

R.D. Laing and the Politics of Truth

R.D. Laing and the Politics of Truth:

Self, Society and Therapy

Edited by

Theodor Itten and Ron Roberts

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN: 978-1-0364-4883-7

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-4884-4

In Memory of
the Fab Five of
The Philadelphia Association London
1972-1982

Francis Huxley
Hugh Crawford
John Heaton
Leon Redler
Ronald David Laing

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are extremely grateful to all the authors who contributed generously to this collection; to Ron Roberts co-writing the new preface for the 2025 edition, to Evelyne Gottwalz-Itten for her continuous encouragement, and to Raphael Grischa Itten, Berlin, for his painting of R.D. Laing (2012), that adorns the cover of this book.

We would like to thank the artist Victoria Crowe, for permission to reprint her portrait of R. D. Laing hanging in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, represented by Christina Jansen Managing Director, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh. All further photos are from Theodor's archive.

We deeply appreciate Adam Rummens, Senior Commissioning Editor, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, having seen reason with us, to publish this book in its entirety once again in their publishing house. Many thanks to Sophie Edminson, for her harmonious layout design. Finally, thanks to Sam Taylor, Business Director – PCCS Books, who first supported this venture for letting us use the text and photo imprint of the 2012 edition which went under the Title: R.D. Laing – 50 Years since The Divided Self. We extend our deep appreciation for our colleague and friend, Courtenay Young, Edinburgh, who co- edited the first edition.

NEW PREFACE

Over the Pentecost weekend of 1989, Ronald David Laing and Theodor met for what would be the last time face to face. Neither of course, could foresee Laing's impending death on August 23rd. During this jolly weekend in Going, Austria, spent with Marguerita and Charles at their rented home, a former farm house, they discussed a joint book project, with the preliminary working title: *The Politics of Truth*. This would lend an echo to Ronnie's two previous books referring to the politics of experience and of the family. Our book was to interrogate who does what in who's name and for what reason, and under what power are decisions made. I (TI) wrote about this weekend.¹

Thirty-six years after this joint vision, the time has come, to render this second edition of collected essays, conversations, reviews, memories, dreams, and reflections under the umbrella of the *Politics of Truth*. The first edition was published thirteen years ago, in celebration of 50 years since Laing's first masterpiece *The Divided Self*, (1960). This diverse collection confirms Laing as an original practitioner in the healing arts and a succinct and enduring theoretical voice.

Among the three collections reappraising Laing's work which have been published in the 21st century,² ours gives greater space to the female voice – a necessary and long overdue move in the appraisal of R.D. Laing, all the more so given the strong female presence in Laing's published case material.

Demystifying our communal longing for truthful encounters with one another was always preeminent amongst Laing's concerns. As the new century grinds on in increasing waves of remorseless destruction and authoritarian conceit, we must contend with a renewed politics of ignorance, both raw and educated, supervised by those who stand determined that their ideas, theories and methods are the incontestable absolute. The advent and wide availability of general artificial intelligence will do nothing to end this conceit or emancipate people from the relentless drudgery of life's inhumane conditions. We cannot know nor predict all the twists and turns that lie ahead, but the future of the human enterprise of living on this planet, needs common wisdom, love and humility, to offset the unending insanity and folly which have taken us thus far. Laing at his best stood for all three of these.

How then to be knowledgeable of the issues we know and have experienced? The art of living – the core philosophical conundrum from antiquity to the present – must address how we deal with our experience, and how we present our knowledge of this experience, knowing that we have witnessed the phenomena that have come to pass. From there we can hopefully arrive at an operational knowledge to guide us and our fellow travellers, both human and animal on this planet. Our experience as Laing made clear is an unbridled veil of secrets which perforce must find an outlet in words and publicly endorsed meanings. In the texts you are about to read, there is an invitation for wayfarers of the soul to read and pay due attention to the words and meanings of the assembled voices who relay the ordinary, extraordinary, and disquieting understandings of human quirks which Laing's work opened a door to. How to alleviate needless mental suffering lies at the back of this. In the healing professions, there is as yet no simple consensus on this. A broader politics of truth must invariably contend with the human mystery, and the paradox that although we think we know what we know and what we don't know, there are things which we will never know. These are beyond the limits of our presently constructed imagination.

