

Book Review

James Lieberman: Acts of Will: The Life and Work of Otto Rank

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Though Lieberman is an American psychiatrist, this book does not offer a medical or psychoanalytic interpretation of Rank, but rather an attempt to rescue him for our time as one of the most important figures in the history of the analytic movement, and to discover why “his message had fallen on deaf ears for so long, why psychoanalysis, psychiatry and psychology fought against or simply failed to understand one of the most creative philosophers of helping.”

Lieberman has chosen to call the book “Acts of will”, emphasising Rank’s focus on willing rather than wishing, self or ego psychology rather than instincts and drives from the unconscious Id, the centrality of the existential present of human relationship in therapy, rather than that of transferences from the distant past. Certainly the will has been an unpopular concept in 20th century psychology. Only Jung has taken it seriously, without making much of it, describing it elegantly as the amount of energy at the disposal of the ego.

Rank saw therapy as at times a contest of will between patient and therapist, a theoretical stance that, if taken seriously, presents an immense challenge to the scientific objectivity and professional detachment espoused by his colleagues in their struggle for scientific respectability and professional status in society.

Lieberman enthusiastically contends that “Rank’s concerns with birth, death, and immortality – the nature and preservation of the soul – are as fresh as when he wrote his masterworks some fifty years ago”. However, the current trends in world psychotherapy at the start of a new century are no more conducive to a resurrection of Rank and his approach than they were at the time of his professional assassination over seventy years ago. In fact one of the most interesting dimensions of this book is its historical analysis of the development of the movement and its major players. It provides an excellent study of the personal and institutional dynamics of a major world movement.

The strongest impression we receive is of a male psychology, and a psychology of fathers and sons. Most of Freud’s followers were young enough to be his children, sons of the primal father. The women headed in Jung’s direction. The key men were each given rings binding them into the inner circle, like Arthurian Knights of the round table. “No one outside seemed to care that election of officers of the IPA was merely a ratification of what Freud wanted, not a democratic exercise,” says Lieberman. Rank himself was virtually an adoptee, easily the youngest of the original group. For 20 years he was the closest to Freud in Vienna where he faithfully minuted the analytic discussion group’s meetings. After Jung and Adler’s departures he held most of the key organisational roles, contributing immensely

to the successful emergence of the movement from the ruins of the old Empire in Vienna after the First World War. How could he have been so completely neglected and forgotten by the mainstream?

Rank came from a poorish background and was self-taught, impressing Freud with his writing and thinking powers. Freud encouraged him to qualify as a psychologist instead of a doctor, thus keeping him excluded from the professional brotherhood of medicine. Freud was always in favour of lay analysts, however. The movement was intended to be psychoanalysis free-standing, not merely a part of medicine.

Expressing a commitment to science, the movement was and continues to be a family dynasty, and sociologically speaking, a family religion a bit like the English Monarchy. Power and authority within the sect were bestowed not by procreation, with the exception of Freud's favourite daughter Anna, but through the initiatory ritual process called analysis, later Training Analysis. For status it is necessary even today to trace roots directly back to analysis by the master. The groups that have broken away from the U.K. Council for Psychotherapy to join the psychoanalysts in the British Confederation of Psychotherapists can claim these kind of roots. The others cannot. The bonds that linked these early Freudian men, at least in the early days, were ones of deep affection and loyalty. These were men of strong personal relationships, men very different from the colourless academic thinking types who often run training institutes today. They came up with some ideas we would find wacky, such as man as a nose-led animal. They believed in love as part of cure. Many of them became romantically and/or sexually involved with patients. Barely any of them, not even the master himself, would be acceptable according to the new puritanism of modern codes of morality misdescribed as codes of ethics.

The movement started to change after the First World War. Rank returned a different man, married, but with iron in his soul, his response to the collective trauma of the terrors of war. Jones tells the story of him depositing a loaded revolver on the table at a meeting, and claimed it was a hypomanic reaction to episodes of depression during the war. Lieberman believes this was part of Jones' later role in discrediting Rank. "Nothing else about his behaviour at that time evoked such criticism; indeed Jones indicated that the two got on very well in all personal meetings, and that Rank's work was both commendable in quality and astonishing in volume." The man with the gun may have been Tausk, a troublesome member of the group who shot himself in 1919.

