

# SUBLIMINAL THOUGHT ACCORDING TO SABINA SPIELREIN'S PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

*O PENSAMENTO SUBLIMINAR SEGUNDO A  
TEORIA PSICANALÍTICA DE SABINA SPIELREIN*

*EL PENSAMIENTO SUBLIMINAL SEGÚN LA TEORÍA  
PSICOANALÍTICA DE SABINA SPIELREIN*

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## RESUMO

Nas últimas décadas, a importância e o ineditismo das ideias da psicanalista russa Sabina Spielrein têm sido reconhecidos. No entanto, ainda são poucos os trabalhos que se dedicam a uma análise minuciosa de sua teoria, de forma que uma avaliação mais precisa do papel desempenhado por ela na história das ideias psicológicas ainda não foi plenamente alcançada. Ao longo de toda a sua obra, Spielrein procurou compreender as características do funcionamento mental subliminar, e essa foi uma de suas principais contribuições para a psicologia. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar as ideias centrais que a autora elaborou sobre esse tipo de processo mental. Essas ideias foram desenvolvidas através de suas tentativas de compreensão dos sintomas esquizofrênicos, do pensamento infantil, dos sonhos, fenômenos hipnagógicos e sintomas afásicos, assim como a partir de dados fornecidos por pesquisas na área da linguística. Argumenta-se que ela formulou uma teoria original sobre o pensamento subliminar a partir de uma abordagem inovadora no âmbito da psicanálise.

*Palavras-chave:* teoria psicanalítica; Sabina Spielrein; pensamento subliminar; subconsciente; simbolismo.

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**ABSTRACT**

In recent decades, the importance and novelty of the ideas of the Russian psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein have been acknowledged. However, there are so far few works dedicated to a thorough analysis of her theory. Hence, a more precise assessment of the role she played in the history of psychological concepts has not yet been fully achieved. Throughout her work, Spielrein sought to understand the characteristics of subliminal mental functioning, which was one of her major contributions to psychology. The objective of this article is to analyze her main ideas regarding this type of mental process as she presented them during the course of her research. She developed such ideas in her attempts to understand schizophrenic symptoms and in her analyses of thought processes in children, dreams, hypnagogic phenomena, aphasic symptoms, and data resulting from research in the field of linguistics. We conclude that she formulated an original theory on subliminal thought, derived from her innovative psychoanalytic approach.

*Keywords:* psychoanalytic theory; Sabina Spielrein; subliminal thought; subconscious; symbolism.

**RESUMEN**

En las últimas décadas, la importancia y la originalidad de las ideas de la psicoanalista rusa Sabina Spielrein han sido reconocidas. Sin embargo, son todavía pocos los trabajos que se dedican a un análisis minucioso de su teoría, de modo que una evaluación más precisa del papel que ella desempeñó en la historia de las ideas psicológicas aún no ha sido alcanzado plenamente. A lo largo de toda su obra, Spielrein intentó comprender las características del funcionamiento mental subliminal y esa fue una de sus principales contribuciones a la psicología. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las ideas centrales que la autora elaboró en su obra sobre ese tipo de procesos mentales. Estas ideas fueron desarrolladas por ella en sus intentos de comprensión de los síntomas esquizofrénicos, en el análisis del pensamiento infantil, sueños, fenómenos hipnagógicos y síntomas afásicos, así como a partir de datos proporcionados por investigaciones en el área de la lingüística. Se argumenta, en fin, que ella formuló una teoría original sobre el pensamiento subliminal, que resultó de un enfoque innovador en el ámbito del psicoanálisis.

*Palabras clave:* teoría psicoanalítica; Sabina Spielrein; pensamiento subliminal; subconsciente; simbolismo.

## Introduction

Despite the originality of the theoretical and clinical proposals made by Russian physician and psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein (1885-1942), and in spite of her pioneering contributions in various areas, she remained forgotten for a very long time. According to Ovcharenko (1999), Spielrein began to reappear in the history of psychoanalysis after McGuire published, in 1974, correspondence between Freud and Jung, in which she is mentioned. Nonetheless, interest in the author mainly grew subsequent to the publication of the book *A Secret Symmetry: Sabina Spielrein between Jung and Freud* (Carotenuto, 1980/1984). As pointed out by Noth (2015), subsequent to Carotenuto's publication the view that came to prevail with respect to Spielrein was largely based on the assumption that her theoretical production depended exclusively on Freud and Jung. In recent decades, however, the importance and originality of Spielrein's ideas have been increasingly recognized, although there still are very few works dedicated to making a thorough analysis of her theory, such that a more precise assessment of the role she played in the history of psychological concepts has not yet been fully achieved.

