

The death drive according to Sabina Spielrein¹

Fátima Caropreso*

Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, Institute of Human Sciences. Juiz de Fora, MG, Brazil

Abstract: Sabina Spielrein's thought and life have attracted an increasing interest in the last decades, although her theoretical contribution has remained in the background in comparison with her biography. One of the most widespread ideas is that in *Die Destruktion als Ursache des Werdens* she anticipated the Freudian concept of death drive. However, the specific meaning of her hypothesis is seldom discussed and, in fact, there are fundamental differences between their views. The objective of this article is to discuss some hypotheses formulated by Spielrein in her 1912 work in order to better elucidate her concept of death drive.

Keywords: Sabina Spielrein, death drive, destruction, come-into-being.

The life and work of Russian physician and psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein has increasingly attracted interest in last few decades, especially since the publication of her letters, diary and other documents by Aldo Carotenuto in 1977. However, her theoretical contributions for our understanding of both normal and pathological psychology have taken a back seat to certain aspects of her biography, in particular her personal relationship with Carl Jung. The first volume of Sabina Spielrein's complete writings (Cromberg, 2014) has just been published in Brazil, containing translations of some of her most important papers, as well commentary on her biography and her theoretical production, a great contribution to those interested in the history of psychoanalysis.

Most scholars who study Freud and Spielrein, often defend the thought that her text, "Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being" (1912), anticipated the hypothesis of death drive, only introduced by Freud in 1920 (Lothane, 2003; Britton, 2003; Van Waning, 1992; Robert, 1966; Carotenuto, 1980; Peres, 2012). In the 1943 edition of "Psychology of the Unconscious" (1943/1968), Carl Jung himself pointed out that the Freudian concept of death drive was originally proposed by Sabina Spielrein in her 1912 text. However, the meaning of Spielrein's hypothesis is little discussed, as is the idea that she anticipated the concept of death drive Freud would later come to propose in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920/1982). A careful analysis of Spielrein's text reveals fundamental differences that distance her hypothesis from Freud's own work. Other ideas parallel fundamental aspects of Freud's theory after 1920, especially the postulation of a psychic functioning existing prior to the one governed by the principle of pleasure. Spielrein's theories reveal a wealth of theoretical and clinical ideas and insights and seem to carry the seeds that

would later allow Freud to develop the central hypotheses of his theory. On the other hand, this Freudian theory uses other foundations and brings a theoretical originality that justifies a more careful analysis of its internal development. In this work, we intend to delve into some points of Spielrein's theory, using her work on destruction, in order better to understand the concept of death instinct.

The introduction of the "death instinct" hypothesis

Sabina Spielrein participated in the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society between October 1911 and March 1912 (Balsam, 2003). On November 29, 1911, she presented her "On Transformation" lecture, sharing a part of her "Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being" article, published in 1912. At this conference, she refers for the first time to her death instinct hypothesis (Nunberg & Federn, 1974). Cromberg (2014) points out that the concept of a death instinct is directly linked to the clinical issues Spielrein faced when caring for schizophrenic patients in the Burghölzli clinic (Switzerland), and to the theoretical questions raised in her first essay "The Psychological Content of a Case of Schizophrenia". This essay was the result of her medical thesis, supervised by Eugen Bleuler and presented at the University of Zurich's School of Medicine, in 1911. By her own admittance, her reflections were part of the "new psychiatry", which introduced psychoanalysis and occurred at the Burghölzli clinic during the first decade of the 20th century (Cromberg, 2014).

Spielrein starts the essay "Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being" (Spielrein, 1912), questioning the reproductive drive (*Fortpflanzungstrieb*), the most powerful of drives, and the reason it carries positive feelings, as well as negative ones – such as anxiety and disgust. She ponders on what happens to the individual when faced with sexual activity that could justify this state of mind. A number of authors have pointed out this relationship and attempted to explain it, and Spielrein had

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* Corresponding address: fatimacaropreso@uol.com.br

her own hypothesis to answer it: these negative feelings correspond to “the destructive components of the sexual instinct” (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 232). Afterwards, Spielrein speaks of a “death instinct within the sexual instinct” (Spielrein, 1912, p.259)².