Hamburg and London, 16th December 2024
Theodor Itten & Ron Roberts

Notes

1. 2001, Laing in Austria. In: Janus Head - An Interdisciplinary Journal, 4.1, Pittsburg. S. 69-89.
2. Raschid, S. (Ed.) 2005. *R.D. Laing. Contemporary perspectives*. London. Free Association; Thompson, M.G. (Ed.) 2015. *The Legacy of R. D. Laing. An appraisal of his contemporary relevance*. London. Routledge.

INTRODUCTION

THEODOR ITTEN & COURTENAY YOUNG

With this book, our authors and we, the editors, commemorate and celebrate in our various ways, the 50 years (or so) since the publication of R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self*, in 1960. He was then 33 years old. He began writing his first book shortly after he entered clinical practice in the Royal Gartnavel Hospital, Glasgow, in 1953, developing his style of relating to patients, listening to them, and conveying his experience by getting his 'voice' going. For Laing, the epistemological basis for the science of a person became empirical phenomenology: the ultimate definition was not some erudite theory, but what could actually be seen and heard. In this, he was quite radical and – for him – this was also somewhat transformational. The title for his first book came from Chapter 8, 'The Divided Self, and the Process of its Unification', by William James, in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience – A Study of Human Nature* (1902/1961).

What was Laing's basic message just over half a century ago? First of all, that it is imperative to listen more carefully to the 'mad' communications of all the people who are similar to those portrayed in *The Divided Self*. Maybe they are not as 'mad' as they seem; maybe they are just 'divided selves'. Whilst simple, this was revolutionary. For centuries, society (we) had excluded, ignored, imprisoned, laughed at, and been afraid of these 'mad' people. De facto, their ravings could not therefore be sensible, but Laing just asked us to listen more carefully and take some of their personal 'stories' into account: maybe then they would make more sense than heretofore presumed. If you start to 'be' with these ordinary people, much like you and me, in a more courteous, respectful way, you may find that they open up to you some of the treasures of their hidden true selves.

In April 1958, Ronald D. Laing wrote to Donald Winnicott: 'You may not remember me. I have written a study (ca. 80,000 words) on schizoid and schizophrenic states, in particular trying to describe the transition from a sane to a mad way of being in the world. It draws its inspiration very largely from your writings. May I send it to you?' 'Yes,' Winnicott replied, a day later. On July 28, Winnicott wrote back appreciatively to Laing (Winnicott, 1987, p. 119):

Dear Dr. Laing,

Yesterday I had my first chance to read your MS, which I insulted by getting through it in two hours. You will understand from this that I did not do it justice. After reading it I tried to ring you up because I was so excited. I suppose my excitement had to do with the fact that you make so much use of the sort of things that I think important. Certainly you are very generous in your attribution.

It is possible that in your build-up at the beginning you are talking to yourself quite a bit. This maybe a good way of starting a book but I did not really get interested until about a third of the way through. I hope the book gets published soon and that from there you may get on making a more concise theoretical statement.

Incidentally I learned something from your book which is always exciting: something you said about being watched in paranoid states made me see that one of my patients is being watched by a projection of her true self. This is something I had not thought of and it helps me very considerably. Thank you very much for letting me see the MS.

I look forward to reading the book.

Yours sincerely

D.W. Winnicott

Others, like John Bowlby, had their strong reservations. Apparently, he said to Laing that it was basically a sound book, but could he not cut out the phenomenological, existential and ontological references? Philip Toynbee reviewed the new book in *The Observer* with favourable sympathy for Laing's truly humanistic approach.

All the essays, articles and reflections in this book are dedicated to the life, the work, and the extraordinary person that was Ronald David Laing (1927–1989). His close and oldest friend, social anthropologist Francis Huxley, gave a moving and eye-wetting farewell address at the memorial and thanksgiving service at St. James's, Piccadilly, in January 1990. 'I honour him more than I can tell you,' he said, while reminding us of Laing's personal struggle for a truthful life and his 'psychic fist hitting at the navel of insincerity'. This sentence became the key for John Clay (1996) in writing Laing's biography, with the subtitle: *A Divided Self*.

Laing saw his life as a search for his true self and encouraged others, be they family, patients, friends, foes, readers or colleagues, to join him on that arduous, lie-challenging journey to an authentic paradise. Of course, even being on course, we will never reach any permanency in this state, which – more often than not – comes as a fleeting moment in our ordinary and normal life. 'I am a student of my own nature,' he lectured in 1972 to an American audience, 'I can only tell you how my life has gone. It has been a very circuitous journey ... in a sense, I suppose, it's just the story of a mid-

twentieth century intellectual. I suppose I am one of the symptoms of the times' (Mezan, 1976, p. lxxv).