Americans arrived in Vienna in numbers for analysis. Training procedures were developed. Centres in London and Berlin grew to rival Vienna. Freud and his lieutenants visited the states, where psychoanalysis was taking off. Ideological tensions grew along with the movement. Lieberman perceives it as a North-South split geographically, a right-left split, politically. Freud devised the Id, Ego, Superego divisions at this time, shortly followed by "Beyond The Pleasure Principle", a new dualism of Eros and Thanatos, Life versus Death Instincts. Three years later, in 1923, his cancer was first diagnosed. But Freud was still full of creativity, at least to this point, and very encouraging to his favourite southerners, the Hungarian Sandor Ferenczi, and Rank.

Reading between Lieberman's lines, I perceive the fundamental split in the movement as between the creative, untamed, Eros-led people like Ferenczi, Grod-

deck and Rank, and the conservative institutionalizers like Jones and Abraham. Freud sided with the former at first, even telling Jones to go back to Ferenczi for analysis at one point, while of Rank he said, "In fifteen years of consistently intimate relationship with Rank the idea scarcely occurred to me that he needed analysis." His wish to stay the master led him ultimately to support the numerically and organisationally stronger Jones and Abraham.

The crunch time came between 1923-26. Freud's mythographical/anthropological study "Totem and Taboo" is not so much about a hypothetical primitive society, but unconsciously about the state of his own movement. Lieberman says "Freud himself pointed out 'the parallel that existed between the sons of the primal horde and some of his followers who were awaiting the death of the 'primal father.'" Ferenczi and Rank made their bid for the future of the movement in a 1923 book on active therapy, *The Development of Psychoanalysis*.

They wrote "Indeed it is these ego forces which finally bring about the process of cure, the further transference of the libido from the analyst to 'more real objects' in life, . . . The problem is to get the patient, with the help of the love for the analyst, to give up this love."

Lieberman comments "The authors, closest of friends, placed a new emphasis on experience in the present, to balance interpretation of the past, on therapeutic intervention rather than passivity, on intelligence and love rather than impulse and sex. These factors proved to be too radical for the conservative mould into which psychoanalysis rigidified."

The book was written with the knowledge and approval of Freud. Jones later claimed, it was brought out surreptitiously, without the consent of the committee. In 1919 Jones said, he had been appalled by Rank saying that men were not important, and that the essence of life was the relation between mother and child. He saw this as the start of Rank's splitting with the movement. If the movement can be characterised as phallogocentric, homophobic and defensive of the bastions of paternal authority, then it is undoubtedly true.

Ferenczi and Rank's new technique, while claiming to be thoroughly in line with Freud, was optimistic, time limited, and even sometimes short-term. In today's world of private health insurance and cost-conscious public fund holders it would have swept the field. In the days of only private medicine, where cure was still the exception as the direct result of most medical interventions, and in the face of Freud's basically pessimistic view of human nature, it stood much less chance of gaining the ascendancy.

There was challenge enough in the book on technique, according to Lieberman: "Relationship, the heart of Rankian therapy, was the guiding principle in his approach to terminology. He saw the exaggerated use of Freudian terminology as dehumanising. To relate in human terms is to respond to what another says and does, to take seriously what is manifest . . . he maintained his humility in the role of therapist, recognising that psychoanalysis did not make the practitioner omniscient. Analysts never lose their subjectivity, he argued, and their science is weakened when they pretend otherwise."

However, there was a still more fundamental challenge posed by Rank in that year. He now published *The Trauma of Birth and Its Meaning for Psychoanalysis*. As Lieberman puts it, "Rank concluded that anxiety, neurotic and normal, de-

rived from birth, from primal separation from the haven of the mother's womb." He dedicated his book thus: "To Sigm. Freud. Presented to the Explorer of the Unconscious, Creator of Psychoanalysis."

