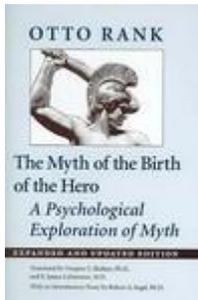


The Hero's Rankian Birth

A Review of



The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Exploration of Myth

by Gregory C. Richter

E. James Lieberman

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Reviewed by

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—The translation into English of an expanded and updated edition of Otto Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Exploration of Myth*, by Gregory C. Richter and E. James Lieberman, adds to a growing body of scholarly work that explicates Rank, a historically misunderstood and underappreciated psychological thinker and psychotherapy pioneer. This expanded and updated edition of the book, never before available in English, preserves the original text, published when Rank was 25 years old, and includes new material written 13 years later. The book is a reminder of Rank's lifelong devotion to the search for universals in human experience, over the course of history and across cultures. Although this new translation will not revolutionize our understanding of Rank, Richter and Lieberman's more contemporary language helps filter out irrelevancies, allowing Rank's original intention to come through.

—Rank was a protégé of Freud (see Jones, 1955) who famously broke with psychoanalysis and was for years ignored, neglected, and worse after the publication of *The Trauma of Birth* (Rank, 1924/1973). Over the past 25 years, as a result of renewed attention to Rank stirred by an authoritative biography by Lieberman (1985), a collection of Rank's lectures edited by Robert Kramer (1996), and books on Rank by Esther Menaker (1982, 1996) and Peter Rudnytsky (1991), Rank has begun to be recognized as a progenitor of cultural psychology, creativity studies, and existential-humanistic therapy. Nevertheless, misunderstandings persist, particularly about differences between his earlier Freudian writings and his

postpsychoanalytic contributions, and a return to texts he wrote in his youth, such as this small book, provides valuable historical information about Rank and his milieu.

Reading Otto Rank

—This book is not an introduction to Rank, whose complex and expansive thinking is best approached, initially, through the secondary literature. On first reading, much of what Rank wrote is daunting in scope. However, readers who have encountered Rank before in his writings on art and artists or in his descriptions of will therapy are likely to be impressed with his encyclopedic cross-cultural knowledge of myths and intrigued by the resemblances he found among them. Scholars in fields such as comparative literature and classical studies have always found Rank's early writings congenial to their interpretive work; this publication is likely to be well received by them. A short chapter by Rank titled "The Play Within *Hamlet*," first published in 1915 and included here, is a bonus for those interested in psychoanalysis and drama. Rank scholars and psychology historians will likewise welcome the new insights into Rank's psychology this book provides.

—Rank's prodigious body of writings is notoriously inaccessible, in part because of awkward previous translations into English of his noun-packed and, occasionally, inflated prose, and in part because of the complexity of the prose itself. With each new translation (Richter and Lieberman were also cotranslators recently of *Psychology and the Soul: A Study of the Origin, Conceptual Evolution, and Nature of the Soul*; Rank, 1930/1998; and Richter translated *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation*; Rank, 1912/1992), one hears more of what Rank intended in language tuned to our 21st-century ears. For example, in the present translation, as compared with the previous English version (Freund, 1959), "the juvenile faculty of imagination" (p. 66) has been changed to "the fantasy life of the child," (p. 48) "parallelization" (p. 79) to "parallel" (p. 52), and "delicately shaded manifestations" (p. 67) to "nuanced manifestations" (p. 49).

Conflicting Stories

—More fluid language helps, but there is another obstacle to understanding Rank: conflicting stories—one might say myths—surrounding his separation from Freud (cf. Lieberman, 1985) and the early psychoanalytic circle of which Rank was a valued member. In one story, Rank's (1924/1973) publication of *The Trauma of Birth*, with its emphasis on pre-Oedipal sources of anxiety, was an affront to Freud and his other followers. According to this

story, the book was evidence that Rank was hostile toward Freud, who was a father figure. The implication was that Rank was an underanalyzed rebel acting out his unfinished transference reactions to Freud. At least, this is the story told by some of Rank's early psychoanalytic colleagues and repeated in gossip during his life and after his death.

