

Sabina Spielrein

A Life and Legacy Explored

There is no death in remembrance.

—Kathleen Kent, *The Heretic's Daughter*

Sabina Spielrein (often transliterated as Shpilrein or Spilrein) was born on November 7, 1885, in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, into a Jewish family of seven: one sister, Emily; three brothers, Jan, Isaac, and Emil; and a businessman father, Nikolai Spielrein, and his wife, Eva. Spielrein was highly encouraged in her education and, unlike many young girls at the time, was afforded lessons in Warsaw, though her youth is often characterized as a troubled one, a time when her mother was emotionally unavailable and her father exerted immense authority over the household.¹ However, Spielrein was a bright and intelligent child, and as a budding scientist, she kept liquids in jars expecting “the big creation” to take place in her near future.² Remembering her early desire to create life, Spielrein once noted: “I was an alchemist.”³

Sadly, the death of Emily, who died at six years old, sent Spielrein into a dizzying confrontation with mortality at the tender age of fifteen. This loss, coupled with confusing abuse at the hands of her father—discussed in the next chapter—spun her into a period of turmoil for which she was institutionalized. In August 1904, at age nineteen, she was sent to the Burghölzli Clinic in Zurich, Switzerland, where she became a patient of a then twenty-nine-year-old and married Dr. Carl Jung. She was to be one of his

first patients, subsequently diagnosed with “hysteria” and exhibiting symptoms of extreme emotional duress, such as screaming, repetitively sticking out her tongue, and shaking.⁴ She was a guinea pig for a new “talking cure,” based on free association, dream interpretation, and talk therapy, as innovated by Dr. Sigmund Freud in Vienna, Austria.

Russian historian Victor Ovcharenko (see “Love, Psychoanalysis, and Destruction,” 1999) believed that an affair soon began between Spielrein and Jung and was in full swing by the completion of her in-treatment in June 1905. Without ambiguity, it is known that Spielrein was deemed cured by Jung and by Dr. Eugen Bleuler, the director of the clinic, before she began her own studies at the University of Zurich that same year. Her relationship with Jung then lasted with varying intensity for approximately four years while Spielrein was an outpatient. While many scholars have defined Spielrein’s affair with Jung as a “romance,” I do not, and I will continue to question this categorization throughout the book.

Spielrein eventually earned her doctorate in psychiatry in 1911 from the University of Zurich to become a pioneering figure in the field of psychoanalysis: one of the first female psychoanalysts as well as one of the first—if not the first—child psychologists. When she became a mother in 1913, she focused her academic interest primarily on child psychology and went on to teach, publish, and practice psychoanalysis in Geneva, Switzerland, for almost a decade. She then helped to buttress the psychology program at the (State) Moscow Institute of Psychoanalysis upon her return to Russia in the early 1920s.

During the communist purges under Stalin, Spielrein receded into the background, as her three brothers were all taken to and executed in gulags in the 1930s. Though she managed to survive the deaths of both of her parents (of natural causes) and her husband, Spielrein and her two daughters were murdered in Rostov during its second Nazi occupation in August 1942.⁵ She then faded into the annals of history until her diaries and letters were discovered and published by Aldo Carotenuto in 1977. Today, her personal and professional works remain and continue to exhibit tremendous insight into identity, death, heartbreak, and transformation during an era of cultural and social upheaval.

In the words of Viktor Frankl, *these are the dry facts*.⁶ While details of all aforementioned facts will be examined in depth, this chapter is devoted to challenging the existing narrative constructed around Spielrein’s life, given that much of modern scholarship consistently reduces her existence to the roles of “hysteric” and “mistress.”⁷ This only degrades and demeans her academic and personal writing as mere symptoms of a stigmatized mental illness or a gendered objectification.

Sabina Spielrein in Scholarship and the Construction of a Narrative

John Kerr, in his extensive and groundbreaking biographical research on Spielrein in *A Most Dangerous Method: The Story of Jung, Freud, and Sabina Spielrein*, examines her life from a clinical perspective and notes her academic work in relation to Jung and to the other grandfather of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. He presents her as a figure worth attention in the so-called feminist age, due to her being a woman “insisting on her point of view.”⁸ Aside from this somewhat condescending implication, Kerr states:

She [Spielrein] had a crucial contribution of her own to make, one that was potentially central to the overall structure of psychoanalytic theory. Yet that contribution, like her earlier protests as a patient and as a lover, was ignored and then deliberately obscured. The silence that for so long attended her story is emblematic of a more insidious silence that gradually overtook psychoanalysis during this time.⁹

While Kerr asserts that Spielrein’s work contributed to the development of the field, he continually refers to her solely as “lover” or “patient” and maintains that his study is primarily about Freud and Jung’s early partnership. However, Kerr emphasizes that suppression of women’s voices in the field began at the literal beginning of analytical psychology, with Jung’s very first “hysterical” patient: Sabina Spielrein. It would follow then, that the subsequent dismissal of Spielrein’s work in contemporary academia contributes to the “insidious” silencing of her voice in an attempt to selectively reorganize the history of psychology, as we will see.

Kerr goes on to say that his book “is not a love story . . . it is an unusually gruesome ghost story.”¹⁰ Ironically, he recounts nearly the entirety of Spielrein’s life in relation to the “love affair” that Jung and Spielrein maintained while she was his patient at the clinic, which not only suffocates her own narrative; it definitively turns the book into a love story. Such a “love story” denies the breach of trust between client and therapist that resulted in an affair in favor of providing a romantic characterization of their relationship. Also, by asserting that Spielrein’s story is “gruesome,” though granted her death may be deemed a tragedy, he diminishes the extraordinary insight inherent in her personal and professional work, and devalues the events of her life during the thirty years she stood on her own as a scholar and as a woman. Beyond her tie to Jung is a narrative with autonomous and interdisciplinary value that requires reassembling so to give a full account of her as an analyst and original thinker in her own right.