She comes to this conclusion after a brief reflection on some biological facts. In reproduction, unit cells are destroyed in the process of giving birth to new life. Some lower beings die after reproduction. With multicellular beings, the difference is merely quantitative: a part of the organism (germ cells), representing the organism as a whole, is destroyed. In this case, the male component merges with the female component, suffers reorganization and takes on a new form that is mediated by the unknown intruder. Thus, Spielrein affirms:

destruction and reconstruction, which under usual circumstances always accompany each other, occur rapidly. The organism discharges its sexual product as if it were one of its excretions. It would be highly unlikely if the individual did not at least surmise, through corresponding feelings, these internal destructive-reconstructive events. The joyful feeling of coming into being that is present within the reproductive drive is accompanied by a feeling of resistance, of anxiety or disgust. This does not result from spatial proximity to the excreta or from the negativity of a renunciation of sexual activity; the feeling directly corresponds to the destructive component of the sexual instinct. (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 232)³.

After presenting the existence of destructive components in the sexual instincts, Spielrein explored some psychological phenomena, which could support and clarify this hypothesis. The last part of the essay is devoted to linking her theory with the mythology and the literature. Below, we explore only some of the psychological hypotheses presented in the 1912 article. They are the basis for understanding the concept of death instinct.

2 The idea of a necessary relationship between sexuality and destruction was already mentioned in excerpts of Sabina’s diary (Spielrein, 2003). In the prologue, Jeanne Moll says that there is reason to believe that the diary was written between 1906 and 1907, though it is impossible to determine this unquestionably. In a letter Spielrein wrote Freud in 1909, there is mention of her theory regarding the relationship between sexuality and destruction (Carotenuto, 1980).

3 Spielrein (1912) uses German terms like “Instinkt”, “Trieb” and “Drang” throughout her work. She uses “Instinkt” to compose the names “Todesinstinkt” (death instinct) and “Sexualinstinkt” (sexual instinct). The term “Drang” is used in “Destruktionsdrang” (destruction drive) and the term “Trieb” is used in “Selbsterhaltungstrieb” (self-preservation drive), “Arterhaltungstrieb” (drive for the preservation of the species) and “Fortpflanzungstrieb” (drive to procreate). The author also uses, a handful of times, “Fortpflanzungsinstinkt” (procreation instinct) and “Selbsterhaltungstrieb” (self-preservation instinct).

The relationship between death instinct and sexual instinct in the psyche

Other psychological facts, besides the negative feelings that often accompany sexual activity, illustrate the necessary relationship between sexuality and destructiveness, defends Spielrein. Among them, we have the great incidence of neuroses in times of war, the sadism and masochism phenomena and cases of intense parental fixation.

The author notes that times of war are strongly associated with the irruption of neuroses and even suggests that this is in direct consequence to a disruption of people’s sexual lives. Destructive representations walk alongside war and evoke other representations associated with the destructive component of the reproductive drive. For a normal person, these representations could disturb a life felt as ephemeral and senseless, but neurotics would see them as pernicious, symbols capable of representing their destructive fantasies. Neurotics see representations of war as destructive fantasies. Thus, Spielrein maintains that: “In neurosis, the destructive component prevails and is expressed in all symptoms of resistance to life and natural destiny”. (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 259-260)

Spielrein argues that, due to the destructive component inherent in sexual impulses, man can possess intensely sadistic desires, which may lead him to want the destruction of the object of his love. Sadism would be the result of this destructive component intensifying, and if directed to a person’s Self (his Ego), could lead to self-criticism, self-destruction, characterizing masochism. Thus, the phenomena of sadism and masochism would clearly illustrate the relationship between sexuality and destructiveness.

The case of intense parental fixation also appears as the manifestation of the relationship between death instinct and sexual instinct. Spielrein argues we love in the other the parental resemblance and that chance will determine whether or not a pre-intended sexual experience will be activated. If representations were activated but not fulfilled, they would remain in the psyche as an intense yearning to return to the origins, more specifically, a state of fusion with the parents. According to the author, a strong parental attachment would prevent the transformation to the external world and the unsatisfied libido could reconnect with the parental figure, resulting in incestuous fantasies in the external world or in more sublimated symptomatic fantasies. In other words, nature worship or religious symptoms. At the same time, the destructive impulse contained in the procreative drive would intensify, producing more concrete or more sublimated death fantasies. On the other hand, death manifestation connected with incestuous desire would not be expressed (I am dying because I must not sin). In this case, dying would achieve the desired regression to the paternal. Regarding the less differentiated incestuous love, Spielrein defends that “the desire for more evident destruction corresponds to a more intense desire to become”. (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 259)

These hypotheses aid the author in maintaining the existence of a regressive sexual instinct, which basically means a tendency to return to a state of fusion with the parents. Unresolved sexual impulses would intensify this trend, thus strengthening the destructive component of sexual impulses, and giving rise to the phenomenon described above. This desire to return to a state of fusion with the parents would in turn mean a desire for self-destruction.