—An alternative story emerges from Rank's biographers and others more favorably disposed toward him. This is the story of Rank as a precocious young scholar esteemed at first by Freud but later estranged from the older man—his mentor and adoptive father—beginning at the moment of his symbolic birth as an independent thinker. According to this account, Rank was a brilliant and devoted student and collaborator of Freud's who was, until age 40, as Rank (1932/1968) himself admitted, “under the spell” (p. xxi) of Freud. With the publication of his *The Trauma of Birth* (Rank, 1924/1973), which he dedicated to Freud, Rank found himself subject to an ideologically motivated shunning by his closest associates. Rank moved away and, from that point forward, produced his most important works on topics as wide ranging as art, soul belief, and education. In these years, Rank overcame the influence of his most powerful precursor and actively appropriated the myth of the outcast as motivation for original thinking that went “beyond psychology,” as in the title of his last, posthumously published book (Rank, 1941/1958).

—In this new translation of *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, Lieberman and Richter forgo another retelling of the Rank–Freud saga and let Rank speak for himself, but an introduction by Robert A. Segal stirs up recurrent questions about prepsychoanalytic versus postpsychoanalytic Rank and, thus, about the two competing stories of Rank. Segal examines both the first and the expanded edition for evidence that Rank was anticipating his later, post-1924 thought, but finds none. He concludes that this book must be seen as the Freudian document it is.

—However, as Segal notes, just to complicate things, Rank, true to the ideal of the self-created artist type he studied, retrospectively reinterpreted and revised his own history. In “Literary Autobiography,” first published in 1930, Rank (1981) contended that Freud was interested in “the hero's dependence on his family,” as in the Oedipus myth, whereas Rank “emphasized, particularly in the second edition, the hero's struggle for independence” (p. 6), which exemplifies the will struggle so central to his later theory.

—What Rank saw in retrospect is akin to what later Rankians have emphasized: the striking contrast between Rank's and Freud's (1900/1953) interpretations of the family dynamic represented in hero myths, particularly

in the paradigmatic myth of Oedipus. Freud focused on the child's hostility and aggression toward the biological father and the child's subsequent fear of retaliation (castration). Rank, conversely, attended to the relationship between the child and his adoptive parents and the havoc caused by too much knowledge, in the form of prophecy, about his birth parents. Rank (1929/1978) called Oedipus an "overweening riddle solver" (p. 51). The hero, for the later Rank, must not allow himself (all of Rank's heroes are male) to be a victim of fate; foreknowledge of one's fate prevents one from living life in all its existential uncertainty. The hero must take fate into his own hands through consciously chosen acts in the world.

—One limitation of Richter and Lieberman's book is that this rich and revealing contrast in interpretations is left to the introduction by Segal. The translators have diligently rendered the text into readable English but have left their insights and opinions out of the mix. One wishes for annotations to the translated text or for an epilogue in which their voices are heard. Lieberman (1991) has elsewhere poignantly addressed the relationship between the son and adoptive father in Oedipus and has commented on the normalizing effect of myths for understanding a child's ambivalence toward his or her parents (Lieberman, 1985, p. 93), but his insights on this and other relevant topics are missing here.

