wink. ‘What troubles me most is that Miss Spielrein wants to subordinate the psychological material to biological criteria…’ Psychoanalysis, in his view, must constitute a science of its own, and not depend on any other field of knowledge.

Six months afterwards, Spielrein moved to Berlin, away from both Freud and Jung, although (almost uniquely) she remained on good terms with both of them. She continued to address conferences and to publish her ideas. Ironically, both Freud and Jung used and adapted some of these ideas in their later writings, but without the emphasis on biology, and with only a grudging acknowledgement to her. In Spielrein’s subsequent career, she worked with some of the greatest names in the history of twentieth century psychology and neuroscience. In Geneva, she collaborated with—and analysed—Jean Piaget, one of the towering figures of the century in developmental psychology. After she returned to Russia in 1922, she worked with two other seminal thinkers, A.R. Luria and Vygoztsky. Unlike her three brothers, she managed to survive Stalin’s purges. However, in 1941 the German army occupied Rostov-on-Don. Spielrein and her two daughters, along with the entire Jewish population of the city, were rounded up and summarily shot.

There are many lessons to draw from Sabina Spielrein’s extraordinary life. A variety of people have done so in books, on film and on the stage. My own view is that we have hardly begun to appreciate the importance of her ideas. Her attempts to reconcile psychoanalysis with evolutionary theory and developmental psychology were far ahead of her time. Few in the West saw the need to do so until John Bowlby in the 1950s and 60s, or researchers such as Daniel Stern and Peter Fonaghy in modern times. More significantly, Spielrein’s ideas about sex are in keeping with almost everything we have discovered in the last twenty years about the biology of reproduction: sexual desire makes absolutely no sense to the individual male or female, but is an expression of a collective need of the species. To put it in her own words, ‘the act of procreation consists in self-destruction’. As she speculated almost a hundred years ago, there is an irreconcilable tension in biology between the needs of the ego (the ‘I’) and the needs of our genes to replicate themselves. This may have profound implications for our happiness or unhappiness as human beings. In proposing such an idea, the ‘little girl’ may have been one of the most far-sighted thinkers of the early twentieth century.

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References