Sexual instinct would thus have two antagonistic impulses: a destructive and a reproductive impulse. The imbalance between them would result in one standing out and the other fading into the background, which would explain the neglect of the death instinct in sexual instinct. In the phenomena described above, the destructive component would be intensified. However, there is no coming into being without destruction. The author explains this: “Under normal circumstances, representations of becoming coming into being should prevail a little, after all coming into being is the result of destruction, it is determined by destruction. Nonetheless, it is much easier to think of the end results than to always seek what caused them”. (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 259)

Spielrein’s death instinct would not seek the annihilation of the individual as a whole or life as we know it, but rather the destruction of the Self, which we can clearly see occurring in cases of early onset dementia. Sexual instinct, or the “drive to preserve the species” (*Arterhaltungstriebe*), would express itself psychologically in a tendency towards dissolution and assimilation of the psyche (*Ichpsyche*).

The opposition between the tendency towards dissolution and the tendency towards differentiation

For Spielrein, what makes an individual is that he is a “dividual”, in other words, a being that is divided. She cites Ernst Mach, who believes that the Self is merely a momentary grouping of elemental sensations eternally alive; it is something continuously changing and not wholly essential. The author groups Mach with Carl Jung, who defends the psyche as a combination of many individual parts; groupings fighting each other for precedence. The perfect consolidation of this view, for Spielrein, turned out to be one of her patients, who had early onset dementia. His Ego experienced this struggle so strongly, activated powers fighting for supremacy, that the patient considered his own unconscious desires as being hostile living beings.

According to Spielrein, an event would acquire emotional tonality only insofar as it could stimulate emotional tonalities of previously experienced events, hidden within the unconscious. For this reason, what we experience is not exactly the present. Our conscious experiences are allegories of unknown primitive experiences that seek connections in the present. Unconscious thoughts and representations walk side by side with each conscious representation or thought and that would transform the products of conscious thought into a specific language. This last

step of transformation is known as “assimilation” or “dissolution”. This way, consciousness differentiates from the unconscious and is assimilated, determining the emotional tonality of an experience. The unconscious dissolves representations, making them undifferentiated. An example that illustrates this process is a patient diagnosed with early onset dementia, who used to say “The earth has been pierced”, rather than saying “I was fertilized”. Earth represented the great mother or the unconscious representation of all people. In this great mother (the unconscious), the patient would transform herself into her undifferentiated (mother).

Spielrein distinguishes between the ego-psyche (the Self) and a deeper psyche, known as the “species-psyche” (*Artpsyché*)⁴. The unconscious would not only be an individual’s past experiences, but also the experiences of countless generations. This means that the unconscious assimilation of events, which occurred many generations before, would fit into a chain of present thoughts, that is, an experience of the Self would eventually turn into an experience of the species. The more we approach our conscious thoughts, the more differentiated our representations would be. On the other hand, the more we dive into the unconscious, the more universal and typical they would be. According to the author: “our deep psyche is a stranger to the Self, knowing only its sum, the *Us*”. (Spielrein, 1912, p. 472). The present Self would be an object, subordinated to other similar objects. The species-psyche considers the Self (or the ego-psyche) a subordinate object, observing it as an individual part of the personality, which could be seen as an object.

Early onset dementia means that the Self is no longer functional, and that the representations of the Self are transformed into representations of the species (*Artvorstellungen*) or objective representations. This disease could be explained as a battle between these two opposing tendencies of the psyche. According to Spielrein: “The species-psyche wants to reduce the representation of the Self into a typically impersonal representation, the ego-psyche defends itself from this dissolution”. (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 240).

