Freud, Patricide, and the Birth of the Hero

A review of

The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank: Inside Psychoanalysis
by Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank; E. James Lieberman and Robert Kramer (Eds.); Gregory C. Richter (Trans.)

Reviewed by
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The previously published correspondence between Sigmund Freud and various associates has both enriched psychoanalytic theory and provided an intimate glimpse into the thoughts, feelings, and social dynamics surrounding the development of possibly the greatest grand theory of personality to have ever emerged. The recently published Letters of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank: Inside Psychoanalysis (edited by E. J. Lieberman and R. Kramer), containing approximately 250 newly available and unpublished letters, should be met, then, with great interest. Furthermore, although Freud’s story has been variously documented and commented upon (e.g., Breger, 2000), the correspondence also promises to shed further light on the lesser known life and contributions of Otto Rank.
Structure and Content

The correspondence between Freud and Rank is relatively small, compared with some of Freud’s other communications, and the letters’ significance would be obscure without context. Addressing this issue, the editors present the letters “within a narrative that provides historical and psychoanalytic context for general readers as well as specialists” (p. vii). Lieberman and Kramer provide an excellent integration of various threads of evidence in the context of both men’s published research and also their other correspondences (e.g., with Ernest Jones and Sándor Ferenczi). The significance of the correspondence is not always clear (e.g., the letters between Rank and Edward Bernays, May 17 and May 19, 1924), but for the most part the surrounding narrative is exemplary.

The chapters themselves are arranged according to historical developments in the psychoanalytic movement, and the editors clearly have extensive knowledge of both psychoanalytic theory and relevant history. The letters themselves contain a mix of day-to-day publishing and practical matters, as well as discussions of family and reports of holidays.

We also see the politics of the psychoanalytic movement: factions in northern and southern Europe, rifts between medical and nonmedical analysts, non-Jewish and Jewish members’ alliances, and dissolving friendships. There is also political maneuvering to protect and consolidate Freud’s psychoanalytic position (e.g., the formation of a secret committee in 1913–1914 to protect the psychoanalytic movement) and arguments ad hominem against rivals and friends alike with respect to theoretical deviations or interests (e.g., patricide and sibling rivalry).

There are also glimpses into Freud’s “unpublished” therapeutic approach that included what might now be considered “desensitization” through exposure. Furthermore, the letters reveal a refreshing glimpse into Freud’s character. Much is often made of Freud’s intolerance of “heresy” (e.g., Breger, 2000), but here we find Freud trying to avoid losing his friend Rank over theoretical issues: “In God’s name, let’s just disagree” (p. 196, letter from Freud to Rank, March, 23, 1924).

Otto Rank

A distinctive contribution is made to the psychobiography of Otto Rank. Rank (born Otto Rosenfeld) was born in 1884 and was 26 years’ Freud’s junior. He is a complex character, “locksmith by training, poet, psychologist and philosopher by nature” (p. 1). In many ways Freud and Rank could not be more different—Rank was a technologically minded, trained
locksmith who enjoyed music, whereas Freud had a medical and academic background, and his distaste for music is well known.

Rank appears to be an astute and innovative writer, addressing topics including art, literature, and mythology (e.g., the “birth of the hero”—Rank, 1909/1952), and his practical contribution to the psychoanalytic movement cannot be overstated. He appears as a driving force behind the psychoanalytic publishing house Psychoanalytischer Verlag, and he cofounded the psychoanalytic journal *Imago* with Hans Sach in 1912 featuring psychoanalytic papers on literature, mythology, and philosophy. However, as the narrative states, we have few glimpses into Rank’s private life, but from the letters in Lieberman and Kramer’s volume, he evidently suffered much personally, in terms of both depression and mania.

**The Story of Rank**

Of major interest is the unfolding story of the relationship between Freud and Rank. Freud was Rank’s mentor and father figure, steering Rank toward a PhD rather than a medical education. Rank was considered “nearest to Freud” (p. 192), and Rank saw himself as “in deepest of all” (p. x). Freud evidently placed a lot of trust in Rank. For instance, Rank was the only analyst who initially knew of Freud’s cancer.

The story of Rank and Freud begins slowly and unremarkably. Rank features initially as a somewhat background and shadowy figure, a workhorse, junior in status, and troubled. He was seen as exceptionally competent by some and “obedient” by others, but all appeared to appreciate his sacrificial service to the development of psychoanalysis.

