

## OTTO RANK AND THE TRAUMA OF BIRTH. INSTANCES AND CONCEPTS

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*Abstract: Otto Rank was a close collaborator of Freud and the author of one of the most underrated theories: the trauma of birth. Rank first published "Das Trauma der Geburt" in 1924. The variant consulted for this study is the 1929 English translation, with an introduction by Rank's biographer E. James Lieberman. In his book, Rank argues that the trauma of birth is the original human trauma and that all anxiety that one encounters in life is due to the primal repression. Along the book, Rank offers valuable insights into different fields: infantile anxiety, sexual gratification, religious sublimation, artistic idealization or philosophic speculation. Due to the richness of ideas expressed, "The Trauma of Birth" by Otto Rank remains, as Lieberman states in Introduction "one of the most remarkable books in the history of psychology."*

*Keywords: trauma of birth, Otto Rank, primal repression, anxiety, psychological rebirth*

### A short biography

Otto Rosenfeld was born on April 22, 1884, in Vienna, and belongs to a Jewish family with a precarious financial situation. His father, Simon Rosenfeld, supported the family in the jewellery business, while his mother, Karoline Fleischner, raised little Otto and his older brother. As a young man, Otto Rank resonated with the creations of Richard Wagner and with the works of writers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Henrik Ibsen.

As for the change of name from Rosenfeld to Rank, it seems that misunderstandings in the family led him to adopt a new identity, initially signing with the name Rank and then legalizing the name change on March 30, 1909 (Taft: 4). It is highly possible that the name chosen derives from Ibsen's play "A Doll's House" (Lieberman: 4).

Around the age of 20, Otto came into possession of Freud's famous writing "The Interpretation of Dreams," on which his work "Der Künstler" ("The Artist") was based. The work was published in 1907, after Freud helped him to give it a final form faithful to his ideas. Later, the friendship between the two became increasingly close, with Freud helping him enter the University of Vienna where he would obtain his doctorate in 1912 with the thesis "Die Lohengrin Sage" ("The Legend of Lohengrin"). Freud also offered him the position of secretary of The Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and considered him his "right hand" for twenty years.

The main rupture between the two psychoanalysts occurred shortly after the publication of the study "Das Trauma der Geburt" ("The Trauma of Birth"), published in 1924, in which Rank suggests that the anxiety we feel throughout life has as its starting point the initial trauma of physical separation from the mother. Even though Freud initially appreciated Rank's ideas, in time he became a harsh critic of them.

Between 1924-1936, Rank lectured in the United States and Europe at universities such as Yale, Harvard and Sorbonne, especially on the topics of neurosis,

relational psychotherapy and creative will, distinguishing between psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. In 1936, he settled in New York, and three years later, on October 31, 1939, Otto Rank died. His death occurred five weeks after Freud's.

### **Overview**

In the preface to "The Trauma of Birth," Rank argues for its necessity, considering it as "a first attempt to apply the notions of psychoanalysis in order to understand the whole development of humanity, even the fact of becoming human." He admits that he has "come up against the final origin of the psychical unconscious in the psychophysical" and clearly states that we should "recognize in the birth trauma the ultimate biological basis of the psychical." Rank highlights that the main purpose of the book is to emphasize the "biologically based law of the form which determines the content" (Rank, Preface). In other words, Rank's study "supplements the Oedipus theory from a biological point of view" (Kramer, 1924: 81).

In the eleven chapters rigorously entitled "The Analytic Situation," "Infantile Anxiety," "Sexual Gratification," "Neurotic Reproduction," "Symbolic Adaptation," "Heroic Compensation," "Religious Sublimation," "Artistic Idealization," "Philosophic Speculation," "Psychoanalytical Knowledge," "The Therapeutic Aspect," the book offers a landscape of the Rankian philosophy on trauma and the birth.

### **The Analytic Situation**

Numerous cases conducted by Rank ended with the idea of a symbolic (re)birth: "patients frequently speak, in their convalescence, of feeling 'new born'" (5). After sublimation, Rank observed that the patient is not only "able to renounce the infantile libido fixation, expressed in the Oedipus complex" but he can also "consider himself a newborn (spiritual) child (of the analyst)." As a conclusion, "the analysis finally turns out to be a belated accomplishment of the incompleting mastery of the rebirth trauma" (Rank, 1994:5).