In her first two publications, *On the Psychological Content of a Case of Schizophrenia* (Spielrein, 1911/2014) and *Destruction as the Cause of Becoming* (Spielrein, 1912/2014), Spielrein presented several hypotheses regarding schizophrenia and mental functioning in general, especially with regard to unconscious mental functioning, which subsequently came to be called "subconscious" or "subliminal thought". As of the publication of her following work, *Contributions to Understanding a Child's Mind* (Spielrein, 1912b), she began focusing on child psychology; and, as of 1920, the development of children's thinking and language became the main focal point of her investigations. As commented by Santiago-Delefosse and Delefosse (2002), Spielrein was the first analyst dedicated to understanding the relationships between child language and child development. According to the author herself, in *Time in Subliminal Psychic Life* (Spielrein, 1923b), it was her interest in understanding subconscious mental processes that led her to study child thought, due to her observation that such processes present the same characteristics as child thought exhibits.

One may say that, in her entire theory, Spielrein sought to elucidate the characteristics of subconscious mental processes and that this was one of her main contributions to understanding the psyche. The objective of the present article is to analyze and discuss the central ideas about this type of mental functioning that

the author presented throughout the course of her research. We aim to demonstrate that she developed an original theory and adopted an innovative approach in the area of psychiatry.

## Spielrein's Initial Theoretical Formulation

In her first published work, *On the Psychological Content of a Case of Schizophrenia* (Spielrein, 1911/2014), Spielrein presented an idea that would become central in her entire theory: the notion that very longstanding modes of thought influence our awareness of the present. Two hypotheses are implied here: first of all, that all of our conscious experiences are accompanied by unconscious experiences and that the latter establish the emotional tone of the former; and second, that the unconscious mind possesses records of experiences that go beyond the scope of the individual experience, for, in the author's own words, "we also inherit the sedimentation of the experiences of our ancestors" (Spielrein, 1911/2014, p. 213). This phylogenetic view of the psyche, as Spielrein called it, would come to permeate her entire theory and constitute one of its main ideas.

As illustrated by the author, when we feel pleasure while listening to a story, we get the impression that the pleasant feeling is related to the present content of the representation, for we experience the pleasant feeling in the present. Nonetheless, the truth is that our pleasure derives from past experiences, which are related not only to our own personal experiences, but also to ancestral experiences. Past representations associated with pleasure are triggered by the present experience, so that such a feeling is experienced when the new content of the representation comes into contact with the old. With this in mind, Spielrein contended that the unconscious dilutes the present into a past that transcends the individual experience. In the unconscious mind, we find something that is beyond time, or is simultaneously present, past and future. In her subsequent writings, as we shall see further ahead, she developed this notion in greater depth.

The ideas formulated by Spielrein in 1911 were further developed in her work published the following year, *Destruction as the Cause of Becoming* (Spielrein, 1912/2014). In it, Spielrein revisited her hypothesis that every conscious experience is accompanied by an unconscious experience and she explained that unconscious thought expresses conscious thought by way of a primitive form of symbolization; that is, it transforms the conscious thought according to the language of the unconscious.

The author pointed out that hypnagogic phenomena, which were previously described by Viennese psychoanalyst Herbert Silberer (1909), exemplify this characteristic of mental processes. In *Time in Subliminal Psychic Life* (Spielrein, 1923b), she commented that these phenomena consist of an elaboration of our present situation and that, little by little, such a state is transformed into a dream, just as hypnagogic hallucinations are transformed into dream images.

One of Silberer's examples that she mentioned is the conscious thought, "I want to improve a rough piece" (of a work), which, in a hypnagogic state, is accompanied by a symbolic thought in which the individual sees himself planing a piece of wood. Spielrein (1912/2014) explained that this example illustrates how a line of thought suitable to the present is adapted, in the unconscious mind, to past experiences of countless generations. The expression "rough piece" of the work would theoretically be extracted, by analogy, from other representational content, i.e., that of planing wood. In the conscious mind, the meaning of the expression would be appropriate to the present. Nonetheless, the unconscious mind would go back to giving the words their original meaning, i.e., a rough/coarse piece of wood that is smoothed out with a plane. As explained by the author, the present act of improving the work is thus transformed into the act of planing wood, which was done so often by our ancestors.