The late Freudian psychoanalyst Johannes Cremerius characterized Spielrein as the “guilty party . . . who must be sacrificed” by Freud in order to save his own place as head of the psychoanalytic movement, as if this justifies Freud’s subsequent complicity in suppressing her contributions at the time.¹¹ In his response to the publication of Spielrein’s diaries, Cremerius also revealed the probable reason she has been suppressed in history: her sexuality. Demeaning and gendered labels such as “hysterical” and “mistress,” the epithets continually attached to Spielrein, are largely responsible for her historical marginalization.

Yet, as stated by Dr. Bleuler (director of the clinic) upon Spielrein’s discharge in 1905: “Miss Sabina Spielrein from Rostov/Don, resident at this institution and planning to matriculate at the medical faculty in the summer term, *is not mentally ill*. She was here for treatment for a nervous complaint with hysterical symptoms. We must therefore recommend her for matriculation” [emphasis mine].¹² Of course, it could be argued that being “mentally ill” or not; Spielrein’s contributions need not be discredited or devalued. But a continual weapon of attack in scholarship is that Spielrein remained “ill,” and her work and personal diaries have thus been regarded as symptomatic of a condition that was thought cured. Therefore, all of Spielrein’s writing after 1905 may be understood not as the ranting of a “hysterical” patient, but as the expression of a talented and complex woman during her professional career.

The Loss of Spielrein’s Beloved Sister

Though Spielrein’s treatment at the clinic and her childhood trauma will be revealed in the next chapter, it is worth noting the mental and emotional state she was in after her sister Emily passed. During her time as an in-patient (1904), Spielrein wrote a last will:

After my death I will permit only my head to be dissected, if it is not too dreadful to look at. No young person is to be present at the dissection. Only the very keenest students may observe. I bequeath my skull to our school. It is to be placed in a glass container, decorated with everlasting flowers. The following is to be inscribed on the container in Russian: “And let young life play at the entrance of the tomb and let indifferent nature shine with external splendor.” My brain I give to you [unknown]. Just place it, as it is, in a beautiful vessel, also decorated, with the same words on it. My body is to be cremated. . . . Divide the ashes into three parts. . . . Scatter the second part on the ground over the biggest field. Plant there an oak tree and write on it: “I too was once a human being. My name was Sabina Spielrein.”¹³

While this has been previously interpreted as suicidal ideation, Spielrein also demonstrates an existential sensibility often overlooked. While some have understood the above statement to be a symptom of “mental illness,” I interpret the will as a rather poetic confrontation with the trauma of grief, loss, and death.¹⁴ Her words reveal a kind of mythic romanticism in the portrayal of unified opposites: youth dancing at a tomb amid the ephemeral “splendor” of nature. While exhibiting a devastated teenager’s attempt to cope with mortality, the quote actually emphasizes a profound sense of life affirmation and continuation for those who will live on in her absence. She also provides lucid instructions for her body and ashes, which highlights a pragmatic aspect to her personality retained in her adult years. She may have believed that she, like her sister, could similarly fall ill at a young age; surely she is not alone in her attempt to control what happens to her body postmortem.

The fact that Spielrein did not want young children present acts as a protective shield for the innocence of youth, and perhaps a defense against what she herself felt too young to have witnessed upon the death of her sister, which clearly had a shattering effect on her. That she planned to donate her brain to scientific study also foreshadows her devotion and interest in the fields of psychology and biology, which manifested throughout her academic career, and suggests that she felt she belonged in the academic arena. Spielrein’s desire for dissection signifies her belief that her brain was one worth understanding and one worthy of scientific discovery.

Her wish to have her skull visible through a glass container is twofold: she confronts the metaphorical fear of “staring” death in the face and desires for others to be present with the idea of mortality, but is insightful enough to insist on a literal container for it. In her request to decorate the container of her skull with flowers, Spielrein reaffirms the beauty she obviously felt inherent to life and again integrates seemingly opposing realities: life and death. This imagery is reminiscent of the Hispanic Día de los Muertos (“Day of the Dead”) tradition, wherein each November 1 and 2 deceased ancestors are honored with rituals and, among other things, decorated sugar skulls and flowers, and children and adults are painted in skeleton makeup, in celebration of the tension and interconnectivity between life and death.

In addition to Spielrein’s mythic imagery, her words find resonance with William Wordsworth’s sonnet, “Intimations of Immortality:”

What though the radiance which was once so bright
 Be now for ever taken from my sight,
 Though nothing can bring back the hour
 Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;
 We will grieve not, rather find

Strength in what remains behind;
 In the primal sympathy
 Which having been must ever be;
 In the soothing thoughts that spring
 Out of human suffering;
 In the faith that looks through death,
 In years that bring the philosophic mind.¹⁵

Spielrein's last will may be read as just such a meditation, and one that perhaps helped to alleviate her own grief. There is also an air of nostalgia in Spielrein's words that mimic Wordsworth's aging sentimentalism, in her desire to find beauty in childhood, as both authors conjure images of an innocence (or naïveté) that precludes the onset of age and experience. Spielrein, in her philosophic mind, looks through and past death to imagine a life that continues, plants that grow, and children at play. Her tone, like Wordsworth's, muses on the cyclical aspect of nature, reminding whomever she imagined to be the reader of the will that she was once a human being in the middle of a certain splendor, desiring to be remembered beyond her own suffering.

Her need to be remembered as a human being is her most affecting statement as Spielrein calls herself by name, asserting personal agency, history, and presence. She gives herself as much to nature as to science, which describes her life and work possibly more than any analysis could, as she demonstrates integrated scientific and mythopoetic insights from an early age. Similarly, she would continue to express ideas of physical and mystical union throughout her life and career.

