



ED MENDELOWITZ, Ph.D.

Center for Existential-Humanistic
Psychotherapy

21931 Burbank Blvd. #22
Woodland Hills, CA 91367

edmendelowitz@protonmail.com
www.edmendelowitz.com
<https://saybrook.academia.edu/Ed-Mendelowitz>

I AND THOU

Rank, Rogers, & the Birth of the Cool

“A great relationship breaches the barriers of a lofty solitude, subdues is strict law, and throws a bridge from self-being to self-being across the abyss of dread of the universe.”—Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

“Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that’s creativity.”—Charles Mingus

“I crave simplicity. The other I have.”—Otto Rank to Jessie Taft

Clandestinely, I have always been of the mindset that some of the most astonishing displays of emotional and relational, ultimately devotional, acts of communion are to be found in music—especially, perhaps, its improvisational expressions personified by jazz. The best of jazz would seem, regularly, to take things to a whole other level. “Life without music,” proclaims Nietzsche, is, put mildly, “a mistake.” It has never been lost upon me that Jung and Freud, their vast differences notwithstanding, seemed conjointly proud for having no feeling for music, neither of them seeming to realize the liabilities attending such glaring insufficiencies along these domains. In this sizable way, even Jung lags far behind the itinerant philologist by whom he, like Freud, was so thoroughly influenced. The best of jazz luminaries get far beyond systems and key signatures, predictable archetypes and forms. Although I doubt that Rogers spent much time with, say, avant-garde alto saxophonist Jackie McLean or even Miles Davis, he came to realize that, beyond the earthly I-Thou dyad, there arose the possibility of listening, reverently, “to the music of the spheres.”

“An unnatural elimination of all human factors in the analysis”—this is how Ferenczi, in sympathy with Rank, encapsulated classical psychoanalysis and the oddity it had routinely become. We must admire the Rank/Ferenczi alliance and also Rank’s integrity, and ultimate courage, in eventually going his own way. Freud, Robert Kramer informs us, once reprimanded Rank (who for decades had been indispensable to the Viennese practitioner and theorist) for having neglected the father in his understanding of things. (Freud seems not to have been especially troubled by his own diminution of the mother in his own obsessively reductive framework. Rank corrected the adoptive father figure he had been surreptitiously outgrowing by pointing out that he had simply restored a balance by reasserting the primacy of the feminine in these realms. He ended with a plea,

possibly more to himself than Freud, for inward integrity: “The only measure is and remains whether one can be true to oneself.” “How much truth can you stand?” exhorted their mutual mentor Nietzsche. And also this: “Supposing truth is a woman—what then?”

Concerning the therapeutic situation, Rank’s intuition and insight were surpassing and far-reaching: “My technique consists essentially of having no technique,” he said. (This was on no account a dilettantish remark. I recall the Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini uttering almost precisely these words in speaking to the manner in which his films came into being.) Instead of advocating a technique,” Kramer notes, Rank “came to call his therapy, simply, a ‘Philosophy of Helping.’” “Willing,” Kramer observes astutely, “is the experience of feeling, viscerally, the ‘cosmic primal force.’” “Love,” he continues a few paragraphs on, “is a softening of the will.” It is difficult to overstate the extent to which such brilliant Rankian apprehension informs the fabric of our thought and work. “In an epigram to a chapter entitled ‘Feeling and Denial,’” Kramer continues, “Rank quotes Goethe: ‘Gefühl ist alles—‘feeling is all.’” “The main obstacle to feeling, according to Ferenczi, was ‘Insensitivity (Fühllosigkeit) of the analyst.’” “Freud saw himself,” Kramer explains, “as an objective observer—a ‘natural-scientist’—not as a participant in an interpersonal field.” He was not the sort of guy to visit the jazz halls of Harlem, least of all in the company of Anaïs Nin, as Rank would one day do. Freud was minimally touched if at all by the modern arts burgeoning all around him. Though the older man would not have known it, he was left light-years behind.