Accordingly, to Spielrein (1912/2014), the unconscious would dissolve and assimilate conscious experiences into past experiences. In this process, a personal experience would be transformed into an experience of the species, such that personal characteristics would be eliminated; that is, the "self" would be dissolved into the "us". According to the theory she elaborated in *Destruction as the Cause of Becoming* (Spielrein, 1912/2014), two antagonistic flows exist that reflect the opposition between the two parts that make up the psyche: the "ego-psyche" (*Ichpsyche*) and the "species-psyche" (*Artpsyche*). The latter would contain records of experiences of the past of the species, whereas the former would contain mnemonic records of personal experiences.

The species-psyche would have a "tendency to dissolve and assimilate" the individual content into the collective content, which would be a psychic expression of the drives of preservation of the species. In contrast, the ego-psyche would exhibit a tendency to maintain the present state of the self, which would be an expression of the drives of self-preservation. Hence, the two psyches would remain in conflict, for they would be driven by opposing tendencies.<sup>1</sup>

Elaborated in her first two published works, these hypotheses were developed into a more ample theory of the mind in the letters Spielrein wrote to Jung between 1917 and 1918.

## Development of the Concept of the Subconscious

Between 1908 and 1919, Spielrein and Jung exchanged correspondence in which they discussed personal questions, their theoretical hypotheses, and Freudian concepts. In her letters from 1917 to 1918, Spielrein elaborated a theory about the subconscious, encompassing the split between a species-psyche and an ego-psyche, as well as other elements. The theory consists of a development of the concepts she presented in her writings from 1911 to 1912, and constitutes the basis of her subsequent theory, as was pointed out by Cromberg (2014). In her works published between 1921 and 1923, she reexamined some of the ideas presented in her letters and continued developing her theory of the subconscious.

According to the theory Spielrein expounded on in her letter to Jung dated December 20, 1917, the psyche consists of both a conscious domain and a subconscious domain (*Unterbewusste*). In turn, the latter consists of three realms: the “side-conscious” (*Seitenbewusstsein*), the “pre-conscious” (*Vorbewusste*) and the “unconscious” (*Unbewusste*). She proposed the designation “unconscious” for that part of the psyche that is the target of repression, that is, blocked by the censorship exercised by the pre-conscious. She characterized the latter as a force that separates, somewhere in the subconscious, certain infantile impulses, impeding them from penetrating the conscious mind. Hence, through the action of the pre-conscious (censorship), the unconscious emerges in the subconscious as a differentiated area that has no access to the conscious.

Spielrein designated as the “side-conscious” a mental realm that was excluded from conscious thought, but that, contrary to the unconscious, would continue to have access to the conscious mind. The side-conscious would also possess material originating from the experiences of the species, such that the species-psyche, described in 1912, would be there.

According to Spielrein, the conscious possesses a type of directed thought, opposed to non-directed thought, that characterizes subconscious functioning, which is also called “subliminal thought”.<sup>2</sup> According to her theory, some complexes are excluded from directed thought for emotional reasons. As explained by the author, such complexes, however, contrary to unconscious representations, could become conscious, for they would not have been separated from the conscious through the action of censorship. As was elucidated by Cromberg (2014), Spielrein differentiated *Unterdrückung* (suppression) from *Verdrängung* (repression): The former mechanism operates between the conscious and the subconscious (side-conscious), whereas the latter acts between the subconscious and the unconscious.

The subconscious part excluded from directed thought (the target of *Unterdrückung*) and the subconscious part consisting of the censored material (the target of *Verdrängung*) would be made up of content deriving from personal experience. One could say that these two parts of the subconscious correspond to the “ego-psyche”, which was described by Spielrein in 1912. Nevertheless, as aforementioned, the subconscious also contains material that transcends individual life, such that we may infer that the subconscious also contains the “species-psyche”.

In that letter dated December 20, 1917, the author mentioned that individual mental life extends to the species-psyche and argued, “the subconscious possesses a high moral culture since it is a depository of the entire historical series of evolution” (Spielrein, 1917/2014, p. 373). Further on in the letter, she differentiated between a “personal subconscious” and a “collective subconscious”.

