

# Reviews

## The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank: Inside Psychoanalysis

Edited by E. James Lieberman & Robert Kramer,  
letters translated by Gregory C. Richter  
The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011,  
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This book contains 250 letters between Freud and Rank, most of them previously unpublished. We observe the two discussing myths and creativity, as well as business and family matters, revealing the discourse and chatter that stand in the wings of Freud's famous texts.

Otto Rank, 28 years younger than Freud, started out as a locksmith. He became interested in the emerging field of psychoanalysis and his nascent talent impressed Freud. Under Freud's mentorship, Rank became the secretary of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and was encouraged to pursue a PhD, become a psychoanalyst and writer. Rank ran the International Psychoanalytic Press and was an editor of several analytic journals. With this brilliant early CV, one wonders why his name is not as well known as other members of Freud's inner circle, such as Ferenczi or Jones. This text illuminates this situation and raises other themes along the way. The editors, Lieberman and Kramer, orientate the reader by framing the letters with helpful commentary and selected letters from the protagonists' other correspondence.

The translator, Gregory Richter, strikes an excellent balance between conveying the feel of each writer's style in the original German, while allowing the text to flow in English. You can hear their accents without struggling to follow what they are saying. The translation conveys their contrasting writing styles, which adds to the reader's sense of who these writers are. Freud writes confident, direct sentences; for example, 'What I wanted to tell you I can also write'. Rank's early style as an up-and-coming academic can be complicated, containing multiple clauses and parentheses (one sentence is 12 lines' long! (p. 68)).

Some of Freud's letters, particularly those from his treasured summer break, evocatively describe his experience and desire for creativity and peace. Here Freud muses about having time to write and what he hopes to achieve (set as prose in the original):

'The angler throws out his net,  
sometimes catching a fat carp,  
often only a few little whitefish.'

And for those readers (you know who you are!) who are curious about things such as what Rank wrote to Freud from holiday in Rome, travelling with Freud's annotated Baedeker as a guide, this book will hold riches.

These moments provide a balm for the reader against the main arc of the letters: after a long phase of mutual respect and closeness, the two develop ideological differences and eventually become estranged. From about 1920, strain appears underneath the politeness. Here are extracts from an exchange

in 1922, where Freud comments on Rank's draft of a chapter on 'Sexuality and Guilt':

Freud to Rank (July 10, 1922): 'Your manuscript is very rich, not so transparent and lacks certain didactic considerations.'

Rank to Freud (July 14, 1922): 'I especially thank you for your detailed comments on my paper [ . . . ] Unfortunately, I know all too well that its greatest fault is the most difficult to correct; actually it cannot even be corrected. Namely that I have a completely undidactic, even antididactic writing style . . .'

Freud to Rank (July 17, 1922): 'I'm glad you took my critique so well . . .'

Rank, initially working closely with Ferenczi, was developing his own ideas of human relations. His 1924 book, *The Trauma of Birth and Its Meaning for Psychoanalysis*, was a watershed. He argued that the early infant–mother relationship, with its currents of connection and separation, was of prime importance in influencing the child's future relationships – and potential development of neuroses. This relationship was 'always repeated . . . (on both sides alternately)'. Rank writes that the infant relates emotionally towards its mother in an ambivalent way – she is 'both [a] good (vouchsafing) and bad (depriving) object'. The editors point out that these ideas presage major themes in psychoanalysis that are usually associated with others writing decades later.

Freud initially endorsed *The Trauma of Birth* ('This is the most significant advance since the discovery of psychoanalysis', p. 152) but later starts to change his mind ('I've receded further from agreeing with your innovations' (July 23, 1924)). Rank's ideas ran contrary to Freud's contention that the Oedipal situation – the toddler's predicament of competing with his father for his mother's love – was the 'nuclear complex of the neuroses'. Freud believes Rank 'eliminated' the father from theories of development. Rank feels misunderstood and replies in exasperation on 9 August 1924: 'Now again you're saying that I eliminated the father. That's not so, of course and cannot be: it would be nonsense. I've only attempted to assign him the correct place'.

Echoing contemporary debate, they also differ on the question of the length of therapy, with Rank advocating that brief therapy can be effective for some. Freud disagrees, writing to Ferenczi: 'The strongest impression I have is that it is not possible in such a short time to penetrate such deep layers and bring about lasting psychic changes. But perhaps I am already vieux jeu [over the hill]' (p. 183).

The letters tell a complex story. In part, the correspondence tracks their relationship going cold over insurmountable differences about principles that both held dear. The text sets this among other threads: Freud's 'inner circle', a close-knit group of early analysts from various European countries. They survived the division of World War I, but splits began to appear. Rank fell out of favour with some of this group who disapproved of his innovations. This contributed, the editors convincingly argue, to Rank's ideas being buried.

In 1926, Rank finally broke from Vienna and moved to Paris, where he continued his writings and analytic practice. After this, there are no letters.

Substantial parts of these letters concern the running of the analytic press and associated journals, the minutiae of which might sustain the interest of historians more than the general reader. It is possible to focus, as I did, on the passages that track Freud and Rank's own life stories, and the intertwined development of their relationship and work. Read in this way, it is an accessible primary source on the history of psychoanalysis. In places it is gripping, sparing nothing, bringing readers right into the sideshows that can go unseen behind the main event.

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## Hide and Seek: The Psychology of Self-Deception

By Neel Burton

Acheron Press, 2012, £12.99, pb, 248 pp.

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I was asked to review this book just before a holiday to Egypt with a group of non-medical friends, so it replaced my usual beachside reading. The title was intriguing, and Burton warns in the introduction that this book is 'not for the faint-hearted, lily-livered or yellow-bellied' – I was, therefore, ready to look into the depths of my soul to find out in what ways I had been deceiving myself. The cover raised some eyebrows among the group. If my answer to the question 'What do you do for a living?' did not induce the usual wary but curious response, this book did. Our tour guide asked what the relevance of the 'Eye of Horus' hieroglyph on the cover was, and I found myself

wondering, too. In Egyptian mythology, Horus was killed by his evil uncle Set, who also gouged out his eye. Horus offered the eye to his father Osiris (god of the underworld) in return for restoration to life. It became the symbol of power, sacrifice and protection, and was painted on sarcophagi to ward off evil.

In *Hide and Seek*, Burton provides an excellent explanation of how we use psychological defence mechanisms (instead of Horus' eye) to protect ourselves from 'painful truths'. He uses examples from current affairs, the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and from the arts with references to Leonardo da Vinci, Oscar Wilde and Agatha Christie to explain 38 different identified mechanisms – everything from denial and projective identification, to reification and altruism. Initially, I struggled to keep reading, not because I had trouble facing up to my own 'painful truths', but because there did not appear to be much new theory for a practising psychiatrist. Non-medical friends picked it up and read with more instant fascination. But by the end, I felt I had learnt a lot; I had no idea that there were that many different defence mechanisms, and found that Burton's references to modern literature and to current affairs, for example the 9/11 tragedy, really helped put the defences into context.

The philosophy content was explained in a straightforward manner and was new to me. It would make a great present for friends interested in psychology, and a welcome change to the standard examination revision texts in psychiatry. Did I learn a lot about myself as the introduction promised? I am not sure I did. Maybe I am not reflective enough, instead intellectualising the reasons for the cover illustration. In Burton's words, 'self-deception is a defining part of our human nature' and I don't think I'm immune.

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