

**Ian Tilley**

## **THE RE-EMERGENCE OF EARLY RANK:**

### ***The Birth Trauma***

Otto Rank died in 1939. Until quite recently most of his work seemed to be passing into obscurity and Rank seemed fated to be little more than a footnote in the history of psychoanalysis. Yet in the late sixties and early seventies his writings received somewhat of a revival. 1)

I will consider an early position of Rank's: his understanding of neurosis as set out in **The Trauma of Birth**, still his best known book. Specifically, I am concerned to convey my own sense of the basic view of neurosis Rank offered in this book. In other words, lots of other interesting questions about Rank's work are omitted, for example,

- (1) his techniques and their implications:
- (2) a consideration of the evidence Rank offers to support his theory: and
- (3) more recent contributions by psychologists

Unfortunately I don't have space here to raise such issues.

## **RANK'S BASIC VIEW OF NEUROSIS**

One-sidedness, even extreme lopsidedness, seems a clear feature of **The Birth Trauma**. In an important essay on the same subject matter Winnicott says "in a discussion of any one subject one should not be afraid **temporarily** to seem to over-estimate the importance of the subject under discussion." 2) Yet only once towards the very end of the book does Rank himself seem to express any doubts about the degree to which he oversimplifies throughout his work. 3)

Nonetheless, Rank's one-sidedness certainly has its strengths as well as its weaknesses. His ideas have a clarity and a boldness which illuminates - as long as the reader does not accept it as a cure-all.

In both humanistic and analytical 4) circles birth experiences have been given greater prominence recently. This trend is especially visible in humanistic psychology where "re-birthing workshops" and the like still enjoy great popularity.

In the light of this renewal of interest it seems well worthwhile to look directly at Rank's famous book on birth which, despite its monotheistic quality, did develop some of Freud's work on the origins of anxiety in a powerful fashion.

Not only is this early book of Rank's 5) of some considerable interest in its own right but also it prefigures some of his own later and rather different work on creativity and neurosis 6) and, at least as important, it provides us with a vital link between classical Freudian theory and the "object relations" school which is so prominent in psychoanalysis today.

The monistic nature of Rank's theory is clear when one realises that really his whole structure develops from one and only one central proposition and from this one basic idea Rank tries to explain the whole of human reality, or, to put it another way, he believes that everything is ultimately reducible to this.

What then is Rank's starting point? He begins by assuming that the embryo is in a state of bliss (primal pleasure). As the birth process starts this is disturbed and at birth the baby is expelled from the womb. For Rank, this is a thrusting-out of the place of greatest pleasure where all needs are met immediately and where contradiction cannot exist. From then on on and right through life the individual cannot return to this state of primal pleasure. Clearly this is impossible. Nonetheless, for everyone, neurotic or otherwise, the return is wanted more than anything else.

At birth the baby, therefore, moves abruptly from primal pleasure to its absence; the baby experiences basic anxiety which is the dynamic factor for its entire life. But it is most important to remember that there is always a two-fold movement - what Rank calls "the double barrier of repression": the **first** movement or contradiction is back towards the womb/pleasure **and** this

brings up the basic anxiety of the separation from the womb and pleasure. So there is a **second** movement which is also contradictory: away from pleasure **but** with the remembrance of it. Everyone faces these two interlocking contradictions as a fact of birth. For Rank they explain anxiety and especially in the 1920s it was often thought that explaining anxiety meant that neurosis itself had been explained.

I said earlier that Rank is important because there is a modern feel to much of his work. He seems to provide a link, an important part of the transition from psychoanalysis as it was up to the inter-War period and post-War depth psychology: that is, Rank and **The Birth Trauma** are part of the path linking classical psychoanalysis and so much of what is going on today. It seems rather apt to see Rank as playing a "mothering" role in depth psychology which, had he lived longer, is something he would surely have appreciated. 7)

Rank's transitional role needs to be drawn out of his central proposition which I have just presented. What the proposition meant in these terms was that there is a profound change from classical Freudian theory: **the mother tie replaces the father tie as the major dynamic issue**. And this is a profound change because much of Freud's theory is retained but its meaning shifts. For Rank the birth trauma is the prototype of all future anxiety. It is the archetypal experience **par excellence**; it gives the form to everything irrespective of its content - the emergence of sexuality or whatever.

