

PSYCHOLOGY and the SOUL by Otto Rank

Newly translated by Gregory Richter and E. James Lieberman, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Paperback edition, 2003.

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Reviews/Comments

Excellent translation. You have done a splendid job making a wide-ranging text assimilable. The structure of the argument emerges clearly, and Rank's gift for chronological arrangement shines through. The genius of the man is there for all to see. The "Translator's Introduction" abounds in novel insights and states Rank's contributions, feistiness, and genius succinctly and persuasively. Pp. xii-xiv present innovative cultural criticism. I had never before connected ignoring the poor with fear of being reminded of death, but the thought makes sense. Likewise your comments on "extraordinary death" as reminding us "that we are alive" rings true. An arresting way to start a book!

Rank's sheer learning and deftness in applying it dazzles and no doubt deters many today. He is, as you say, a kind of universal progenitor of contemporary thinking about the psychology of soul.

--William M. Johnston, letter of 26 Oct.

1998

Author, *The Austrian Mind* (1972) and other works. Prof. of History, University of Massachusetts

The new translation reads like a new and different book. The words no longer get in each other's way and block movement. It's a pleasure to move along in the text at a normal pace and be assured of clarity. A very

nice job. Your introduction gives the reader what is not in the text, a context and a clarification in which to properly understand Rank. Congratulations!

--Carl Rakosi (poet, essayist, former social worker), 1998

See *Carl Rakosi: Man and Poet*, Michael Heller, ed., Orono: Univ. of Maine, 1993.

Excellent introduction. This translation has finally rendered a very “readable Rank” without...sacrificing accuracy or any of the startling profundity of the original. Although it was Rank’s earlier book, *The Trauma of Birth*, which opened up the rift within Freud’s circle, this book much more clearly charts Rank’s independent course.

We know that Drs. Lieberman and Richter not only know the original language of Rank, but are intimately acquainted with Rank’s system as a whole and are gifted writers in their own right.

--Daniel Liechty, *Newsletter*, Ernest Becker Foundation, Sept. 1998

An excerpt from the translator's introduction by E. James Lieberman

What is the soul? Otto Rank treats it as a universal and essential belief for individuals and their societies, constant in function but evolving in form through millennia. To borrow a post-Rankian metaphor, the soul was created in the big bang of irresistible psychological force colliding with immutable biological fact--our will to live forever against death. The collision creates a spark in our individual and social consciousness which through history has become both consolation and inspiration: the immortal soul. All ideologies reflect this phenomenon and modify its expression to suit the era.

Otto Rank wrote before the atom bomb or television, both of which alter our perception of death without changing the fact. Rank's introduction of

the soul as an essential part of contemporary psychology helps explain a number of perplexing, irrational phenomena in contemporary life.

o Why violent death may be more attractive than natural death.

Attention to unnatural, uncertain forms of death relieves anxiety about everyday, ordinary death that is actually more threatening because it is certain.

o Why capital punishment survives despite its cost and its failure to deter.

Revenge--a soul for a soul--concentrates retaliation upon concentrated evil. Deterrence is undermined, not improved, by this wishful projection and "destruction" of evil.

o Why having, even creating, an enemy can be therapeutic.

By projecting our nemesis, death, upon another whom we can kill, we symbolically annihilate death.

o Why abortion and suicide arouse more ire than infanticide and war, starvation and murder.

We face paradoxical threats in today's world: too much death, too much life. Along with weapons of mass annihilation we have overpopulation. To some, abortion and contraception interrupt the transit of souls while death in combat or by starvation is quite compatible with salvation and immortality. Their ideology takes this life to be mere preparation for the next (where there is no overcrowding). Of course, willing one's own death by suicide is strictly forbidden.

o Why some faiths proselytize and others don't.

Any holdout from the group's shared belief system may "cost" the community in the salvation sweepstakes. This produces great pressure for conformity, with scapegoating of the holdout.