### **Infantile Anxiety**

"The patient's Unconscious uses the analytic healing process in order to repeat the trauma of birth and thus partially to abreact it" (Rank, 1994: 11), according to Rank. A child needs a long period of time to overcome the trauma of birth. An instance of childhood anxiety concerns leaving a child in a dark room. The anxiety disappears only after the child becomes conscious of the existence of a person near him. Rank extends this template of the anxiety mechanism to the cases of phobia.

### **Sexual Gratification**

The chapter brings together sets of ideas that belong to different spheres, addressing issues such as how birth is seen by a child, perversions, homosexuality and the Oedipus complex.

Children do not know where they came from, as the birth trauma was so intense that it is impossible for the child to remember it. However, they tend to want to know

where they came from, not for the sake of knowing but for the fact that they are interested in “how to get inside.” The array of the most used scenarios for birth concern the “denial of the female sex organ, which clearly shows what it is due to the repression of the birth trauma experienced there” (Rank, 1994: 32).

Perversions have their explanations as well: for instance, the exhibitionists are thought to wish to “return into that paradisiacal primal state of nakedness in which he lived before birth” (Rank, 1994: 33). The swaddling clothes of the baby are linked to the “intrauterine pleasurable condition of immobility” which is related to the state of being bound in a masochistic intercourse. Homosexuals suffered a shock of birth and therefore they can only see the female organ as an instrument of giving birth and not as an organ for giving pleasure. The act of penetration is seen as “an infantile return” (Rank, 1994: 38) to the womb.

Rank promotes that there is a pre-Oedipal complex and he himself coined the notion of Oedipus complex in 1925, therefore seven years earlier than Freud. From the perspective of birth trauma, the Oedipus complex offers us a view “of the first valuable attempt to overcome the anxiety of fear of the (mother's) genitals” (Rank, 1994: 43), by considering them a possible source of enjoyment.

### **Neurotic reproduction**

In order to offer a better understanding of the neurotic anxiety conditions, Rank offers as a revelatory example the case of a child left alone in a dark room, supplementing the example with interpretations of the event. The dark room reminds the child of the darkness of his mother's womb. Therefore the source of his anxiety is not the darkness in itself, but the fact that, he is left alone. The separation from the mother is the source of his neurotic anxiety which since it appeared, it “shows that the neurotic has overcome the birth trauma only in a highly insufficient degree” (Rank, 1994: 49).

Rank states that “all neurotic disturbances in breathing (asthma), which repeat the felling of suffocation, relate directly to the physical reproductions of the birth trauma” and that the migraines are in tight connection with the process of being born (Rank, 1994: 51). “Neurosis is a more pretentious substitute for a banal organic suffering, both of which have at bottom the same cause” states him (Rank, 1994: 59).

The chapter expands upon numerous examples of schizophrenic behaviours characterised by catatonic stupor, among which: the patients tended to wish not to be adults; one of them, approaching a stuporous state, draw imaginary circles round his navel with his hand; while another patient claimed to have transformed into a child. Rank states that these behaviours become “intelligible as far-reaching regressions to the foetal state” (Rank, 1994: 69).

### **Symbolic adaptation**

Rank makes some interesting interconnections among sleep, dreams, darkness, and the intrauterine state. As the night falls, we fall asleep because the “external conditions urge the Unconscious to an identification with the primal state” (Rank, 1994: 74). Rank follows the classification given by Freud but he adds that the dreams that we

dream resemble our life in the womb. For example, the *wish dream* symbolizes our desire to live in the womb, whereas the *anxiety dream* resembles the painful severance from the mother.

### **Heroic Compensation**

The hero is constructed as an entity which, “being free from anxiety, seeks to overcome an apparently specially severe birth trauma by a compensatory repetition of it in his deeds.” The “heroic invulnerability” represents “a kind of a permanent uterus” (Rank, 1994: 107) and is compared to his armour and his helmet. Rank offers an interesting reading of “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Hansel and Gretel” from the standpoint of birth trauma.

### **Religious Sublimation**

A base concept in any religion is that one's soul will reach, at a certain point, a specific state of peacefulness: Christians wish to go to heaven or seek salvation while Buddhists seek enlightenment or Nirvana. In fact, the aim is to be able to enter a “dreamy attitude of meditation” and to “approach the embryonal condition” (Rank, 1994: 119). Rank makes some dives into certain religions and sects and brings to the surface proofs of the fact that each adept beseeches getting into the embryonal state.