It is perhaps worth remembering that eight publishers had rejected the manuscript of *The Divided Self* at first. When asked late in his life, in 1989 by Bob Mullan, to go through who turned it down, Laing replied:

'I can't remember all of them, but I think I sent it to Gollancz first of all because of being attracted to his "Year of Grace", and I send it to Penguin because I thought, "Why not? Let's go for it." It just came back after about three months. Then Allen and Unwin. I sent it to Pantheon, who turned it down.'

'How disheartened were you at this time?'

'Well, it was quite a few turn-downs and Schorstein rather shared Avenheimer's view. I think he thought of it as a "private Ph.D. thesis" which would be good practice for later mature work, but thought I was a bit pompous thinking that I could get it published. Well, one thing gives the book the heart that it's got was the relationship I had with Edith Edwards who was the schizophrenic woman of the last chapter.' (Mullan, 1995, p. 266)

Eventually, as a member of staff at the Tavistock Clinic, he offered his manuscript to Tavistock Publications, who were pleased to receive it. Within a year it was out. In the first few years, only about 1500 to 2000 copies were sold. 'One of the best compliments that I've had was from Christopher Isherwood, who said that he'd include the last two pages of *The Divided Self* in any anthology of 20th century English prose' (Mullan, 1995, p. 360). After all, Laing mentioned that the authors Albert Camus and Franz Kafka 'were meat and drink to me' at that youthful time and 'immediate background influence on the sensibility of *The Divided Self*'.

Let's hear then, as a taster, the last paragraph of his final chapter, 'The Ghost of the Weed Garden':

Yet, as we saw from earlier statements, she did value herself if only in a phantom way. There was a belief (however psychotic a belief it was, it was still a form of faith in something of great value in herself) that there was something of great worth deeply lost or buried inside her, as yet undiscovered by herself or by anyone. If one could go deep into the depth of the dark earth one would discover 'the bright gold', or if one could get fathoms down one would discover 'the pearl at the bottom of the sea'. (Laing, 1960, p. 223)

How did this talented Scottish doctor of psychological medicine come to be invited down to London in 1956 in the first place? Please remember that it was in 1920 that Hugh Crichton-Miller, MD (1877–1959) founded the Institute of Medical Psychology in Tavistock Square, London, which

became known worldwide as the ‘Tavistock Clinic’, and whose first medical director he was until 1933. This very innovative outpatient clinic was run by a group of dedicated doctors, psychologists and social workers, who were inspired by the ‘New Psychology’, originating in Vienna (Sigmund Freud, 1856–1939) and Zurich (Eugen Bleuler, 1857–1939; C.G. Jung, 1875–1961).

In 1947, Dr John D. Sutherland (1905–1991), from Edinburgh, was appointed to become the third medical director of the Tavistock Clinic, a position he held until 1968. While active in Edinburgh University, teaching psychology, Sutherland went into analysis with Dr Ronald Fairbairn (1889–1964), Scotland’s first psychoanalyst. Together with Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, Fairbairn was one of the founders of the ‘object-relations’ approach to psychoanalysis, which bases personality and character development on the experience of the infant in his or her early relationships – both in qualitative and quantitative patterns within the family. Fairbairn’s contributions to psychoanalysis and psychotherapy were original, both in practice and theory, without his having undergone the normal psychoanalytic training routine. In 1946, he published his seminal essay, ‘Object-relationships and dynamic structure’ (Fairbairn, 1946).

Glasgow University’s first Professor of Psychiatry, T.F. Rodger (1907–1978), a friend of Fairbairn’s, had appointed a young and bright MD, Thomas Freeman, who had trained at the Tavistock Institute, 1950–1952, and was an enthusiastic researcher into ‘schizophrenia’. As Professor of Psychiatry, Rodger was also medical director of the Gartnavel Royal Mental Hospital. Ronald David Laing studied medicine at Glasgow University from 1945–1951. At the Gartnavel Hospital, Laing trained as a psychiatrist and joined the ‘Schizophrenia research unit’, headed by Freeman. Together with John L. Cameron and Andrew McGhie, Laing wrote up his first experiment in interpersonal relations research, ‘Patient and Nurse’ (Cameron, Laing & McGhie, 1955a). While practising in this mental hospital, he began collecting cases and writing them up.