Spielrein contended that the repressed material is expressed in the non-repressed subconscious by way of subliminal symbols, which represent formations of commitment between the repressed unconscious desires and the most sublime tendencies. Nonetheless, such subliminal symbols express not only the unconscious, but also archaic representations, which pertain to the collective psychology, as well as bodily sensations. In her letter dated January 6, 1918, Spielrein described subliminal symbolism in the following manner:

Up to a certain level, it possesses an individual nature; beyond that, delving deeper, it always becomes more archaic, the content of the individual conscious is transformed into the content of the conscious of the species, individual problems are transformed into archaic problems, etc., from which new individual problems and their solutions crystalize; and it can proceed on its course to the conscious. (Spielrein, 1917-1919/1984, p. 143)

With these hypotheses regarding symbolism, the author developed the idea (which she had introduced in her first two publications) that every conscious thought is accompanied by a parallel thought, which transforms it according to an archaic mode of functioning. However, at that point, she formulated a more precise hypothesis as to what subliminal symbols consist of: In addition to expressing archaic content, they also express bodily sensations and repressed representations.

In her December 20th letter, in order to illustrate the symbolism of subliminal thought, Spielrein reexamined another hypnagogic-state example fur-

nished by Silberer that had already been mentioned in *Destruction as the Cause of Becoming* (Spielrein, 1912/2014). In the example, a person relates that, after contemplating the “progress of the human spirit in the complicated dark realm of the Mothers-problem (Faust, Part II)” (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 233), the following symbolic thought emerged in a hypnagogic state: “I am standing on a lonely stone pier extending out into a dark sea. The waters of the sea merge at the horizon with the equally darkly toned mysterious black air” (Spielrein, 1912/2014, p. 233).

According to Spielrein (1912/2014), being led into the dark sea corresponds to penetrating the dark problem. The merging of the air and the water, the blending of the upper and lower parts, symbolizes that in mothers (as described by Mephistopheles) all times and places merge. The author explained that, in this example, as in the thinking of ancient peoples, the sea is seen as the mother, as the creative maternal water, from which everything emerges. The sea (the “mother”) that is penetrated is the dark problem, the state in which time, place and opposites do not exist. As affirmed by the author, the image of the sea (mother) is, at the same time, the image of the depths of the unconscious, which exists in the present, past and future simultaneously (i.e., beyond time), and for which all places merge and for which opposites have the same meaning.

In the letter dated December 20, 1917, Spielrein returned to this example and added to the previously presented interpretation a possible signification of such symbolic thinking, related to both the unconscious and the body. From the perspective of unconscious desires, the image would symbolize the desire to return to the maternal womb. From the viewpoint of the non-repressed subconscious (side-conscious), the dark sea would be a symbol of the difficult problem turned subconscious and, at the same time, a symbol of many other thoughts tied to it. From the standpoint of organic sensations, one could say that the image of the dark sea, just as the difficulty of the conscious task, is merely an expression and a symbol of respiratory activity that had become more difficult. In her letter, the author contended that this example also illustrates how such symbols are interchangeable, that is, how the subconscious symbolizes the conscious and vice versa. Accordingly, she asserted that subliminal symbolism possesses a composite origin, and she emphasized the overdetermination and reversibility of the symbols.

In *Time in Subliminal Psychic Life* (Spielrein, 1923b), Spielrein proposed that all non-conscious mental life be called “subliminal psychic life” (*Unterschweligen Seelenleben*), although she did continue to use the term “subconscious” on several occasions. Mainly in the above work concerning time and in *Some Analo-*



*gies between Thinking in Children, Aphasia, and the Subconscious Mind* (Spielrein, 1923a), she continued her theorization about the subconscious.

In *Some Analogies between Thinking in Children, Aphasia, and the Subconscious Mind* (Spielrein, 1923a), Spielrein resumed and further developed her hypothesis as to the difference between a consciously directed thought and a non-directed, spontaneous, non-conscious thought. She stressed that this classification is arbitrary, for a strict limit between directed thought and spontaneous thought does not actually exist, just as there is no such limit between the conscious and the subconscious.

The consciously directed thought would be, above all, a verbal thought, whereas the spontaneous thought would have conserved primitive characteristics, as it would mainly be a kinesthetic-visual thought. The author returned to her hypothesis that the two types of thoughts would occur in parallel, such that the conscious processes would always be accompanied by a parallel, organic, hallucinatory thought, which would translate the conscious content into images.

Once again, she mentioned that, principally, hypnagogic phenomena permit observing such subconscious processes in a clear manner. In such phenomena, due to a state of great fatigue, a thought is not directed so sufficiently as to suppress all of the subconscious images, such that it is possible to observe the verbal thought and its visual expression at the same time.

