

E. James Lieberman & Robert Kramer (eds), *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank: Inside Psychoanalysis*, The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2012; xi + 365 pp.: 9781421403540, £18.99 (hbk)

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*History of Psychiatry*, June 2013

Otto Rank (1884–1939) was a great many things to Freud and his movement: Secretary to the Wednesday Psychological Society from 1906 and Freud's right hand man as psychoanalysis grew and internationalized; innovator in the application of psychoanalytic theory to culture; stalwart of the 'Secret Committee' during tough times; and latterly major theorist in his own right, pioneering the new therapeutic and analytical ideas – most notably birth trauma – which by the mid-1920s had helped to secure him banishment into the movement's unconscious alongside Adler, Jung and the rest.

The 250 letters from the Freud-Rank correspondence presented here, helpfully contextualized by the editors via an artfully interwoven narrative, offer a compelling sense of this trajectory. The early letters from Rank are unsurprisingly dull: brief exercises in the ingratiating communication of trivia about recent travels, with the odd hint of a half-finished idea here and there; the surviving replies from Freud are fatherly, indulgent, anodyne. The value of these first missives lies chiefly in the shift they help us to trace through Rank's later incarnations.

We move first into the realm of the confident co-conspirator, trading with Freud the terse one-line judgements on new theories and the psychologically speculative barbs about enemies and backsliders familiar to anyone with a passing interest in the history of psychoanalysis. From here we witness the emergence of an Otto Rank able to formalize and to publish guidance on psychoanalytic practice, working alongside another great Freud loyalist, Sandor Ferenczi. At the same time we see Rank developing his defining interest in the developmental importance of 'birth trauma' – the great moment of human separation – and the centrality of the mother-child relationship. If Freud was lukewarm about Ferenczi's and Rank's fast-track 'active therapy' – sceptical that 'deep layers of the unconscious' could be penetrated in scarcely longer than the few months it took his facial scars to settle down after surgery – this was because Freud was reserving most of his energy for doing battle over Rank's birth trauma ideas.

Rank's letters are arguably of more interest than Freud's at this point. Notwithstanding Freud's always-enjoyable prose, students and scholars of psychoanalysis will be wearily familiar with his tactics: professing interest, noting deviations from his ideas, declaring the matter in need of further investigation, and on one occasion appearing to wonder whether Rank wished him dead. Rank, on the other hand, shows every sign of having stepped out of Freud's shadow by now, helped by a successful sojourn in the USA. (Lieberman and Kramer's inspired decision to include other epistolary angles on the Freud-Rank relationship reveals Rank declaring to Ferenczi that he has 'saved the life of psychoanalysis' in the USA, 'and perhaps thereby that of the entire movement'.) An emboldened Rank argues his corner point by point with Freud, accusing him of

misunderstanding his theory and practice, lambasting ‘stupid’ and ‘unworthy’ conspiracies back in Europe, declaring the psychoanalytic movement in any case to be ‘a fiction’, and dropping broad hints about choosing his friends in future from outside the social circle of psychoanalysis.

This was 1924, and aside from a brief recantation at the end of that year – the psychoanalytic equivalent of Communist self-criticism, with Rank blaming his misdemeanours on fear of losing Freud to cancer and on his own weak mental health (framed according to Freudian ideas that Rank had recently been seen to doubt) – Rank’s relationship with Freud was effectively over.

Whether or not there was a deliberate decision by the editors to let the letters do the talking in this collection, the overall effect is a positive one. We might have wished for a lengthier introduction, laying out some of the themes that readers can expect to see playing out in the correspondence: a brief paragraph on this is offered, but feels a little perfunctory. However, useful ground is covered in the Epilogue, where Freud’s and Rank’s approaches to psychoanalysis are systematically juxtaposed: Rank’s interest in art and the subjective versus Freud’s in science and objectivity; Rank’s work on the creative will versus Freud’s sexual theories; and Rank’s therapeutic orientation versus Freud’s abiding commitment to analysis and research.

The collection succeeds as an understated and compelling portrait of an exceptionally talented young man just about surviving his intellectual upbringing in the decidedly strange household that was Freudian psychoanalysis. We are given accessible and authoritative introductions to Rank’s thought, some useful biographical appendices, and the all-important – for a volume of this sort – detailed index. All this will be of great value to those seeking to understand the psychoanalytic movement via the triangulation of Freud’s various correspondences, to anyone wanting a first-hand feel for the movement’s infamous inner politics, and of course to those wanting to know more about Rank, a figure who, as Lieberman and Kramer note, was all but written out of the movement’s mainstream history for many decades.

Freud and Rank died within a few weeks of one another, in the autumn of 1939, having never reconciled. Freud had by turns been regretful, sad, and at pains to appear uninterested in the whole affair. He wrote of the split to Ferenczi in April 1926: ‘I don’t belong to those who demand that one has to manacle and sell oneself for eternity out of ‘gratitude’. [Rank] received much as a gift, and accomplished much in return, so we’re even... we can make the sign of the cross over him.’ (p. 252).