Rank's redefining of Freudian theory, the shift back in time from the Oedipus complex needs clarification because of its contemporary significance. I think Rank is saying that the father's role is not so central as Freud felt. He only has a role in relation to mother, not in his own right. This role is to sever the child from the mother.

It seems to work like this: the child, **irrespective of sex**, is primarily interested in mother/womb/pleasure but he does not want to face this; it's too unbearable. Therefore a decisive phase in the child's development is putting his anxiety on to the father in the form of rage: "He's the one who separates me from mother,

who stops me relating to her in the way I want. It's his fault!" This is largely an unconscious step.

For Rank the situation now seems to emerge like this:

1) **the pre-Oedipal phases.** In the child's fantasy the father stands between him and mother; ultimately father stands in the way of the return to the womb.

2) **the Oedipus phase.** Here Freud is fundamentally redefined. The Oedipus complex is now seen as the **same** drama as before but occurring in the sexual sphere. Of course, the individual's sex matters now in terms of the way things work. Father still intrudes directly on the mother-son relationship; in the case of the girl, she moves towards father but this is still in essence an intrusion as in so doing she moves away from mother and primal pleasure.

It is this shift towards the mother-child relationship that makes Rank an important figure in relation to both the theory and practice of psychology today. This focus on birth is important but at least as significant is that in stressing the mother's role rather than the father's, he helped pave the way to a thorough re-examination of the pre-Oedipal phases in their own right. Previously the Oedipus phase was given such preeminence that all earlier phases were mainly considered in terms of their relation to and culmination in the Oedipal situation. Rank's emphasis on the mother tie consequently played an important, oft-neglected role, in the growth of the object-relations work of Klein, Winnicott, Fairbairn and others.

It is important to remember that for Rank the birth trauma is universal. The difference between the neurotic and others is that the latter has effectively adjusted to the trauma whereas the neurotic hasn't. The broad object of analysis, therefore, is to help the client towards making a "normal" adjustment to the birth trauma.

Rank does not offer a detailed discussion of the developmental stages in the life of the individual, yet he does say that the "Normal" adult adjustment to the birth trauma is gradually made as the person builds a psychic superstructure. Philosophy, religion, myth, fairy tales and the like 8) could help the individual cope

with the trauma. If this happens, they will form part of his personal superstructure. Their usefulness comes from their connection with the birth trauma and basic anxiety, but in such way that energy is discharged but without regressing towards the anxiety as the neurotic often does.

Following Freud, Rank considered that sexuality and work were the key ways energy is discharged. Rank considered that if the person was able to allow it, 9) the sexual act could be the closest thing to experiencing primal pleasure. Work activity as a way of discharging energy leads Rank to a special group, "the artist". The artist is a truly creative person who through work can absorb much of the energy not discharged in other aspects of life. 10) This is an important observation given that in today's world most people do not have work that is experienced psychically as creative.

In sum, the difference between "normal" (and "supernormal", i.e., "the artist") and the neurotic in terms of adjustment is that The neurotic is thrown back again and again to the real birth trauma, whilst the normal and supernormal throw it, so to say, forwards and project it outwards, and are thus enabled to objectify it. 11)

In other words, the neurotic is more regressed than the "normal" individual in terms of this basic life experience, the trauma of birth, and his regressions are often self-destructive, if not destructive in relation to others. In the extreme case psychic, even physical, survival is put at risk.

But why are some adjustments unsuccessful - as they so clearly are in the case of the neurotic or psychotic? After all the birth trauma is worldwide. Everyone is born physically and has to become born in the psychic sense of relating to the trauma.

Although the paucity of his clinical data is a handicap here, it is clear that Rank's answer is that if birth (and therefore its associated trauma) is a fact - the fact - then the facts of the individual's birth decide whether the relationship to the trauma will become creative or uncreative.

Rank only considers the case where the infant has to deal with impingement that is too great. Winnicott, however, goes further: he would say that where there has been too much or too little struggle for life, neurotic difficulties are likely to arise. 12)

The disagreement between Rank and Winnicott is clearer if we pursue Rank's views about caesarian birth. According to Rank the child born by caesarian section will feel unconsciously a sense of escaping or avoiding the birth trauma. Presumably by this he means that the facts of this person's birth make a good relationship to the trauma relatively easy to achieve. He speaks here of "the hero".