As an example, Spielrein mentioned a hypnagogic state a woman went into after having entertained the thought that life is not worth struggling for because, as soon as you reach the top, something happens that makes you fall and you have to start all over again. In that depressive state, the woman went to lie down and, in a hypnagogic state, saw a beetle climbing a trellis. When it got to the top, something happened to it and it fell and had to start climbing all over again. Spielrein explained that this hypnagogic image was the visual expression of the woman's conscious thought. Such examples clearly illustrate how the subconscious thought expresses in images what the conscious thought expresses in words.

Spielrein (1923a) contended that kinesthetic-visual subconscious images are the vital force of our conscious thoughts. The subconscious thought is the main one, for only the beginning and the end of our thoughts become conscious and everything else takes place in the subconscious. The author commented that, in many cases, subconscious thought can be superior to conscious thought, such as when it permits solving real problems in collaboration with conscious thought. Nonetheless, subliminal processes would presumably lack direction and concentration towards the function of what is real.

Spielrein better explained this characteristic of absence of adaptation to reality in her subsequent works. She complemented her theory of the subconscious by analyzing other primitive forms of thinking, such as those of children and aphasic persons.

## **Subliminal Thought, Children's Thought and Aphasic Thought**

In *Some Analogies between Thinking in Children, Aphasia, and the Subconscious Mind* (Spielrein, 1923a), Spielrein emphasized that comprehension of the characteristics of children's thinking is essential for elucidating subconscious processes. She commented that, although thinking in children, word association in adults, dreams and different mental alienations clearly express subconscious mental functioning, the spontaneous thought does not present itself identically in these different phenomena because, in each one of them, there are differences in the degree of adaptation to reality, differences in the experience expressed in the idea and in the verbal expression, and differences in the emotions involved, among other factors. Despite this fact, there are laws that are common to all spontaneous thoughts; such laws can be inferred through analysis of their different forms. The author sought both to elucidate the central characteristics of children's thought and aphasic thought and to demonstrate, through examples, that both types of thought go back to primitive ways of thinking and that they are thus similar in many aspects. By doing so, she added new elements to her theory.

Spielrein pointed out that there are two attitudes towards reality: either we adapt to it or we adapt it to us. Thinking in children would initially move in the latter direction. Among the impressions that reality gives them, children would presumably select those that go in the direction of a grouping of ideas that already exist. Accordingly, children's thinking, like dream thought, would take from reality what suits the children and distort it. It would achieve in fantasy that which reality refuses the children and would thus be marked by the sensation of omnipotence.

In addition to both the predominance of fantasy to the detriment of reality and the sensation of omnipotence, children's thinking exhibits other peculiarities, she claimed. Spielrein (1923a) explained that such thought is slow and poor in terms of associations and is not necessarily related to a direction, for it simultaneously exhibits two opposing directions. When it arrives at a new idea, it returns to the preceding idea, which is then transplanted into the new idea. Through examples, the author showed that in children's thinking a group of ideas remains

for a long time and the same idea always returns in practically the same verbal form; that is, it “adheres” or “perseveres”.

As the preceding ideas are grafted onto the newly emerging ideas, the phenomenon known as “crossing” arises. Children’s speech is made up of phrases that pertain to different groups (cross-phrases), which are followed, or were preceded, by simple phrases borrowed from another group of ideas. Hence, a condensation of two groups of ideas into a single phrase occurs. Spielrein (1923a) stressed that what makes a group of ideas persist in a spontaneous thought is the affective movement; that is, the emotions related to the ideas cause them to persevere, such that they play a central role in children’s associations.

Through analysis of aphasic symptoms, Spielrein showed that the phenomena of perseverance and crossing also manifest themselves in aphasic people’s language and drawings, and she argued that this is due to their incapacity to maintain a fixed direction in their thinking, as occurs with children. The author contended that, in aphasic thought, as in children’s thought, affectivity wields a great influence, which is demonstrated by the fact that aphasics more easily find lost words that possess significant emotional ties.

This characteristic of aphasic language had already been emphasized by the British neurologist Hughlings Jackson (1884/1958). Spielrein (1923a) agreed with Jackson’s conception that aphasias consist of phenomena involving the dissolution of language functions and that emotional factors significantly determine the symptoms. In such pathologies, more-evolved functioning levels would give rise to more-primitive ways of functioning. We can say that, by demonstrating the similarity between the characteristics of children’s thought and those of aphasic individuals’ thought, Spielrein corroborated Jackson’s hypothesis that, in aphasias, there is a return to primitive modes of thought.