The Place of Myth in Psychology

—In *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, one finds Rank carrying out Freud's (cf. Progoff, 1956) interdisciplinary project; Freud appreciated Rank's skill at assimilating vast amounts of literary material and interpreting it in light of the newly emerging psychoanalytic theory. Freud thought symbolic material, which gave access to unconscious wishes, came not only from dreams, slips, and jokes, topics about which Freud wrote, but also from fairy tales, myths, and folklore, topics he thought Rank could best address. At the time this book was written, Rank was already fluent in the cross-cultural languages of dream, folk tales, and myth. Even at his young age, he had absorbed the major thinking of the day in cultural anthropology and in a field one would today call ethnopsychology. In contrast to the prevailing notion that myths were merely "personification[s] of the processes of nature" (p. 4), Rank held, with Wundt (1916), that myths grant us access to human imaginative processes and the inner psychic life (cf. Lieberman, 1985, p. 89). Wundt's "structures of the ... imagination" (p. 6) owe a debt to earlier thinkers such as Vico (1744/1968), whose *universali fantastici* (imaginative universals) are probably a still-earlier version of what Rank was fascinated with and akin to what Jung (cf. Jacobi, 1973) would later identify as archetypes.

—Psychology needs myths. It gets into trouble when it attempts to speak in unambiguous words that have only one meaning and when it discards what cannot be immediately used. Myth, fortunately, is a powerful antidote to literalism and instrumentalism. Myths, like dreams, are open to multiple interpretations; they have their own lives, independent of any uses to which one might put them. Myths may help us organize and make sense of our experiences, but they are ultimately poetic, not pragmatic. In contrast to the notion of myths as naive or prescientific beliefs, myths are sources of wisdom transmitted from the past, but only if one is open and receptive. The very fact that *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* is being published at this time serves as a reminder of psychology's need to connect with its deep, unconscious, mythic roots, as it attempts to make meaning out of senseless and tragic events and as it attempts to define heroism in our time.

The Cycle of Hero Myths

—Rank's book encompasses 18 heroes from a range of cultures, among them Moses, Oedipus, Paris, Perseus, Dionysus, Gilgamesh, Cyrus, Romulus, Hercules, Jesus, and Lohengrin. Heroes are not just courageous humans but beings that exist in a realm somewhere between the human and the divine. According to Rank, heroes typically face difficulties surrounding birth, are often exposed or abandoned, and are usually rescued by animals or adoptive parents. They are models of overcoming difficulty and hardship.

—Rank's effort, in this book, was primarily academic. He was a cataloguer of hero myths, arranging them according to a chart that helped him recognize common elements across stories. The chart, which was never published (Lieberman, 1985, p. 89), was typical of Rank's way of organizing his thoughts. He was mechanical in presenting the myths in chronological order, without any interwoven interpretation, which he reserved for a final chapter. The result is numbing. A good story presented with some space around it can mesmerize and enthrall; Rank's serial catalogue of myths tends to put one to sleep. Fortunately, at the beginning of his chapter on interpretation, Rank made explicit the elements he had been following, which are consistent across the various myths. His concise summary of themes (p. 47) is like a poem that begs to be read again and again. The myths come alive in this brief synopsis. At this one juncture in the book, Rank the poet supersedes Rank the scholar.

A Book About Rank

Because Rank was working so diligently in this early book to establish his credibility as a Freudian scholar, his efforts often seem forced and justificatory. For example, as folklorist Alan Dundes (1990, p. 195) pointed out, Rank's emphasis on the hero's birth tends to shift the focus from other aspects of the hero's life, including his abandonment by his birth parents. In his eagerness to explain the hero's motives in terms of unconscious wishes, Rank overlooked the hero's will and choice, topics that would later become central to his work. However, one can hardly fault Rank for failing to be the thinker he would become.

The competing stories of Rank's life have become inseparable from the content of this book. With hindsight, Rank believed he was able to discern in it the beginnings of his own heroic and creative struggle, his effort to become his own precursor—his attempt to give birth to himself.

Despite the realization that this book is as much about Rank as it is about the hero, it nevertheless stands as an important document in psychology. As Philip Freund (1959) wrote in the introduction to a previous edition, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* is "one of those germinal works which have had incalculable influence" (p. ix). For readers seeking a deeper appreciation of Rank's contributions to psychology, Richter and Lieberman's careful, thoughtful, and readable translation of this book is definitive.

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