By the end, however, Rank steps out and stakes his claim as an independent contributor to dynamic psychology. From around 1920, we see theoretical innovations from Rank and greater questioning and challenging of Freud’s ideas. This culminates with an assault on Freud’s centrality of the father and the Oedipus complex, interposing instead the mother as the central figure in the child’s life. We later see Rank’s growing dissatisfaction with the psychoanalytic movement and his leaving Europe for the United States. There the story takes an interesting turn that is best left for the reader to discover.

**Contributions to Theory**

The correspondence does not contain the same profound insights found in some of Freud’s other letters (e.g., the Fliess–Freud collection, containing drafts of some of Freud’s earliest ideas—see Masson, 1985). Nevertheless, with Rank’s growing independence there are some interesting exchanges. For instance, Rank discusses the theory of birth anxiety and
challenges Freud on drive theory (letter dated February 15, 1924). Rank also provides a very interesting self-analysis of dreams (letter to Freud dated October 27, 1925).

This aside, the major theoretical offerings are from the editors. This includes their exposition of Rank’s theoretical contributions (his comparison of the neurotic with the failed artist, his emphasis on the significance of the will, and his existentialist view of consciousness). The editors also provide their own criticisms of Freudian theory in places (e.g., Freud’s interpretation of the Oedipal myth, pp. 96–97).

The Birth of the Hero

The editors provide a generally even-handed and objective approach to the correspondence, but it is apparent that they wish to promote Rank to greater prominence than he currently has. In many respects, this may be justified. Rank’s thinking appears to be well ahead of his time, anticipating what have become staples of current psychoanalytic thinking (for instance, emphasising the present moment as opposed to the past, e.g., Fonagy, 1999; and appreciating intersubjectivity). Highlighting the role of the mother rather than father is also significant.

However, although the editors somewhat romantically note that Rank “adopted his surname from a sympathetic character in Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House” (p. 1), they omit to say that Rank “changed his name due to conflict with his father” (McGuire, 1974, p. 25), a not-insignificant point given Rank’s “patricide” and his insistence on the importance of the mother. The psychoanalytic significance of this and the emotional turmoil between Rank and his father figure, Freud, is also not addressed. There is also no mention of Rank’s mental state during the last decade of his life, which is a major omission, given the story within the correspondence. One wonders, then, whether Rank’s heroics are being highlighted to the detriment of objectivity.

The book’s epilogue also ends on a weak speculative point concerning the missing letters from Freud to Rank from 1916 through 1921. The editors propose that Freud possibly took back the letters in exchange for a promise not to publicly denounce Rank. However, because no evidence for this is provided—nor is there any suggestion anywhere that such an exchange occurred—then this could be considered a cheap shot.

Additionally, although the epilogue provides some good discussion of Rank’s academic contributions after the split with Freud, the “schematic differentiation” (p. 285) therein between Freud and Rank is somewhat overdramatized. It would be unfair, for instance, to say, as stated there, that Freud did not recognize emotional experience and favored only intellectual insight, as is purported (see Boag, 2012, Chapter 8, for the role of emotions in Freudian theory).
Final Words

Nevertheless, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank* is an excellent scholarly resource and makes a substantive contribution by shedding light on Rank and the psychoanalytic movement. As stated by the editors, the letters “dramatically reveal the interplay of personality and profession, theory and practice” (p. viii), revealing insights into the complex psychodynamics both within and between the early psychoanalysts. Historians of psychology and psychoanalysis, and anyone interested in psychoanalytic theory and the history of the psychoanalytic movement, will find this to be both an excellent resource and a fascinating story.

However, although the editors write that “this book is meant to be a readable text for non-specialists interested in ideas and their history” (p. x), it definitely helps to have both knowledge of the Freudian corpus and background knowledge of the history of the psychoanalytic movement generally. For example, readers unacquainted with Freud’s lesser known writings might find the obscure references to telepathy esoteric (e.g., p. 48).

The importance of this book, nonetheless, cannot be overstated because it provides converging evidence for what actually occurred in the history of Freud, Rank, and the psychoanalytic movement. As the editors write, “The letters add a missing piece to the biographies of these men and to the history of an idea” (p. vii), documenting the fragile and often-volatile beginnings of one of the most substantive and enduring contributions to modern psychology.

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References