Rank presented Freud with the collected works of Nietzsche upon their final meeting. I imagine him pleading, metaphorically, with the older man on behalf of friendship and decency: the two men should not have had to part paths categorically simply because their philosophies and characters so diverged. Ferenczi, after working alongside Rank in arguing on behalf of the human, all-to-human connections between client and therapist, nonetheless betrayed his friend and loftier self in submitting to Freud’s pressure and cutting things off, decisively, with Rank. It is moving to ponder the fact that Rank’s parting gift to Freud, bound in white leather, traveled with Freud to his final home in Hempstead; also, that neither Freud nor Ferenczi ever spoke to Rank again.

“I have long considered Rank to be the great unacknowledged genius in Freud’s circle,” writes Rollo May in a preface to Kramer’s *A Psychology of Difference*, an edited volume containing Rank’s American lectures constituting, in effect, as May further noted, “a readable Rank.” That brilliant collection of lectures is another book I would emphatically recommend as required reading for every humanistically-inclined depth psychologist among us. Rank did what was necessary in breaking out of the constraints of the myth of “masculine ideology” embodied by classical psychoanalysis—a fact not lost upon so many women of creativity and substance both in and out of our own field. In this way, he was able to place his keen intelligence and vast erudition in the service of his own evolution and ongoing self-creation. Only in this manner, does the frail human specimen move, in Rank’s words, “from creature to creator.” “Self-creation,” muses Nietzsche, “the most difficult art.”

Check out Jackie McLean's 1964 Blue Note recording of *One Step Beyond* or *Destination Out!* for stunning examples of Nietzschean gods who dance and are, therefore, worthy of especial observance, even awe. Notice the manner in which Bobby Hutcherson's deft vibraphone replaces the stalwart piano in these recordings, allowing for more breathing room for McLean and his compatriots (fellow journeyers to a brave new world) to better do their thing. These artists, like Rank, hit upon all the notes of existence: nothing is forsaken or forsworn. Here we witness authentic "communities of the abandoned" of the sort with which Adorno and others of the Frankfurt School must have felt especial kinship and more than passing knowledge as well. The courage to create precludes safety or routine or the relentless recycling of old wines we typically witness and endure. (Habit," observes Vladimir in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, "is a great deadener.") Such displays of musical virtuosity put the most self-impressed "creativity" of even humanistic psychologists to shame. If there is no bona fide imagination or anxiety or daring, we can forget about bringing something genuinely new or different into being in the world. For most of us, being a spectator with a good seat at the table will be more than enough. "The only response to genius," I seem to recall Nietzsche somewhere uncharacteristically, yet humbly, opining, "is love."

In psychology, Rank may be as close as we get to those Nietzschean gods who know how to swing, engage, and dance. His writing, God knows, is by no means easy, but with a worthy guide (and Ernest Becker along with Kramer and his friend, Jim Lieberman, on Rank are about as good as it gets), we are able to accompany "little Rank" to those excursions to what James had pointed toward as the "margins" of consciousness and beyond. Here, at these mystic shorelines, both terror and metaphysical epiphany obtain. This was part of the multi-textured message that Rank passed along to Carl Rogers when Rogers encountered him in upstate New York. Rank's banishment from the Viennese fold thus yielded fruit first in Paris and, thereafter, here in the States. "Is this the only reality?" wonders Rogers in his later years; "Do we really need 'a' reality?" Rogers sounds, as he ages, remarkably attuned to William James's invocation of the "vague and inarticulate" and the dimly-perceived "multiverse." Shortly before death, Rogers speculates upon "the transcendent, the indescribable, the spiritual." The poignancy of Rogers's burden and advance remains moving even now.

Speaking for myself, it is good to be reminded of where, very nearly 50 years ago, the journey once began. Rogers was the very first person I read in humanistic psychology shortly after my arrival at college. The dialogue and tensions between Rogers and May on the nature of being, tragedy and the daemonic especially, remain profoundly relevant even today. Just what is it that we mean by human nature or being and what is implied by talk of our shared human predicament and dreams? What are humankind's possibilities and circumscriptions? It would be fatuous to assume that humanistic psychology and its minions are always on the right side of history. The closer we are able to get to the essence of things, the more solitary the journey and, yet, the more ennobling we and our future works and relations are likely to be. Bona fide innovation has never been easy.