Spielrein (1923a) thus claimed that aphasias demonstrate that, if directed thought is altered by any cause, it undergoes a retrogressive process, in a certain sense turning back into the primitive thinking of children. In her earlier works, she had already contended that this regressive process is present in hypnagogic states, in dreams and in schizophrenic symptoms. The new element she added in 1923 was her demonstration of the analogy that exists between such phenomena, children’s thought and aphasic thought, as well as her description of other central characteristics of such types of thought, which constitute the essence of subliminal mental life.

In *Time in Subliminal Psychic Life* (Spielrein, 1923b), Spielrein sought to understand how time presents itself in subliminal processes, thus giving continuity to her theory.

## Time in Subliminal Thought

Spielrein (1923b) emphasized that it was Freud who laid the foundation for the question of how time presents itself in subliminal mental life when he discussed the structure of dream thought in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900/1998). She argued that three fundamental conditions are linked to consciously directed thought: that of “time”, of “space” and of “causality”. She contended that, in contrast with what Kant presumed, such concepts do not consist of “a priori” categories of thought, but are acquired slowly throughout the course of development. The concept of space would be the first to be acquired; that of causality, the second; and that of time, the last. In the concept of time, it would be necessary to distinguish the “duration” and the “direction”, given that an event can be short-lived or long-lasting and that it can be directed toward the future, the past or somewhere between the two, which corresponds to the present.

In order to support the hypothesis that acquisition of the concept of time occurs last, the author mentioned her observations of her daughter. Among the three fundamental concepts, that of time was the one that caused her daughter, Renata, the greatest difficulty at the age of two years and one and a half months. The little girl thoroughly understood the question “where?” and had a general sense of spatial distance. She knew that things come and go and that something can be far away. Likewise, she understood the question “why?” – but she was unable to comprehend the question “when?” because, to her, only the present existed. She always used verbs in the present tense. For example, when her mother would say, “Renata ate well”, she would reply, “eats well” or “eats”, even when she wasn’t hungry. Spielrein (1923b) explained that children initially behave in a spontaneous manner and that they are mainly interested in what they already have or what they can obtain, which makes their preference for the present and the future understandable, to the detriment of the past. They have no comprehension of the ephemeral nature of things and their constant transformations.

By analyzing the characteristics of dreams, Spielrein (1923b) expanded our comprehension of how time presents itself in primitive mental functioning. In her opinion, dreams blend what was, what is and what will be in a totally arbitrary manner, as if this tripartite division were nonexistent. With this, she returned to the hypothesis presented in her 1911 monograph: that in the unconscious we find something that is simultaneously present, past and future.

Spielrein theorized that in dreams the future is never represented independently, for the notion of the future is suggested by the duration of an ac-

tion, such that the present is also represented. Hence, there would be no real distinction between the present and the future. She commented that a vision of the death of a person we don't like expresses a transformation, in the sense of a coming into being. Every action would be a coming into being and, as such, would announce the future, yet at the same time the action would be a present that persists, a present that is constantly transformed.

Compared to the future (as interpreted in the sense described above), representations of the past are much more rare in dreams, yet at the same time more autonomous, the author affirmed. In order to exemplify this characteristic, she described the dream of a man who, after deciding to separate from his wife (which caused him great suffering), had a dream in which she appeared as a moss-covered object. Spielrein believed that this image was an expression of the man's desire to have had already come to grips with the painful moment of the separation, as if it had become a thing of the past, covered with moss. Hence, his dream used the past to free him from his painful impressions. The author concluded that, just like the future, the past is not understood in dreams in the sense in which we understand it, for the focus is not on what was, but rather on what is no longer present. The author explained that small children imagine the past in the same way, for the notion of past comes to them through their noticing the disappearance of something. Accordingly, they would initially conceive the past as a spatial distancing/separation, since they would not comprehend that the object might no longer exist.

Spielrein (1923b) contended that the results of studies in the area of linguistics are, in certain aspects, surprisingly similar to the results of research on dreams and that they make it possible to confirm the supposition that languages lacking the distinction between present, past and future can exist.