Not only Freud but even Jones praised the book at first. But the agenda of Birth Trauma first raised by Rank has been raised by numerous important figures like Winnicott, Lake, Laing and Wasdell in the years that have followed, only for it to disappear again almost without trace. Kohut, a recent reforming theorist in Psychoanalysis has also raised the agenda, apparently without awareness of his predecessors. Those of us involved in Perinatal Psychology experience the same patterns of response today as those that Rank encountered seventy-five years ago. Real acceptance is very rare. The positive appraisal, quite quickly followed by severe rejection, that Rank received from his colleagues, is not uncommon. More common is outright hostility, but the commonest response of all is apparent indifference, which turns to hostility when pursued. Lieberman discovered that later in life Rank wished he had never written the book. Accordingly, he de-emphasises its place in Rank's contribution to the field. The birth trauma experience is too close to the bone of common human fragmentation, which Wasdell calls an event horizon or a black hole. We open the agenda at our peril!

Lieberman places no emphasis on birth as trauma and fixation point. "Rank's great emotional discovery behind the new theory was the analyst's identity as mother in the transference, as much or more than the father."

Seen in this way, Rank does little more than anticipate the work of Klein and Anna Freud. It leaves analysis as still primarily concerned with internal object relationships rather than a whole self-relation to a real lost environment, the mother's womb. Not until Kohut has a psychoanalyst picked this up. He acknowledged consciousness in the moment of birth. Ludwig Janus and others in the International Society for Prenatal Psychology and Medicine are currently working to unearth Rank as the Patriarch of this Birth Trauma perspective. Lieberman scoffs at the suggestion that the heirs to Rank are the primal scream therapists. In this he is like the biographers of Laing who discount all his work in the field of perinatal psychology.

Rank challenged Freud, when he was backing off from the birth trauma theory. "... you point out at once the well-known womb phantasy, to which I assign only a special position. But the essential basis of my viewpoint is the very reality of the womb ... in neurotic symptoms as well as the sex act we have to deal with much more than fantasy, namely, a real though partial return ..." He goes on to claim that the questions Freud posed in the wolf man case can be answered in terms of his development of Freudian theory, taking the source of anxiety back to birth. Rank goes on to argue that "in every analysis (treatment of birth trauma) is possible within the first months, and it can be done not only without the slightest damage to the patient, but also will make the solution of the conflicts, neurotic as well as actual, easier or at least faster."

This heady optimism has not been born out by experience, either by Rank or any of his successors. Primal therapy is not all that simple or easy a solution!

Freud ultimately refused to believe that womb experience could be other than fantasy. It was much the same story as with child sexual abuse. Faced with his own resistances and more especially his colleagues', Freud turned children's experi-

ence of abuse into their wish fulfilment fantasies. We can at least in part blame Freud that it was possible to have generations of institutionalised child sex abuse in British children's homes, because of this refusal to accept the validity of children's testimony.

Ultimately Freud experienced Rank's theory as a bid to steal his throne, and rob him of his immortality. Lieberman explores a dream of Freud's that Rank had dared to analyse. Freud's response was to interpret Rank as David slaying his Goliath! Freud retreated from his first evaluation of the book, "the greatest advance since the discovery of psychoanalysis, even if only 33% or 66% is true," to a position where he could allow them to be "for once, of different opinions."

The time had come for Rank to leave the Freudian womb. He set off for America on a lecture tour that was dressed as Freud, but was all his own material. He taught that the mother is the central figure in child rearing, rescuing Jocasta from the narrow role of Oedipal sex object. He identified "primal repression, which tries to degrade and deny woman both socially and intellectually on account of her original connection with the birth trauma." Strong stuff indeed.

Critics attacked his theory for focusing on the physical aspect of birth. Oberndorf, President of the American Association disputed the theory because his own birth was so traumatic obstetrically, yet he experienced less than average personal anxiety. He had not understood the nature of primal defences. But he did recommend collecting data on children following difficult labour. Even Freud eventually suggested collecting obstetric data, the only time he ever recommended a statistical test of a psychological hypothesis. Only now do we have the data we need. In California, William Emerson has published an account of 20 years work on infant birth refacilitation, and in London, Vivette Glover has demonstrated the reality of birth trauma using biomedical research methods.