Therefore, we have two opposing tendencies – a “tendency towards dissolution and assimilation” and a “tendency towards differentiation” – present in the psyche, which would be psychic expressions of drive for the preservation of the species (*Arterhaltungstrieb*) and the self-preservation drive (*Selbsterhaltungstrieb*), respectively. Thus, the opposition – also defended by Freud at the time – between these two drives continues. The sexual instinct and the death instinct of the psyche work together to preserve the species, and give rise to the tendency towards dissolution and assimilation, as opposed to the tendency towards differentiation, which would be the expression of the self-preservation drive. While the former seeks to transform the

4 Van Waning (1992) and Skea (2006) suggest that Spielrein’s “species-psyche” theory (*Artpsyché*) precedes Jung’s concept of “collective unconscious”.

experiences of the self into experiences of the species, the latter aims for inertia, keeping the Self unchanged. In the author's words:

The self-preservation drive in us corresponds to the tendency towards differentiation and to our ability to preserve an externally crystallized particle of the Self or the whole personality of the Self. The preservation drive of the species is a drive to procreate, and it also expressed psychically in the dissolution or the tendency towards assimilation (transforming self into us), with a new differentiation of the *original matter*. "Where love reigns, the ego, the ominous despot, dies". (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 260-261)

Since there is no coming into being without destruction, the preservation of the species would lead to dissolution and assimilation, without which we would have no creation of new beings. The self-preservation drive would not create anything new, seeking always to maintain the inertia of the Self. Thus, Spielrein argues that:

The self-preservation drive is a simple drive, which only consists of a positive side; the drive for the preservation of the species, which must dissolve the old to create the new, has both a positive and a negative component. The drive for the preservation of the species is, in its essence, ambivalent; thus, inciting the positive component means also stimulating the negative component, and so on and so forth. The self-preservation drive is a "static" drive, protecting the already existing individual against foreign influences. The drive for the preservation of the species is a "dynamic" drive, which strives for transformation, the "resurrection" of the individual in a new form. No transformation can proceed without the destruction of the old state. (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 261)

The dissolution and assimilation process can be experienced pleasantly or unpleasantly. In early onset dementia, the transformation of the ego-psyche into the species-psyche initially causes severe anguish and depression. These feelings would arise while the patient continued to hold on to a relationship with the Self. As the disease progresses, indifference would follow. On the other hand, in the artistic experience, the transformation of the Self into the collective is a pleasant experience. Spielrein argues that, by creating the typical, the artist enjoys his sublimated product. The dissolution of the Self in the beloved, which occurs in the involvement with the opposite sex, is also experienced with joy. However, the author also believes in feeling real pleasure in the unpleasant or the painful, which leads to the hypothesis that not all psychic functioning is ruled by the pleasure principle, which is something Freud defended at the time.

The species-psyche and the pleasure principle

Spielrein argues that Freud was right to suppose that the *causa movens* of our conscious and unconscious Self is the pursuit of pleasure and the suppression of the unpleasant, though it is necessary to question whether all psychic life resides in the Self. We do not possess powerful impulses move our psychic contents without consideration for the misery of the Self, Spielrein wonders, and her answer is as follows:

I have to strongly defend that the ego-psyche, including the unconscious, is guided by motions that are deeper and not part of our emotional reactions to the demands shaped by them. Pleasure is simply the affirmative reaction of the Self to these original demands of the core and we can achieve pleasure directly from the unpleasant and pleasure from pain, which, taken in itself, is heavily loaded with displeasure, for pain harms the individual, against which our self-preservation instinct opposes. Therefore, at our core, there is something that, however paradoxical it may seem *a priori*, seeks this self-harm, since the Self reacts to it with pleasure. The desire for self-harm, the elation at the pain is, however, completely incomprehensible if we only consider the life of the Self, which only seeks pleasure". (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 237)

Spielrein argues that the species-psyche does not obey the pleasure principle, as Freud proposed. This principle would only relate to the functioning of the conscious and the unconscious Self. The species-psyche could derive joy from pain, which might in turn hinder the struggle for self-preservation, as well as a desire for self-harm. Perfectly compatible with the hypothesis of dissolution and assimilation. The desire for self-harm and the rejoicing of pain, according to Spielrein, would support the hypothesis that not all psychic processes are based on the pleasure principle; in other words, there is a deeper psychic functioning, going "beyond" this original principle. According to the author:

The ego-psyche can only desire feelings of pleasure, but the species-psyche reveals to us our desires . . . so we learn that the desires of the species that live within us are not at all the same as the desires of the Self, that the species-psyche wants to assimilate the recent ego-psyche, while the Self, yes, each particle of the Self possesses the ambition of self-preservation in the present form (capacity for perseverance). (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 241-242)

From this deep psyche—not based on the pleasure principle—would arise the impulse to destroy, or the death instinct, which would be an impulse to annihilate the Self and not an impulse to destroy the organism.