Rank has got rather striking, yet internally consistent views about death, the other end of the developmental process. It is important to realise that, for Rank, the psyche is **literally** all powerful. 13) It creates all our reality. Even our technology is, in the last resort, the result of a creative working with the birth trauma.

Even the most "normal" person will eventually succumb to the pull back to the womb. To quote Rank

    this process, which we call 'ageing', has, in order to attain the unconscious aim (i.e., return to pleasure/nothingness), to apply itself to the systematic destruction of the whole body, which, through all kinds of illnesses, it finally leads to death. 14)

The all-powerful psyche initiates ageing and death which, if the individual is religious, might be seen as "going to heaven". Rank says such an idea reduces anxiety but insists that in reality it is a "return" to an earthy heaven, the womb, that is sought.

## CONCLUSION

Rank's fundamental view is that the birth trauma is universal. Modern writers usually do not agree with him, at least on this score. Not only Winnicott but also Janov says:

Rank believed birth itself is traumatic (leaving the warmth and security of the womb behind, while I believe that it is **traumatic birth** which is traumatic. 15)

And, of course, we have attempts to go back even further. The most recent, well-known one being R.D. Laing's **The Facts of Life**. Yet these attempts to speculate about **inter-uterine** life by writers and many practitioners alike, qualify and add to Rank's version; all still build upon his and Freud's foundations.

### Footnotes

1) The first English translations of his work were as follows:

(A) **The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study**, tr. by Harry Tucker, Jr. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1971)

(B) **The Myth of the Birth of the Hero**, tr. by F. Robbins and Smith Ely Jelliffe in **Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease** (1914), re-issued as Monograph No.18.

(C) **The Trauma of Birth** (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929). All my references to **The Trauma** refer to the 1973 edition published by Harper & Row, New York.

(D) **Modern Education**, tr. by Mabel E. Moxon (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1932).

(E) **Art and Artist**, tr. by C.F. Atkinson (New York: Knopf, 1932).

(F) **Will Therapy and Truth and Reality** (New York: Knopf, 1936).

(G) **Beyond Psychology** (Camden, N.J.: Haddon Craftsmen, 1941)

All these works have recently been reissued in paperbacks and a "selected works" of Rank brought out by Philip Freund, ed., **The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings by Otto Rank** (New York: Random House, n.d.) This includes all of (B) and extracts from (D), (E) and (F).

2) D.W. Winnicott, **Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis** (London: Hogarth Press, 1977) p. 177, emphasis from original.

3) **The Trauma**, p.211.

- 4) A good summary of much of the later Freudian work on prenatal and birth experiences and their influence on personality is offered in Gerald S. Blum, **Psychoanalytic Theories of the Personality** (New York: McGraw- Hill, 1953), pp.1-13.
- 5) He finished writing the manuscript in 1923. See Paul Roazen, **Freud and His Followers** (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p.396.
- 6) See especially **Art and Artist**
- 7) Refer to Roazen, **Freud and His Followers**, pp.389-414 for a short but informative account of Rank the man, his work and his "departure" from the Freudians.
- 8) Rank devotes considerable space to reducing these aspects of human culture back to their supposed roots in the birth trauma. He is in no doubt in **The Birth Trauma** that the spiritual side of the human being is not a "separate realm". He recognises that it is useful to some for absorbing energy as are philosophy, art, etc.
- 9) Cf. Wilhelm Reich's concept of orgastic potency in **The Function of the Orgasm** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), Ch. IV.
- 10) The "artist" became increasingly important to Rank in later books and the neurotic was portrayed as a "failed artist" - "an artist without a work of art." See **Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development** (New York: Agathon Press, 1968).

In this and many other facets of his work Rank touches upon issues of central importance to Jung. But when he wrote **The Trauma** Rank presents a picture at odds with, although related to Jungian concerns and goes to great lengths to point out their differences.



Particularly important here is his rejection of "birth material" in client work as being in any way indicative of a change in direction potentially available to the client. He insists that it must only be seen as a historical factor, that material, normally as offered in dreams, could be **both** symbolic and real; Rank at this stage of his development would only see it as about the real, the concrete act of being born.

11) **The Trauma**, p. 213.

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