Spielrein's Will also recalls Honoré de Balzac's *The Fatal Skin*, wherein Balzac describes the depth of grief: "Ordinary people suffer a fall without serious hurt, like children who tumble such a short distance that they get up unharmed. When a great soul is smashed to pieces, however, he must have fallen from a great height, or from the skies where he had glimpsed a paradise beyond his reach."¹⁶ It is possible that Spielrein, in her "great soul" and deep grief, was for a time unable to process the effects of death in a manner acceptable to those around her. Perhaps she expressed her emotion in writing as a way of transforming her feelings as they manifested after the death of her "favorite" and "beloved" sister, resulting in a period of psychological overwhelm rather than a sustained case of hysteria.¹⁷

The concept of death, and not, it should be noted, of suicide, in Spielrein's will is related in paradisiacal imagery, lending us an alternative interpretation of her mental state, outside of the clinical model; Balzac again relates of his protagonist: "As in the yellowish circles around the eyes and the hectic flush of the cheeks, a doctor might have attributed these to some heart or lung

ailment; but a poet would have seen in these symptoms the ravages of study, shadows left by . . . a passion.”¹⁸ As Balzac underscores that there are more than a few ways to interpret a person’s self-expression and behavior, so too are there multiple interpretations to the less examined “passions” of Spielrein’s writing. As it were, she was effectively “cured” and released from the clinic to begin her studies at the University of Zurich in 1905.

Sabina Spielrein’s Unfortunate Reintroduction to the Academy

Aldo Carotenuto, the author responsible both for rediscovering Spielrein and infusing the academic world with her diaries and letters, is also responsible for the retroactive labeling of Spielrein as a schizophrenic victim poised at the center of a love triangle—and little more.¹⁹ While Carotenuto brought her personal writing to light, he also constructed her narrative as the lovesick mistress with a mental illness, examined only in relation to the interpersonal tension that later arose between Freud and Jung. She is repeatedly staged “in between” the two men rather than beside them, immediately introducing and enforcing a hierarchy of talent, and subliminally blamed as a woman who disrupted the friendship of men. Even her later attempt to reconcile the two theorists is described by him, for an unknown reason, as “pathetic.”²⁰

On June 11, 1909, Spielrein wrote a letter to Freud in attempt to clear her name from Jung’s accusation that she was the instigator of their affair: “4 ½ years ago, Dr. Jung was my doctor, then my friend, and finally my ‘poet,’ i.e. my Beloved. He came to me and it went how it usually does with ‘poetry.’ He preached polygamy, that his wife was supposedly agreeable to it, etc., etc.”²¹ Her letter is said by Carotenuto to be sexually motivated in an attempt to cause tension between Freud and Jung. She is thus transfigured into the image of, in his words, a “sick young girl” caught between two powerful men, though she was at that time a doctoral student and an adult woman in her twenties who had been discharged from the clinic for more than four years.²²

The problem that arises in blaming Spielrein for the tension between Freud and Jung is that it implies she is responsible for the actions of men in her life whether it is Jung’s professional transgressions or Freud’s subsequent unease with them. To be sure, Freud would feel his “personal relationship with your [Spielrein’s] Germanic hero [Jung] has definitely fallen apart. His behavior was too bad. My judgment about him has greatly changed since I received that first letter from you.”²³ Freud’s opinion of Jung changed in the years following his knowledge of the affair, though a split was not cemented between the two until years after Spielrein’s initial 1909 letter, as his above response was not written until 1913. It is also common knowledge that Freud and Jung split largely due to diverging theoretical methodologies. There is also

no evidence whatsoever to support the theory that Spielrein and Freud were anything more than friends and colleagues, which they later became upon her reception into Freud's Psychoanalytic Society, so Carotenuto maligns her reputation with clinical labels and sexual motives that were simply not there. It seems that Spielrein wrote to Freud in the letter above in order to speak to her experience of the affair rather than have her narrative defined for her by Jung.

Immediately suspicious of her motivations even in her later attempts to reconcile the theories of the two men, Carotenuto laid the groundwork for the next thirty years of Spielrein being considered primarily in relation to his own retroactive diagnosis of her as a so-called schizoid, as he further asserts: "We ought to ask ourselves what could have been the motivation that drove her to a unified vision of the two theories . . . any attempt at synthesis can be taken as a difficulty in accepting conflict."²⁴ Spielrein's initial and factual diagnosis of "hysteria" is here transformed into schizophrenia, which is then used by Carotenuto as the guiding lens through which to interpret her diaries, letters, scholarship, and life—all of which were written and/or experienced in the years after her discharge from the clinic. Her life is reorganized around this wrongfully applied stigma, which simultaneously serves to discredit her work.

Carotenuto, a professor of history and Jungian clinician in his own right, continued to find fault with Spielrein's personality: "It is hard to imagine how a person can be incapable of tolerating conflict," as if to suggest that Spielrein was an anomaly in her discomfort with conflict, or to imply that any individual uncomfortable with conflict is therefore schizophrenic.²⁵ It could also be argued that, while living under Nazi occupation and Stalinist communism upon her return to Russia in later life, Spielrein was extremely adept at living under conflict. Strangely, Carotenuto constructs the image of Spielrein in his commentary as a schizoid incapable of conflict after he has already stated that Spielrein was a pathetic hysteric driven to create said conflict, meaning he *creates* a case of dual personality disorder out of his own schizophrenic semantics. Sadly, he is not alone in assigning retroactive diagnoses to Spielrein, as many scholars who came after Carotenuto would rely on his flimsy labels; discussed shortly. Yet it *is* possible to view her as a stable and autonomous scholar as a third option to such characterizations.