### **Artistic Idealization**

Art and culture are analysed through the lenses of primal anxiety. Rank offers an intricate but interesting interpretation of Laistner's book “Das Rastel der Sphinx,” emphasizing that “the Oedipus saga is certainly a duplicate of the Sphinx episode” and clarifies that “psychologically, that is the repetition of the primal trauma at a sexual stage (Oedipus complex), whereas the Sphinx represents the primal trauma itself” (Rank, 1994: 144).

The numerous fabulous figures in Greek mythology are “striving to be free from the mother” and therefore “the deep cultural and historical importance of the development of the Greek art lies in” the fact that “it repeats the biological and prehistorical act of becoming human” (Rank, 1994: 147).

An important perspective is the one that concerns creation. To create has the biological equivalent of giving life. The construction of a creation is similar to the act of giving birth and Rank wanders in the admired cultures of the Greek, the Asian and the Egyptian in order to demonstrate this. The “feminine monsters” of these cultures are “representatives of the primal mother.” The artist, just like Prometheus, “creates human beings after his own image,” the operation of perfecting a work of art being in fact a “repeating act of birth” (Rank, 1994: 156).

Considering all of the above issues, as well as some interesting interpretations of the Homeric epic poems, Rank concludes that art is paradoxically both a representation and a denial of reality and that it “resembles the childish game in which we have recognized the attempt to depreciate the primal trauma through the consciousness of not being real” (Rank, 1994: 166).

### **Philosophic Speculation**

The Rankian approach to philosophy revolves around the return “into the primal state.” Multiple philosophies, such as those pertaining to Nietzsche, Descartes, Kant, Thales, Plato or Socrates are reconsidered in the light of birth trauma. For instance, in Plato's philosophy of Eros “the human instinct of procreation” is placed at the centre: “here for the first time the philosophical problem is grasped at the root.” Plato's Eros is “the yearning for a lost state” which is in other words the “reunion of the child with the mother” (Rank, 1994: 172-173).

### **Psychoanalytical Knowledge**

After a brief history of psychoanalysis, Rank either approaches or withdraws from several Freudian ideas. Rank points out that the “primal anxiety-affect at birth” is caused by the change of states from a pleasurable situation to a very painful one (Rank, 1994: 187). “This experienced anxiety” is one's first perception (Rank, 1994: 187). The trauma of being born is such a painful event that one craves to get back there all his life, the only option “for an approximate reinstatement of the primal pleasure is given in sexual union, in the partial and purely physical return into the womb” (Rank, 1994: 187-188). For those unsatisfied with this solution Rank offers significant insights into the human psyche.

### **The Therapeutic Aspect**

Taking Socrates' quotation “knowledge is power” as a starting point, Rank emphasizes the uselessness of knowledge unless we are capable of applying it effectively. The revelatory comparison between an intervention proceeded by a surgeon and the intervention of a psychoanalyst underlines the “necessity for an active therapy,” which means that the psychoanalyst “has rather to absorb in the right way the sum of all knowledge achieved so far, and then to apply it to the demands of the case in a practical way” (Rank, 1994: 203). A therapist, sustains Rank, does “nothing more than that which the patient has attempted his whole life long with insufficient success, namely, to overcome the birth trauma in the sense of adjustment.” The process of psychological rebirth is therefore composed of psychoanalysis (which equals birth) and analyst (which equals the mother). The “severance from the analyst” is a crucial part of the analytic work and it is “accomplished by reproduction of the birth trauma, so that the patient loses his doctor and his suffering at the same time” or, in other words the patient “must give up his doctor in order to lose his suffering” (Rank, 1994: 207).

### **Conclusions**

The exploration of such diverse spheres of life managed to a greater or lesser extent to offer us a “comprehension of the actual fact of becoming human” (Rank, 1994: xi). Exploring the psychoanalytical side of infantilism, sex, symbols, religion, art or philosophy offers us a deeper understanding of the unconscious part of our being. Considering how important birth trauma is, “a new theory of character and types may be

formed which has the advantage over existing attempts of this kind of giving a far-reaching understanding of the individual determinant and, consequently the possibility of influencing them" (Rank, 1994: 209). Therefore Rank's theory of the trauma of birth, which severed him from his mentor and intellectual father Freud, is of unquestionable value and relevance not only for the field of psychoanalysis but also for every single human being who wishes to lay their psyche open to knowledge.

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