Spielrein explained that, like dream thought, language differentiates the past much more than the future in relation to the present, and that expressing the future is a much more recent phenomenon. The future tense is a temporal form that is constructed differently in each group of languages, and it takes root only with great difficulty, which makes it oscillate continuously. She elucidated that the verb form "amo, amabo" of the Latin language is completely autonomous and is a form that is not found in any of the other Indo-European languages. She then cited various examples of how the future is represented in those languages:

The Roman languages (French, Italian, etc.) form their future tense via paraphrases, such as the Latin form 'amare habeo' (literally translated as 'I have to love' = I shall love), which, translated

into French, would be ‘j’ai (à) aimer’. Instead, we have the inverse construction ‘(je) aimer ai’, which was later contracted, becoming ‘j’aimerai’. As an expression of the future, ‘I shall’ can also be found in the English language; we thus have, for example, ‘I shall love’. In the same manner, the British use ‘I will’ (I will love). By way of the auxiliary verb ‘will’, they initially highlight the intention, and that conveys the idea of an action underway, that is, of a future. The German language recognizes (as dreams do) a lasting present, ‘werden’ (come to), for the future tense. Currently, one no longer sees ‘werden’, yet it did exist originally. The term extends the idea of the action, such as the idea of writing, and the duration activated in this manner should give us an idea of the future: ‘ich werde schreiben’ (I [will] *come to* write). The Germans also say, ‘ich will schreiben’ (I will write). (Spielrein, 1923b, p. 307-08)<sup>3</sup>

Spielrein (1923b) contended that another analogy with the language of dreams is the fact, demonstrated by the linguist Bally, that all preverbs (separable verb prefixes) and all adverbs of time were created based on spatial representations, e.g., the French word “*après*” (after) – formed from “*près*” (“near”, “beside”) – and “*tard*” (late) – formed from the Latin word “*tardus*” (“slow”, in the sense of movement in space). She concluded that, just as in dreams, in language the representation of a temporal direction is based on the subliminal representation of a passage through space.

In light of these facts, the author raised the question of why language is so unsuitable to conscious thought and why it exhibits so many similarities to dreams if it was formed consciously. She also queried as to why the concept of temporal direction is expressed in such an incomplete manner in so many languages; why, as in dream thought, the duration appears in lieu of the direction; and why the past is more autonomous than the future in relation to the present. Her answer was that such characteristics are due to the fact that verbal language, like dreams, creates its representations from non-conscious materials. She claimed that language is essentially constructed in the subconscious, an idea that she first presented in her text *The origin of the child’s words ‘Papa’ and ‘Mama’* (Spielrein, 1922).

The fact that language is presumably formed in the subconscious would make the preservation of primitive forms of symbolization in language understandable. She stated that language “is always more archaic than thought is; it brings with it forms of thought that we already went beyond long ago. Cen-

turies are necessary for us to free ourselves from a linguistic stupidity that we consciously perceive” (Spielrein, 1923b, p. 307).

Spielrein commented that linguists presume the existence of a law of inertia, or of persistence, of linguistic forms that are more archaic. She argued that such stagnation results from a tendency, which is present in mental functioning, to relive what has already occurred. In her own words:

Nature knows no stagnation. The inertia that opposes the continuation of any and all development is thus a force that acts within us in the opposite direction, a desire to assimilate everything that is new into what already exists, an impetus to constantly relive what has already occurred. As aforementioned, if we comprehend inertia in a dynamic manner, then it is not difficult to unite linguists’ experiences with our own. (Spielrein, 1923b, p. 310-311)

Accordingly, to Spielrein, the inertia that linguists identify as being present in languages is actually a dynamic force that seeks to assimilate what is new into what already exists. In her opinion, there is thus no real inertia, but rather a dynamic tendency toward dissolution and assimilation, which would explain the persistence of primitive forms of thought. With this, she was getting back to the hypothesis she presented in her first two publications: that, in mental functioning, there is a tendency to assimilate current content into past content. In fact, this hypothesis remains implicit throughout her entire theory.

She believed that the conscious mind always seeks a static point in time, to which everything refers. In contrast, subliminal psychic life does exactly the opposite: In it, present experiences are assimilated into past experiences. Nonetheless, what was experienced in the past is also experienced in the present; and, given that the present is a constantly changing duration, we can also experience it as the future, as a coming into being, the author argued. Like early thinking in children, subliminal psychic life is aware of the general duration, which would be both present and future, or a “being present”.

Spielrein conjectured that, over time, a child comes to learn that the desired object might not be present, such that a notion of the past (of not being present) is formed that is opposed to the notion of present and future (being present). The author emphasized that that is all a dream needs to know about the past, which makes it possible to comprehend the manner in which time is represented in it. Accordingly, in dreams, as in early child thought, time is represented

as duration. Since children replace reality with fantasy over a long period of time, representation of temporal direction is rendered useless for quite a while, which is why such representation emerges later on in their development.