By describing Spielrein as "the schizophrenic patient" even after her discharge from the clinic, Carotenuto rubber stamps Spielrein's history with an illness that was never hers.²⁶ To reiterate, Spielrein's letters, diaries, and, of course, the remainder of her life, occurred after her institutionalization. By using mental illness as a weapon, Spielrein is stigmatized in her achievements and the fact that she was able to heal and was in fact "cured," is undermined. She becomes not a woman or a scholar, or a mother, or a person, but *The Ever-Patient*. Amusingly, Carotenuto himself lamented on the dangers of

“rubber-stamping” labels onto patients, though by doing so to Spielrein, he successfully created an academic atmosphere that continues to discredit and suppress her intellectual merit on account of an imagined illness.²⁷

Sabina Spielrein as “Seductress”

It was the noted analyst René Major, in her article “Love for Transference and Passion for Signifiers: Between Sabina S. and Anna G.” (1984), who introduced Spielrein as the seductress, or the *agent provocateur* in regard to her relationship with Jung.²⁸ An “agent provocateur,” by definition, is something or someone that “entices another to commit an act,” and the term is merely used here as a tactic of slut-shaming.²⁹ Major assumes the “act” in question is the affair between Spielrein and Jung; whether the act committed was brought about by suggestion, by desire, or by overt seduction is unclear, but seems to imply that Spielrein, when she was an in-patient of Jung’s, was in a position of acting power. Actually, it was Jung who, as an authority of the clinic, was both psychologically (as her therapist) and professionally responsible for her care. The inherent power imbalance present at the time of her treatment is dismissed by Major in favor of presenting the affair as a transference seduction, or as a “love,” which is a popular narrative frequently associated with Spielrein.³⁰ However, reducing her to the role of the seductress—patient-as-victimizer—not only strips her of her later academic accomplishments, it also undermines the emotional confusion expressed by Spielrein in her diaries and letters at the time of her alleged enticing—topics explored further in the following chapters.

Also problematic when maintaining Spielrein and Jung’s relationship as a “romance” is that it can be used to justify further abuses of power within therapist-client (patient) relationships in general, and reinforces the image of Spielrein-as-mistress. In fact, it is suggested by Major that the alternatives for acting on desire in therapy vacillate between, essentially, *don’t give in* and *do give in*. She relies on the philosophically inclined though dubious “psychoanalytic ethics” of Jacques Lacan, which are rooted in the belief that there are separate ethics for those in the psychoanalytic profession than there are for everyone else.³¹ This implies that those in the psychoanalytic profession hold a large amount of power that *could* be, if one so chose, exerted over a patient as a means of manipulation and control, due to the emotional and psychological vulnerability of a client within the room of his or her therapist. Clearly, these “separate” ethics, when taken to their logical extreme, could be used to erase professional ethics entirely, dismissing the fact that such ethics are in place for the emotional and psychological protection of both client *and* therapist.

Spielrein’s narrative is constructed so that Jung appears to be the conquest of a seductress. In her article, Major quotes an early letter to Freud wherein

Jung claims his strict professional relationship to Spielrein as her (married) doctor, though admittedly under the thrall of her targeted seduction. In this letter, Jung does not admit to wanting to have an affair with Spielrein, but states that he has been compelled by her “sexual wiles,” using language similar to entrapment.³² Spielrein’s perspective is not included, which makes the implication clear: Jung could not help himself because Spielrein tempted him, and demanded it even, with her supposed sexual “wiles.” She is thus cast as a sexual predator and defined by the role of seductress, regardless of the fact that it was not just any man and woman engaged in an affair, but a woman and her therapist. If we were talking about a similar situation today, we would not categorize such a relationship as a romance, but as a felony.

Henry Zvi Lothane, a Jungian analyst and scholar (an exception among those who blame Spielrein for her own death), states in his article “In Defense of Sabina Spielrein” (1996) that while Jung was Spielrein’s outpatient therapist, he accepted no payment, and was therefore exempt from ethical boundaries.³³ However, this statement, if applied to analysis today, suggests that for pro bono work even when done under the guise of therapy, an analyst is under no ethical bounds to refrain from sexual relations with a client. That we are speaking of a case from the early 1900s in no way detracts from this horror; just because an action was normalized does not mean it was justified. Regardless, Spielrein’s family indeed believed Jung to be accountable for acting as a professional toward their daughter. In fact, Jung received a letter to this effect from Spielrein’s mother (which does not survive) and wrote back to her in 1909: “In order to set boundaries on my position as a doctor, which you are hoping that I retain, I suggest you set aside a fee for me as appropriate compensation for my efforts. You can be sure in doing this that I will respect my duty as a doctor under all circumstances.”³⁴ Lothane refers to this letter as justification for an analyst’s behavior, which begs the question: At what price can a patient assume the therapist’s “respect”? Would a sliding scale then be perverted into a hierarchy of ethics?

The late psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, in his response to the affair, asserts that while Jung may not have accepted payment per se, it was common to accept gifts in place of payment, as was actually customary and often expected.³⁵ The idea that Jung’s intimate relationship with Spielrein is excusable solely based on the fact that he was not accepting payment is, then, challenged. Spielrein also explicitly stated, in a letter to Freud in 1909: “She [her mother] had given him gifts instead of money to express her friendly disposition. Of course it all became complicated (because he no longer figured as a doctor to me anymore),” though we know that in Jung’s letter to Freud (noted earlier), he had already admitted to still assuming the role of her doctor.³⁶ Bettelheim also noted that under the clinic’s policy, many doctors treated patients gratis, and

it was actually a call for immediate dismissal should a doctor become sexually involved with his patient, again suggesting less of a “romance” and more of a breach of professional regulations *very much intact* during Jung’s employment.³⁷ Spielrein’s intermittent outpatient treatment with Jung ceased shortly after the above letter was written and their so-called affair ended approximately one year thereafter.

The “irony” in the sound the name “Sabina Spielrein” makes out loud has also been cited as a point of maligning, Major having stated its relation to the German *spielen* and *sauber*, meaning to “play cleanly.”³⁸ While this is an interesting linguistic coincidence, the implication remains unclear as to the meaning of this coincidence: Is Spielrein’s name ironic because she was in fact *not* clean, because she was a “mistress”? Or is it ironic because, during therapy, her “seduction” is seen as synonymous with playing a game? If nothing else, Major’s comment does highlight the dichotomy of “clean” and “dirty” enforced upon female sexuality at the time of Spielrein’s affair, as well as the perpetuation of the Virgin/Whore bipolarity in contemporary culture, as reinforced by such pointed sentiments as these.