Religious proselytizing takes the form, "My interpretation of the imaginary is better than yours." This phenomenon occurs also with literary critics in relation to readers, and psychoanalysts with patients.

o Why heroic medicine, though costlier and less efficient, is more attractive than preventive medicine.

Heroics deny death; prudent public health only delays it. Accidents continue to exact a greater toll than most diseases, but many people do not

believe in accidents. Their ideology of determinism says that fate decides, that what happens is meant to be and only divine intervention (including high-tech medicine) can change it. We try to prevent the most shocking accidents: 150 people dying in an airplane crash is front page news. The fact that 150 die every day on our highways (the most prevalent form of fatal violence) is background noise which we tolerate at shockingly high levels.

o How sporting events and concerts engender a "group" soul.

Totemism has contemporary forms, from football to Woodstock and Wagner to any sectarianism that supports identity in a global melting pot. Note that the media excitedly report any stadium riot, omitting the fact that tens of thousands of such gatherings are uneventful in that sense: crowds conduct themselves peaceably thanks mainly to inner controls which Rank would give their due.

o Why our domestic poor are hard to embrace.

Many policy makers see compassion as a liability. Those who embrace the weak yield to an ethical pull that closes the gap between strata, reminding us of fallibility and mortality.

o Why we wake ourselves up with nightmares.

To reassure ourselves that we have not died.

A Rankian Views the Nightly News Why do people ritually watch presentations of murder and mayhem at bedtime?

Reports of unexpected death to strangers comfort us, paradoxically. By definition, the audience is comprised of those who have survived. An other died. Death passed us by, claiming someone else, perhaps a sacrifice on behalf of the community. We can rest assured for the moment that death is avoidable.

Television brings no ordinary obituaries. We do not hear about ordinary people dying in the usual ways. If a famous person dies, or an unknown person dies spectacularly, we hear about it. In this way television and the press convey truth but not reality. Despite serious--often correctable--problems with violence, our society is overwhelmingly nonviolent. That is reality but it is not news. The extraordinary alerts us like the nightmare to keep us from dying in our sleep--or from turning off the news. As Rank shows with heroes of old, the murder victim achieves a kind of immortality by dying so vividly.

After the news we have sports, in which rivalries arouse harmless passions, and we identify with teams and heroes seeking a "record," i.e. immortality.

Next we have a detailed survey of the weather, far more than we need or even understand. Milton Mayer once said, "Death is the opposite of the weather: everybody does something about it, but no one talks about it." The high-tech weather ritual invokes technogods to explain and predict what cannot really be controlled. Safe in bed with our barometric lullaby, we commiserate with the victims of storms, floods, and drought.

Finally, the news often includes lottery events. Ordinary people overwhelmingly lose, but the games keep going and our irrational hopes stay high. People identify with winners, who "beat the odds." Big winners become immortal for a moment. Money is only part of this morality play. Beating the odds implies not dying.

Although by far the chief (and most preventable) cause of death and injury by violence is the automobile accident, our society is saturated with powerful weapons and images of violence. Most people are nonviolent while believing that hostile violence is more prevalent than it is, thanks to exaggerated reports. Who would ever guess that suicides outnumber murders three to two? We live in an ideological climate in which preventable dangers (accidents, smoking, unplanned pregnancy, suicide) are tolerated while less prevalent menaces are broadcast.

This supports the reigning ideology that only the threat of violence deters violence. Freud's Oedipus complex assumes that sons are deterred by fear of their fathers, specifically of castration--a threat from outside. But Otto Rank points out that internal controls work very well, generally, without due credit. Will uses the force of instinctual energy for self-governance as well as for aggression. Inhibition comes from will and ethical connection as much or more than it does from fear. Society in general and traffic in particular runs relatively smoothly for reasons other than surveillance by police. Rank's optimistic leanings challenge the Freudian pessimism that was fueled by the grimmest events of the twentieth century.

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Last Updated April 2003 by E. James Lieberman