To Spielrein (1923b), absence of the concept of temporal direction corresponds to the incapacity to perceive opposites. Both children and dreams do not distinguish opposites because both of them only need the final or future direction. They form a single entity with the direction because the desired object is always present in reality or in fantasy. Little by little, reality compels children to experience the opposite direction as well and to come to know failure and annihilation. In this manner, the notion of antagonism emerges; and through such antagonism, the concept of direction develops.

## Final Considerations

In her first two publications, Spielrein presented the hypothesis that every conscious experience is accompanied by an unconscious experience and that unconscious processes symbolize the conscious experiences according to a primitive form of language and give them their emotional tone. The author claimed that the unconscious contains records of experiences of the past of the species, and she thus proposed a distinction between a species-psyche and an ego-psyche.

In her letters to Jung, she expanded her theoretical formulations and proposed differentiating between the conscious and the subconscious, which she believed to be made up of various domains. In her opinion, the conscious mind exhibits a directed form of thinking, whereas the subconscious employs thought that is not directed, or subliminal. In the letters, in addition to other hypotheses Spielrein expounded on the concept of subliminal symbolism, which emphasizes the overdetermination and reversibility of symbols.

In *Some Analogies between Thinking in Children, Aphasia, and the Subconscious Mind* (Spielrein, 1923a), Spielrein further developed the concepts of directed and non-directed thought, which she had already introduced in her letters to Jung. She contended that non-directed thought is a kinesthetic-visual, organic, hallucinatory form of thinking that expresses in images what conscious thought expresses in words. She theorized that subliminal thought furnishes the vital force of conscious thought and that it is the main form of thought, since only the beginning and the end of our thinking become conscious.

Spielrein demonstrated the analogy between subliminal thought, child thought and aphasic thought and, based on analysis of the latter two, added



new data to her theory. She stressed that primitive thought does not differentiate between the self and the external world, and that it is characterized by the omnipotence and predominance of fantasy. In her opinion, this type of thought has no direction, because it manifests itself in opposite directions simultaneously. Furthermore, she believed that it is significantly determined by emotional factors. The author contended that aphasic symptoms both prove the importance of emotions in determining primitive mental processes and demonstrate that primal modes of mental functioning are restored when consciously directed thought is disturbed. She claimed that this same regressive process is present in dreams, hypnagogic phenomena and mental pathologies.

In *Time in Subliminal Psychic Life* (Spielrein, 1923b), she added to her theory several hypotheses as to how the concept of time is formed and how time presents itself in subliminal thought. She argued that, of the three categories of directed thought, time is the last to develop; and that, in primitive thought, the present and the future are represented as a form of “being present”, which she believed to be related to the initial lack of distinction between fantasy and reality. Temporal notions would initially be represented by spatial conceptions, and the concept of past would emerge through the representation of “not being present”. In primitive thought, time would not be represented in terms of direction, but in terms of duration, and the absence of the concept of temporal direction would be a consequence of the incapacity to distinguish opposites.

Throughout the course of her research, Spielrein progressively constructed an original theory of subliminal mental functioning. She began with the analysis of schizophrenia, neurotic symptoms and hypnagogic phenomena. She then added data from research on children’s thought and language, analysis of dreams and aphasic symptoms, and studies in the area of linguistics. By drawing on elements from these diverse sources in the construction of her theory, she adopted an innovative perspective in the field of psychoanalysis. The richness and originality of her theory thus deserve greater prominence and recognition in the history of psychological concepts.

## About

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A more thorough explanation of Spielrein's initial concepts can be found in Cromberg (2014), Caropreso (2017a) and Caropreso (2017b).

<sup>2</sup> As explained by Vidal (2001), the notion of "directed" and "non-directed" thought was first proposed by Jung in the second part of *Psychology of the Unconscious*, published in 1912.

<sup>3</sup> In all the verbatim passages cited from *Time in Subliminal Psychic Life*, I used the Portuguese-language version of that work, granted by Renata Udler Cromberg, organizer and author of *Sabina Spielrein, uma pioneira da psicanálise, obras completas*, vol. II (*Sabina Spielrein, psychoanalysis pioneer, complete works*, vol. II), already completed and in the process of publication, in which one finds the text translated by Renata Dias Mundt. I thank Renata Cromberg for having made the translated version available.

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