Not for nothing, “spiel” is also related to “extravagant speech,” a fitting description considering the intellectual power later displayed by Spielrein. The verb *spielen* in German is also frequently used in regard to “perform,” as in a piece of music, which would also be appropriate given that Spielrein was a gifted pianist and for a time wanted to devote herself to a career in music. Pamela White Hadas, a poet made famous for revisioning mythological stories as well as recreating narratives of unknown women, speaks to this musical understanding of the name *Spielrein* in her poem “Jung and Easily Freudened’: Sabina Spielrein’s Analysis”:

At last, I understand. *Spielrein*:
 plays clean, sublime; plays. All masters flow
 from my fingers, white keys, black keys. Music
 expands all my life contracted.³⁹

Hadas reinforces the notion that many interpretations of Spielrein’s name exist, as many interpretations of her work exist, and she is not confined or limited merely by one.

In her article, and further complicating the details of the “romance,” Major deems it part of a larger “Freudian fiction” rather than as part of actual history.⁴⁰ This should not invalidate Spielrein’s experience nor translate her own account of the affair in her diaries and letters into a “fiction.” But let us first delve into what exactly one means by “Freudian Fiction” by employing James Hillman, who in *Healing Fiction* defines the term as relating to stories told

within the therapeutic process, meaning “tales . . . and primal scenes that had not occurred in the literal historical past.”⁴¹ While Spielrein’s work is subject to interpretation, the actual and substantiated existence of the relationship between her and Jung as viewed through years of correspondence, diaries, and records—the majority of which occurred outside of the therapeutic process—may be understood as “historical” facts.

Still, Major does note with suspicion the erasure of Spielrein from history and implies that forces were devoted to “hiding all traces of [her], as well as of her role in Jung’s life and work, [and] her name in the history of psychoanalysis.”⁴² However, she, too, continued to undermine the validity of Spielrein’s entire existence: “Sabina’s history seems so strange that one has the impression that what is considered reality is a matter of pure fiction.”⁴³ Again, Spielrein’s personal experience is called into question as an attempt to revision her out of her historical narrative. By transforming her into a figure of fiction, or as an *agent provocateur*, doubt is cast upon Spielrein’s perspective, and once this is done, her credibility as a serious scholar is jeopardized. This may be a good time to note that the reason I refer to her by her last name is to purposefully give her the respect that her male peers are regularly afforded, as with Freud or Jung.

Unfortunately, the issue of credibility brings up questions of truth and fiction in cases where inequalities of gender and power are used to invalidate the character of an individual coming forward with his or her own perspective on the “truth.” For example, in the recent controversy surrounding Woody Allen, in a place of fame and power, and his adopted daughter Dylan Farrow, it was *her* credibility that was instantly degraded so that her truth became a work of fiction, while her mental health was questioned and her story mined for fault. Similarly, Bill Cosby’s multiple accusers were, at first, subjected to the same kind of scrutiny, disbelief, and character assassination in order to keep an untainted image of Cosby intact. These stories parallel Spielrein’s, since her history includes a personal account of a relationship with a man of power and stature being turned into a personal delusion, or worse, used to discredit her entire body of work.

Sabina Spielrein as a Scholar

In 1911, upon graduation, Dr. Spielrein joined the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society (VPS), finding acceptance within Freud’s circle and resonating with his methodology, due to Freud’s emphasis on sexuality. It was his associative method, after all, though administered by Jung, which had helped her to heal. Be that as it may, she would always retain her sense of metaphysical and mythological insight, directly influenced by Jung. In Rosemary Balsam’s article, “Women

of the Wednesday Society: The Presentations of Drs. Hilferding, Spielrein, and Hug-Hellmuth” (2003), information is gathered and presented from the minutes of the weekly Wednesday meetings of the VPS; she introduces three pioneering women psychoanalysts of the day and argues: “Some of the ideas that were devalued at the time can now be seen to have foreshadowed the most promising directions in recent analytic thinking.”⁴⁴

At the same time, Balsam immediately devalues Spielrein by stating that she is “ultimately less impressive” than the other two, even though she is the only one who is mentioned—by Freud, no less—as anticipating aspects of his own research.⁴⁵ Also, Spielrein was the youngest woman, at twenty-six, and only the second woman to join as a member of the society. She also presented to the all-male VPS in 1911 and 1912 on the topics of the “death instinct,” death to her necessitating rebirth, particularly in relation to artistic renderings of sexuality, and on female masturbation respectively, and she regularly contributed in conversation during the meetings with such notables as Otto Rank, Sigmund Freud, Hanns Sachs, and Wilhelm Stekel. Under the gender constrictions of the time, given that female sexuality was considered a symptom of “hysteria,” when it was even considered, it may be viewed as distinctly progressive of Spielrein to present on the female perspective of sexuality at all.

The notes taken in 1912 on Spielrein’s latter presentation refer to “female masturbation—hand rubbing . . . ‘psychic masturbation’ stimulated by reading novels or seeing pictures. She [Spielrein] accepts that women are ‘generally more erotic’ than men and that virtually anything can arouse the desire to masturbate [like] listening to music.”⁴⁶ Though a closer look at her presentation may be found in chapter 7, Spielrein’s ideas can be interpreted as anticipating twentieth-century feminist philosophy while challenging the ever-present assumption that women are less sexual or sensual beings than men. Spielrein, in renegade fashion, also presented on a subject that was considered a symptom of the diagnosis she herself had been given years earlier.