Final considerations

Spielrein proposes the differentiation between the species-psyche and the ego-psyche, two antagonistic tendencies. The former contains a tendency towards dissolution and assimilation—the psychological expression of the species' preservation drive –, which seek to dissolve the contents of the Self into the species. The latter manifests a tendency towards differentiation—the psychological expression of the self-preservation drive –, which wants to keep the inertia of the Self. While the tendency towards dissolution and assimilation are based on positive and negative components, the tendency towards differentiation is based only on positive components. Since there is no creation without destruction, the first of these tendencies is the one that depends on the creation of something;

it is essential to the preservation of the species and has as a pre-requisite the destruction of the Self. The species-psyche, unlike the ego-psyche, would not flee from displeasure or pursue pleasure.

Thus, the author maintains the opposition between the ego drives and sexual drives and places the death instinct within these two. This latter instinct would not seek the annihilation of life, would not aim to completely eliminate stimulation, as Freud proposed in 1920, but would in fact attempt to destroy the Self; the transformation of *Self* into *Us*. The hypothesis of the inseparability between destruction and creation means that, for Spielrein, there is no purely negative drive, which is part of the Freudian theory. In future works, we will analyze more thoroughly the approximations and divergences between concepts defended by Freud and by Spielrein.

O instinto de morte segundo Sabina Spielrein

Resumo: O pensamento e a vida de Sabina Spielrein têm despertado um interesse crescente nas últimas décadas, embora sua contribuição teórica tenha ficado em segundo plano em relação a sua biografia. Uma das ideias mais difundidas é a de que ela teria antecipado o conceito freudiano de pulsão de morte, em seu texto *Die Destruktion als Ursache des Werdens*. No entanto, pouco se discute sobre o sentido da sua hipótese e uma análise atenta revela que há diferenças fundamentais que distanciam suas ideias das de Freud. Nesse texto, pretendemos retomar alguns pontos da teoria formulada por Spielrein em seu texto de 1912, tendo em vista melhor elucidar o seu conceito de instinto de morte.

Palavras-chave: Sabina Spielrein, instinto de morte, destruição, devir.

Le concept d'instinct de mort chez Sabina Spielrein

Résumé: L'intérêt pour la pensée et la vie de Sabina Spielrein s'est accru lors des dernières décennies, même si ses contributions théoriques sont restées en second plan par rapport à sa biographie. Une des idées les plus répandues, c'est qu'elle aurait anticipé le concept freudien de pulsion de mort dans son texte *Die Destruktion als Ursache des Werdens*. Toutefois, on discute peu le sens de son hypothèse et une analyse attentive révèle qu'il existe des différences fondamentales qui l'éloignent de Freud. Dans ce texte nous aurons reprendre certains points de la théorie formulée par Spielrein dans son texte de 1912 avec le but d'éclaircir son concept d'instinct de mort.

Mots-clés: Sabina Spielrein, instinct de mort, destruction, devenir.

El concepto de instinto de muerte según Spielrein

Resumen: El pensamiento y la vida de Sabina Spielrein han despertado un interés creciente en las últimas décadas, aunque su contribución teórica haya quedado en segundo plano respecto de su biografía. Una de las ideas más difundidas es que ella habría anticipado el concepto freudiano de pulsión de muerte en su texto *Die Destruktion als Ursache des Werdens*. Sin embargo, no se ha discutido suficientemente el sentido de su hipótesis y un análisis pormenorizado revela la existencia de diferencias fundamentales que la distancian de Freud. En este texto pretendemos retomar algunos puntos de la teoría formulada por Spielrein en su texto de 1912 con el objetivo de elucidar su concepto de instinto de muerte.

Palabras clave: Sabina Spielrein, instinto de muerte, destrucción, devenir.

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