In the July 1924 *Psychoanalytical Review*, Rank set out his stall, but crediting Freud with the two seminal ideas, the primacy of birth anxiety and the usefulness of setting a termination date in analysis. According to Rank, successful therapy consisted of, or at least resembled, a psychological rebirth. One gives birth to a new self, with the analyst as midwife. He wanted to "reinstat[e] the high estimation of woman . . . and we can do this by freeing her from the weight of the curse of her genitals." He went further, arguing that there is more to be done with the transference than explaining the past. As Lieberman puts it, "He believed that the transference should be encountered and lived out in the therapeutic relationship, not always displaced somewhere else. To some extent the love and hate must be taken personally by the therapist. In doing so, therapist confront their own needs and wishes (not to mention their wills-Rank comes to that later). Therapists have to reckon with strong affect, not deny its pertinence, its validity in the present, and its effect upon them as human beings. And according to Rank that is possible and necessary to do (though there is no precise formula) within the bounds of professional demeanour."

To Freud the elevation of the mother was too much like castration of the father, and of his Oedipus theory. He started to side with Jones and Abraham against Rank. Rank tried to move away, to settle in Paris. At this point he was unable to sustain his momentum. He recanted and even went into analysis with Freud as

part of his repentance. Lieberman sees it as an attempt to undo what was done, to return to the Freudian womb.

The attempt failed. Eventually he did move to Paris. He returned also to America, but this time without the benefit of Freud's mantle. Even his bond with Ferenczi was broken. His wife remained a Freudian. In 1930, when he returned to the States, the orthodox Freudians were waiting for him and he was humiliated at The American Congress he attended. He was excluded from membership of the American Associations. He was disqualified as a supervisor for not having a medical qualification. His American analysands all had to be reanalysed by someone from the orthodox persuasion. There was a brief struggle with the Europeans to keep open the possibility of lay analysts, but the Americans got their way. From then onwards American analysis has been run by a right wing medical elite.

Ernest Jones was Rank's main opponent in Europe. His control of the English press meant that many of Rank's works have never been published in English. Like others who left the fold, he was accused of mental illness. Jones used his history of Freud and the movement to discredit Rank. Lieberman uses his book to fight back on Rank's behalf in a way Rank never did for himself. This book depicts Jones as a liar, a child abuser, and an anti-Semite, who was almost excluded himself at one point for an anti-Semitic outburst.

Once settled in Paris, Rank began to show his independent practical philosophical talents. But although he organised summer school training courses in Paris, there was no fixed methodology or system. In fact, Rank's philosophy of helping challenges the core territory on which the system builders and their professional training Institutes are built, and his critique is as valid today as it was when he wrote it.

In contrast to the historical-analytical approach, this was a developmental-constructive theory, little of which has appeared in English. He labelled Freud's theory an intellectualised flight from a fact (the new relationship) in which the interesting and valuable is just that which is new, that which lies beyond the 'transference'. The analytic situation is actual emotion, not just transference from the original child-parent relationship. Analysing this process brings insight to the ego. If this interpreted experience of love is Ego psychology, then the experience of relating to another is Thou psychology. He called this relating in a group of two or more the ethical. Just as Freud reduced love to instinct and slighted the ego, he externalised the ethical into an old testament Jehovah who punishes and rewards, based on the castration threat demonstrated by the Jewish father in the ritual of circumcision. Rank's ethical factor is derived from love instead of fear. He felt that guilt united one human with another while anxiety separated and isolated individuals. Sexuality, he saw as biological ego preservation or expansion, a counterbalance to death. Love is seen as psychological ego expansion, a counterbalance to anxiety and guilt. He saw the achievement of wholeness, biologically and socially as through the positive love emotion. This was the real task of psychotherapy. In all this he particularly anticipates Laing's existential phenomenology.

Rank accepted the categories of Freud, Jung, and Adler, but found them only useful up to a point, beyond which they impeded therapy. Something new was needed to fit each situation, perhaps even a new theory for every patient. "To attempt to categorise everything is to deny the creativity, the uniqueness, of in-

dividual solutions to life," he said. Psychology deals with interpretations of life rather than with facts. People behave more according to their interpretations of themselves than according to what they are.

When he presented these kinds of ideas to the Americans in 1930 at the First International Congress on Mental Hygiene, with people present from 53 countries, he spoke to declare science a failure, and the pursuit of knowledge to predict and control human behaviour misguided. Others replied with sarcasm and even derision to the audience's applause. Rank became a pariah.

Yet what he was saying is still fundamentally important today and just as relevant.

"The scientific approach with its emphasis on truth and its aim to control and predict strives ultimately only for security, but it is a false security which does not do away with the cosmic fear of the individual, and hence does not make us any more happy," said Rank.