A short reflection on European social behavior is in order, to contextualize the climate in which Spielrein was presenting. Dan Agin, a cultural historian and philosopher, states in “An Evil Age: An Essay on Marriage and Sex in the Victorian Era”:

The two great engines of despair during this era were the oppression of women by men and the repression of sexuality by the state and the Church. The consequence could only be the production of misery on a large scale . . . by placing the Victorian woman on a purity pedestal, by making her untouchable and with a distaste for sex . . . boys and girls who sexually transgressed were burdened by guilt.⁴⁷

In addition, the reigning authority on human sexuality in the late 1800s and early 1900s was William Acton's book, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, wherein he states: "I should say that the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind."⁴⁸ Acton, a prominent medical doctor and gynecologist of the time, believed that women "submitted" to sex for the pleasure of their husbands only, and that the sexual impulse in women was a symptom of nymphomania, which was in itself a sign of hysteria.⁴⁹ This is the era into which Spielrein was born and the era in which she experienced "hysteria." This climate, in regard to women's sexuality, lends a deeper understanding into the radical nature of Spielrein's presentation on female eroticism and masturbation in Vienna to a room full of men.

In 1910, just one year before Spielrein joined the VPS, women were not even allowed admittance into the society. Freud, to his credit, later encouraged inclusivity while at the same time expressing: "It is true that women gain nothing by studying."⁵⁰ Fellow member of the VPS Fritz Wittels seemed to agree with Freud on the topic: "The average half-way normal student regards his female colleague as nothing but a prostitute," while others agreed that a woman's position was best as a "mother" or a "nurse," and that a woman's behavior was geared only toward attracting other men.⁵¹ By her immersion in such a hostile environment regarding the nature and status of women, for whom sexuality was equated with hysteria, motherhood, or prostitution, Spielrein may be considered at least a little "impressive." It seems as though Balsam diminishes the importance of Spielrein's presentation in order to elevate the contributions of her other two subjects.

Ironically, though she decidedly states that Spielrein is "less impressive" than the other two, her article's text is devoted mostly to the former's role in the society as well as to her involvement with Freud and Jung. Balsam insinuates that to Freud, Spielrein "could no doubt be cultivated as an attractive spy or courier" due to her relationship with Jung.⁵² However, if this assumption is correct, and the only appealing interest Freud saw in Spielrein was the fact he could turn her into a spy, it does not mean he succeeded. Spielrein had clear ambitions of her own and opinions running at times counter to Freud's (e.g., female sexuality), which suggests she was not a malleable puppet.

Such accusations contribute to the construction of Spielrein's narrative identity as being a woman *between* two men, Freud and Jung, instead of a woman *beside* these two men. The placement of Spielrein between these men actually situates her beneath them, tied to them only as a physical object, as a "spy" or a "mistress," and forever cloaks her in the tattered garment of inferiority. Furthermore, even if Freud initially saw an opportunity, or what he perceived to be an opportunity, to spy on Jung, he and Spielrein soon became friends and fellow colleagues, keeping up a correspondence for the next decade.

Blame is further placed on Spielrein's so-called borderline personality in this article for the tension that subsequently arose between Freud and Jung: "A fracture had been in the making for some time between the two men. However, the potential of borderline patients to turn two people with whom they are involved against each other is a common experience in hospital-ward dynamics."⁵³ Simply put, Spielrein was not a patient (and far from a hospital ward) at the time of Freud and Jung's fracture, but a grown woman and an academic in her own right. Balsam's diagnosis of Spielrein as a "borderline" is retroactive and based primarily on the presumption that she was attempting to do anything other than find her own voice and further her career.

Further invoked is the notion that Spielrein was the reason that Freud and Jung "broke up," or as she states, "helped to drive the wedge between them."⁵⁴ Spielrein is reduced to the status of a malignant and destructive force, and relegated once again to a woman between men and not beside them. Balsam goes so far as to say that Spielrein "may have been more pivotal for psychoanalytic politics than her intellectual work *per se*."⁵⁵ Her role as a *femme fatale* is posited as more notable than her actual life, diaries, or scholarship, the latter of which is seen by Balsam as only derivative of Jung. The notion that Spielrein was pivotal to Jung's early theoretical formations is not considered, nor is the idea that being influenced by a scholar need not be synonymous with being derivative.

Oddly, Spielrein's attempt to reconcile the two men has been so well documented that it has been used as both "proof" of schizophrenia as well as evidence of her role as a nurturing mediator.⁵⁶ Was Spielrein a schizophrenic unable to effectively cope with tension? Was she a hysteric? Was she a borderline who sought chaos? Was she a mediator attempting to unite opposing forces? Or was she simply a female scholar trying to survive in a field dominated by men? I offer this last interpretation as being closest to the truth, with the addition that it was perhaps to her own benefit, should she attempt to bridge the tension between Freud and Jung, that a healed relationship between the two would offer greater academic acceptance to her own interdisciplinary work.

To force Spielrein into the role of a nemesis, or a vengeful mistress, is to disregard her actual independent scholarship and personal life apart from Freud and Jung, including her roles as teacher, psychologist, and mother. Ignoring her contributions by favoring the narrative identity of a *femme fatale* transfigures her into *The Ever-Patient* with motives linked to pathology instead of to intellect. Point of fact: Spielrein had not been institutionalized for seven years when she presented to the VPS in 1912 and had been effectively cured, a point frequently dismissed.

Balsam cites a footnote written by the editor of the VPS's *Minutes* that states: "Spielrein was my colleague at medical school . . . she suffered a psychotic episode," interpreted as a "warning to the reader."⁵⁷ It is unclear whether

or not this warning refers to the episode in Spielrein's past, though the point is rather moot considering that this information is only used to discredit and suppress her scholarship. In the construction of Spielrein as an inferior scholar, Balsam also asserts: "At this stage of her career, when she was writing extremely ambitious theoretical papers, Spielrein had had no clinical experience other than her own."⁵⁸ This statement is markedly untrue, as she had worked tirelessly with a schizophrenic patient in preparation for her dissertation (on the mythic structure of schizophrenia) and had clinical experience with female patients prior to her presentation to the VPS. Spielrein's competence and authority need not have been demeaned in order for Freud and Jung to maintain theirs.