The distances between Rank and Rogers strike me as well. Rogers, albeit differently than Freud, was originally rooted in a rather left hemisphere-leaning understanding of method. Rank, a vastly more literary and aesthetic character, seems to have moved beyond this very early on. Is it possible that Rogers in some sense embodied the “simplicity” Rank sought following his years in Vienna? “Feeling and willing,” Kramer notes, “are colors of the soul.” Rank simultaneously embodies and catalyzes a Maslovian “growing tip” of what Henry Murray rightly called a “literary psychology.” In these realms, I would say, Rank is indispensable, whereas Rogers has much less to contribute or say. Still, Rogers receives the message and continues to grow as a human being and man: spiritually, he becomes authentically tuned-in and turned-on. Those conversations and sympathies with Buber remain stirring to me even now. As a card-carrying member of James’s “healthy-minded” human representatives, Rogers attended insufficiently to humanity’s dark side. What is intriguing is that Rank seems to have traveled a very long way in achieving a deeply engaging humanness embodying a simplicity and genius all its own. Inevitably, the rhymes and contrasts between these two men remain compelling.

The Trauma of Birth, the book that so rocked the psychoanalytic establishment, made possible Otto Rank’s emergence from the byzantine milieu that Freud had so assiduously cultivated and then sought to control. The trauma of re-birth, we may say. Averting their vision from what Jaspers, influenced by his Jewish wife, Gertrud, had called “the Encompassing,” Freud and his disciples created a misshapen, this-worldly religion with that strangely delimited Freudian unconscious as godhead of an instinct-ridden underworld and Freud himself as prophet reigning over all. It is fascinating to consider how Rank’s excommunication from this insistently terrestrial church made possible his ongoing evolution no less than an astonishing body of further work. Rogers, it is evident, was touched by this brilliance, as was, in certain ways differently, Rollo May. Both pillars of third-force psychology deserve credit for recognizing in Rank a surpassing exemplar. With Kramer as guide to the guide, we become Rank’s beneficiaries as well. I don’t think we can rightly think of ourselves as laborers in the vineyard of third-force psychology (a noble place to live and work only when done wholly and right) without embracing Rank’s story and odyssey and beholding his breathtaking genius.

Kramer is one of our most erudite existential-humanistic scholars—a remarkably articulate interpreter of all things relating to Rank. We do not hear from him especially often; when we do, it is fitting that we dispense with everyday dalliances and attend to this voice with some care. Bob’s illuminating book on the Rank/Rogers connection has a directness of expression, even rhythm, perfectly suited to its conjoined themes of connection, possibility, and largesse. His book is informed by rarified sensitivity and awareness and an engagement, sustained and authentic, with the horror and beauty of it all. No one understood such things better than Rank, who, thanks to Bob’s ongoing efforts, continues to teach and inspire us so many years down the line. Rank’s abiding influence upon Rogers is as much a tribute to the magnanimous self genius is able to become in going its own way

as it is to Rogers's uncanny receptivity to this unprepossessing messenger from a different world.

To read Kramer is to be returned to rarified narratives and sources from whence we have descended. Rank, inexorably, is a member of this hallowed pantheon. Kramer, along with his friend and colleague, Lieberman, has been quietly constructing a sublime sort of stateside temple uniquely honoring this simultaneously this- and other-worldly man. It is one of the very few houses of worship in which I find myself an eager, indeed rapt, congregant. Kramer's riveting book is doubly instructive in shedding light on the continental antecedents to our cause and how the baton was passed along to the New World via perspicacious souls like Rogers and also May. Kramer cogently summarizes the phenomenon and result: "To be twice born is surely no more miraculous than to be born once. I cannot but feel . . . that long after Otto Rank died in 1939, his spirit was alive in the mind, heart, and soul of Carl Rogers."

Bob Kramer remains, for me, one of the vital voices in our domain.

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Note

Robert Kramer's *The Birth of Relationship Therapy: Carl Rogers meets Otto Rank* is available for purchase on Amazon or by writing the publisher directly at vertrieb@psychosozial-verlag.de. All quotes by Rank, Rogers, and Kramer, too, are excerpted from the book.