The current trend towards statutory regulation and professionalization of the psychotherapist is based on this very same ungrounded and ungroundable search for security in human life. But pointing out that this emperor has no clothes is no more popular than reminding human beings that they come into the world through the trauma of birth. These are also truths, but they are unpalatable truths.

There is much more about Rank in Lieberman's book, which has 400 pages of well researched data backed up with 80 pages of notes and bibliography. I cannot possibly do justice to more than a part of it in this review. What I can do is to link Rank's ideas to the situation of psychotherapy today, with particular reference to Britain.

A group assembled by the U.K. Department of Employment as representative of the Profession of Psychotherapy to identify commonalities of good practise among different approaches almost universally disapproved of there being a real relationship between therapist and patient, let alone allowing a conflict of wills between them! World gatherings of psychotherapists, and national and international bodies being established in attempts to regulate the activity as a profession, are setting their stalls out in the name of Science. Rank wrote one of his major works on Art and Artist and saw therapy as essentially an artistic endeavour. To quote Lieberman: "Freud's immortality was linked to his self-image as a scientific explorer who discovers a truth which conquers the world after being initially rejected. This image combined science with social movement in precisely the form taken by psychoanalysis. In pursuing that goal Freud rejected the identity of the artist, which was precisely the role most important to Otto Rank."

Post communism, globalising first world culture is presuming that mind and psyche are as tameable as farm animals and that psychological ills can be contained by insurance and employee assistance programmes, and a new generation of psychopharmaceuticals. Lieberman waxes lyrical about Freud: "Freud brought under medical control that Nietzschean self-consciousness that threatened man's sanity. Almost single-handedly, Freud turned a monster into a helper, a nightmare into a comprehensible dream. To many, it was still ugly, dangerous and frightening but Freud simultaneously challenged and comforted his listeners. He performed a kind of magic but reassured them that it was science. He dared to tamper with

the soul, but with the attitude of a careful surgeon. Yet in Kant's sense it was as a creative artist that he made new working rules for the psychological era."

Passages like this are beautifully written and incisive. A hundred years ago, Freud could inspire the world with a revolutionary movement which both challenged man's command of his own mind, and offered new understanding.

Today we have a very different and stangely similar kind of movement riding in on the back of "the end of history", claiming that there is now a science of the mind which validates state control and registration of psychotherapy. That this is complete and utter nonsense is easily exposed by the fact that there are not enough willing practitioners to make even a short conference on integration of psychotherapies viable (at least in the U.K.), and that sub-groupings of the profession are organised in terms of different theories which quite often flatly contradict each other as to appropriate methodology. What is good practice for the behavioural schools is generally bad practice for the analytical schools and vice versa, for instance. What makes a Professional Counselling Training acceptable to the British Association for Counselling is the adherence to a "Core Theoretical Model." Yet all outcome research in the field has shown that the theoretical model of the practitioner has nothing to do with effectiveness. It is all down to the practitioner's ability to accurately empathise with and relate to the clients' individual experiential needs. Rank's thinking is fully supported here. The idea that it does not matter what theory you have as long as you work in accordance with one can hardly be called scientific!

However, the successful commercial training schools are coming together, albeit in rival groupings, behind what they call codes of ethics, which are in reality only tradesmen's codes of behaviour, sliding over the surface of the fundamental ethical differences between the different philosophies and methods. There is scarcely a course among them which looks at the practise of psychotherapy as itself the practice of ethics. Love is almost a taboo subject. The assumptions are that if you have a detailed methodology and a clear and unified theory that you can teach as a fixed body of knowledge over a number of years, backed by fixed codes of behaviour, you are guaranteed to produce capable competent ethical practitioners. These are false assumptions, but to the insecure public looking for something they think they can trust, it looks really good.

Like all oligarchies and tyrannies they seek to achieve political and social power by offering security to people who feel deeply insecure. There is never going to be a Council for Psychotherapy that can make your conscience run on time. What we may end up with is a statutory body that enforces the particular moral prejudices fashionable in society at a given time. The individual who turns to the psychotherapist because he/she feels profoundly at odds with his/her social world will no longer have someone to turn to who is a liminal figure, able to stand aside from the mainstream, but only another instrument of reconditioning to the norm.

Nick Owen