This inferiorizing of Spielrein continues when Balsam goes on to say that: "[Spielrein's] intellectual life seems to have been dominated by whatever male [e.g., Jung, Freud, and later, child psychologist Jean Piaget] was her champion."⁵⁹ Jung, who helped her to heal from adolescent trauma, also engaged in an affair with her at the time, and in doing so may be titled something other than a "champion." Freud, too, while having a profound influence on Spielrein's theoretical methodology, can be considered an "influence" rather than a dominating power. Like her male colleagues, Spielrein was extremely affected by Freud, though she is the only one to be considered "dominated."

The implicit objective of identifying Spielrein as "dominated" is to suggest she is submissive, or subject to male power with no autonomous merit. It is to also bring the sludge of gender politics into academia, where Spielrein, as a woman, is viewed as being dominated rather than purely influenced. The very fact that she presented on topics such as female sexuality to a society that previously did not accept women as members is a testament of her own thinking, her own agenda, and her own ambition as a scholar. Had her ideas been well received, instead of merely tolerated by her peers, as is intimated, perhaps her work would be more widely known and appreciated.

Historian Mireille Cifali iterates that the famed child psychologist Jean Piaget was briefly Spielrein's patient in the 1920s during her time in Geneva: "She is praised for her moral qualities, her serene stoicism and her intellectual qualities . . . her name appears with Piaget's, who mentions her in his work . . . but she resists confining herself to a solely Piagetian orientation," instead insisting that "'his construction of reality in the infant,' is . . . too one-sided."⁶⁰ Cifali, in her thoughtful piece, regards Spielrein as *with* Piaget, rather than beneath him or "dominated" by him. In this recounting, Spielrein forms and maintains her own opinions even if they diverge from an esteemed male peer. Further, Piaget could hardly be viewed as Spielrein's "champion," since he regarded her with some suspicion after negatively associating her with his own mother; though, to be fair, he also granted her scholarship its originality.⁶¹ Her influence on Piaget has yet to be fully explored.

Strangely, Spielrein's other notable presentation to the society has been similarly regarded as symptomatic of mental illness. In this presentation in November 1911, primarily dedicated to the "death instinct," or the mystical idea that lovers want to dissolve into each other, Spielrein also set forth an idea of an archaic (archetypal) mother image that exists in the psyche unbounded by time, citing "The Mothers" in *Faust* as an example; she also expanded on the theory that experiences in childhood affect an adult's older life. Nonetheless, her line of thinking was linked by Balsam to Spielrein's "borderline personality." To her, Spielrein's "imaginative and globally ranging style of mind" is used as evidence of such psychological "vagueness," rather than being an example of an *imaginative and globally ranging mind*.⁶² In this narrative construction, Spielrein is not an interdisciplinary scholar, but is again transformed into *The Ever-Patient*, both demeaned and dismissed. It is also of note that Balsam's other two female subjects were, like Spielrein, killed during the Holocaust, though neither is accused, as is Spielrein, of having been suicidal at the time.

Why Spielrein's understanding of mythology and psychology is linked to mental illness instead of innate intelligence seems an attempt to suppress her voice and confine her within the role of a dominated woman. Additionally, her personal and professional work is continuously mined for "proof" of an illness rather than explored for its psychological and philosophical significance. The question arises: Is it possible to view Spielrein's life and work without a diminutive label that seeks to undermine the value of her work?

Spielrein's fascination with the concepts of life and death is further claimed to be "dependent" on Freud and Jung, which dismisses Spielrein's own childhood confrontation with mortality after the death of her sister, following which she wrote her last will, which very clearly demonstrates preexisting mythopoetic and scientific interests.⁶³ The suggestion that Spielrein's interest was dependent upon men is defamatory and inflammatory. In relation to such a notion, Ovcharenko, like Carotenuto before him, classifies Spielrein as a "schizophrenic" due, it would seem, to the challenges she posed to the men of the VPS, as it is documented that her theories "did not fit" with theirs, presumably because of her emphasis on male *and* female sexuality.⁶⁴

Spielrein's gender is rarely examined in relation to her academic reception, though her experience finds imaginal representation in Sylvia Plath's poem, "Edge:" "Woman" is described as "perfected" and smiling, though her body remains stone "dead" as her inanimate children suckle at her two emptied and dried "pitchers" of milk.⁶⁵ In the poem, "Woman" is perfected in gruesome irony, and in reality rendered an idle statue while the milk that was once nourishing is transformed into nothingness. Similarly, when the vitality of Spielrein's work is transfigured into an image of seduction or mental illness, her "children," or her words, are stripped of life. This metaphor of vital female

autonomy emptied of its meaning resurfaces when scholars slap Spielrein with the label of schizophrenia.⁶⁶

As if that weren't unsettling enough, Ovcharenko cited her work on the "death instinct" as nothing more than "her own psychological baggage."⁶⁷ Academic research is rarely, if ever, considered "baggage" in relation to Spielrein's male counterparts and such a characterization infantilizes and condescends her contributions, both personal and professional, to the field. Instead of being touted as intellectual prowess, her work is consistently viewed as a lingering effect from her relationship with Jung, which fails to recognize the fact that her scholarship continued for thirty years *after* the so-called affair and encompassed much more than her theory of a "death instinct." That her life influenced her work is clear, in the way that a subjective experience may influence a passionate interest in academic research for any scholar, male or female.

In her book, *Jewish Women in Fin de Siècle Vienna*, Alison Rose includes Sabina Spielrein as a woman of Freud's circle and an eminent figure in the history of the field, but maligns her nonetheless as being important due to her having been Jung's patient with "a preoccupation with defecation . . . masochistic fantasies," and a woman that merely embodied Jung's "Jewess" fantasy.⁶⁸ While Rose briefly mentions Spielrein's membership in the VPS, she quickly reverts to describing her as the woman who "may have contributed to the growing animosity between Jung and Freud," thus concluding her study of Spielrein.⁶⁹ The fact that Spielrein's clinical record, or her behavior as a teenager when under emotional duress, is continuously used against her character and her work further promotes the construction of Spielrein as *The Ever-Patient*. Such a construction also entirely dismisses what is *in* her work.

However, in 2006, Jungian analyst Brian Skea underscored the original "hysterical" diagnosis given to Spielrein, contrary to the later diagnoses of "schizophrenia" (see Carotenuto in 1982) and "borderline personality" (see Hoffer in 2001; Balsam in 2003).⁷⁰ He also rightly reminds us that her symptoms remitted after a few months in the clinic. Aiding in the construction of Spielrein's narrative as an autonomous woman in his article, Skea points out that she graduated with honors in psychiatry, finishing her dissertation under Jung's supervision in 1911.

In her doctoral work, she conducted interviews with a schizophrenic patient and linked her patient's "psychoses" to an alternatively patterned way of thinking and speaking as found in mythology, folktales, dreams, and alchemy—at a time when Spielrein herself had been influenced by *Visions of Zosimos*, Zosimos being a mystic of figure of the Gnostic tradition defined by his search for wisdom and enlightenment in the third and fourth centuries CE. Spielrein's own integrative and interdisciplinary research style enabled her to

recognize her patient's fantasies as not simply the ranting of an ill patient, but as the language of myth. Spielrein was thus one of the first people in history to write on the presence of myth in an individual's mind.

While Hillman claimed that "Jung was perhaps the first in our time to understand the psychic reality as myth; this he learned from the tales told him by his psychiatric charges at Zurich's Burghölzli asylum," Spielrein was among the first to understand the mythic structure of the psyche and relay her findings.⁷¹ Jung, then, did not learn solely from "psychiatric charges," but also from his young doctoral student's dissertation. Again, her contribution fades from history as her character is fused with the erroneous image of a woman institutionalized.

Spielrein also posited that mythic symbols ordered the patient's chaos, and would later argue, anticipating internationally regarded mythologist Joseph Campbell, that this kind of mythic imagination was not only present in schizophrenics but in each individual's psyche, and that the symbols and complexes "do not belong merely to personal experiences, for we also have inherited a deposit of ancestral experiences," meaning, "the language of the mythological thought process."⁷² It appears as though Spielrein gave voice to the meaning of mythology in the modern imagination, as influenced by prototypical, ancestral, and primordial images. In her writing, one is reminded of Jung's later definition of the term *archetype*, or "archaic remnants" that he found to be present in dream images, art, and religious literature.⁷³ Sounding uncannily similar to Spielrein, Jung would suggest that the symbol-making aspect of the psyche is accessed through "ideas, myths, and rites."⁷⁴

Brian Skea maintained: "Despite immersing herself in Frau M's [Spielrein's patient] psychotic material, Spielrein was able to maintain her objective stance and successfully wrote it up . . . I believe a case can be made for recognizing Spielrein as an important contributor to Jung's emerging theory of the collective unconscious."⁷⁵ Spielrein was decidedly objective in her doctoral training, and not schizophrenic or borderline or hysterical. Here, she has finally been presented not as a patient or as Jung's mistress, but as a successful professional distinctly *not* caught up in her patient's psychosis. Spielrein's work may be considered pivotal to fundamental ideas in depth psychology.

These dates are rather important, due to Jung's published work, *Symbols of Transformation*, in 1912, in which Jung defers to Spielrein's work on multiple occasions in reference to her case studies, formulation on archaic symbols, and the "death instinct." In a footnote:

I wish to refer here to the interesting correlation of mythological and pathological forms disclosed in the analytic investigation of Dr.

S. Spielrein, and expressly emphasize that she has discovered the symbolisms presented by her in the *Jahrbuch*, through independent experimental work, in no way connected with my work.⁷⁶

This footnote has since been omitted from subsequent editions, though Jung cited Spielrein's research as being conducted in 1912, rather than in 1911. This is a slight error but one in which Spielrein's research can be understood as occurring *before* Jung's; though the article that appeared in the *Jahrbuch* was not published until 1912, it developed directly from her dissertation's material, published in 1911. This issue of primacy will be discussed again in chapter 6 through the letters between Jung and Spielrein, where she is very clearly acknowledged by him as having been original in her research.

By Jung admitting that her work was "in no way connected" to his own, one may conclude that Spielrein was capable without being "dominated" by him, as has been previously suggested. Skea asserted, quite contrary to popular opinion: "For this reason, I consider Spielrein to be the first into print with examples of mythological motifs arising out of a case study conducted by the author."⁷⁷ Regardless of who was "first," Spielrein publishing in the field of mythology as a woman in 1911 is still quite a feat, though the entirety of her dissertation remains untranslated.⁷⁸

Sabina Spielrein's Marriage

Spielrein married Dr. Pavel (Paul) Scheftel in Summer 1912, of which little is known, and gave birth to their daughter Renata, meaning "rebirth," in 1913. Though he left her in 1915, due to Spielrein's choice to continue her professional career outside of Russia, they would later reconcile and have a second child in 1926, before his health-related death in the 1930s. In a 1996 article, psychoanalyst and author Zvi Lothane judges her marriage as "without love" and as a quick, misguided attempt to forget Jung.⁷⁹ In this characterization, Spielrein's own volition is dismissed, as is her ability to love a man other than Jung. The fact that she married quickly does not negate the possibility for love, nor does it mean—granting the assumption that she still harbored feelings for Jung—that she was unable to love more than one man simultaneously, which would undermine the sterile depiction of her marriage. No matter, as any opinion here is pure speculation, since so little is actually known about their relationship.

As a result of her choice not to follow her husband, Spielrein continued her career as a young psychoanalyst: she went on to practice in Berlin, Vienna, Geneva, and Zurich; she studied music composition and was a passionate pianist; she became fluent in three languages (Russian, German, and French,