It was these writings that became the basis for his two books (first conceived as one), *The Divided Self* (1960) and *The Self and Others* (1961). Freeman, Cameron and McGhie published their own book, *Chronic Schizophrenia* (1958) with a foreword by Anna Freud (1895–1982). It was John Sutherland who, having asked Rodger to suggest a few names of bright and talented psychiatrists, decided to invite Laing, who was one of those fortunate enough to be mentioned, to come down from Glasgow to London to train as a psychoanalyst on a grant and, at the same time, join the staff at the Tavistock Clinic as a registrar, which Laing did between 1956–1960. Until he left the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in 1964, Laing was active

in the family communications research field. H.V. Dicks' *50 Years of the Tavistock Clinic*, features Ronald Laing:

... who also obtained a Foundation Fund grant on completing his senior registrarship and his psychoanalytic training with us ... Laing's work in pathological family process not only consisted of vivid observation of schizophrenic families, but also laid the foundations of a new method of recording interactions, which resulted in a book by Phillipson, Lee and himself – Interpersonal Perception. (Dicks, 1970, p. 243)

As a brief note to Laing's psychoanalytic apostolic succession, we would like to remind readers that he was in psychoanalytic training from 1956 to 1960 with a member of the so-called 'independent group' of British psychoanalysts, Charles Rycroft (1914–1998). Laing was also in supervision with D.W. Winnicott (1896–1971) and Marion Milner (1900–1998).

As therapists, we perceive with the whole of our own embodiment and the whole of our (own) past, what the patient brings to us, as what is the case and what is not the case in what is the matter with her or him. This is what Ferenczi called a 'relaxed-active therapy stance'. Rycroft once remarked that perhaps Winnicott's most important contribution to psychoanalysis was his concept of 'a transitional reality ... which mediates between the private world of dreams and the public, shared world of the environment' (Jacobs, 1995, p. 136).

In summarising his work in *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, Laing wrote succinctly:

There is so much that goes on between us which we can never know. The necessity of this ignorance, and the impossibility of any satisfactory criteria of decidability when it comes to the validation of particular attributions of a personal and interpersonal order, have led those who wish to cultivate the art of the soluble to abandon this area of uncertainty and enigmas. However, this domain does not evaporate because the objective look does not see it. The great divide between fact and feelings is a product of our own schizoid construction. In reality, the reason of the heart and the physiology of the brain coexist and must be interdependent. We cannot construe this reality, however. We cannot explain it, much less can we understand it. (Laing, 1987a, p. 418)

Since our experience and our theoretical musings are based on how we sense the meaning of the experiences that we depict and describe, these are usually quite fragmentary in relation to the whole picture.

Nevertheless, what we can do is to live and let ourselves be lived. We can cultivate a method of reflexivity; to see how I 'see' things; to depict

‘my’ way of seeing, feeling, thinking, dreaming; to be more ‘in my body’; to live more authentically; and thus to live my own particular path and purpose in life through the embodiment of my soul.

Authenticity is the key: and Allan Beveridge, in his excellently disturbing study of the young R.D. Laing does not tread lightly on what he calls ‘Laing’s self-mythologizing strategy’ (2011, p. 247).

From Laing, we know that *The Divided Self* and *The Self and Others* were, at one point, going to be one book, or one book in the form of two volumes. But Tavistock Publications wanted them as two separate books. As described, it didn’t sell well at first. *The Divided Self* finally came out in a Penguin paperback edition in 1965. It then sold over 380,000 copies in the next five years, to Laing’s great surprise. It continues to sell very well indeed and has been translated into virtually every language in which books are published (Smith, 1982).

When considering the introduction to this book, we asked Penguin for the latest publication figures. This is the reply that we received:

R.D. Laing’s The Divided Self has sold over 460,000 copies since it was first published by Penguin in 1965, and continues to sell steadily each year. I don’t believe we’ve licensed language rights to any other countries. (Goddard, 2012)

There have, of course, been other English copies sold by other publishers, like his American publisher, Pantheon Books, in New York. When Victoria Brittain interviewed Laing in 1972, after his return from his sabbatical in Sri Lanka, he said that he saw the success of *The Divided Self*, ‘... as a reflection of how many people knew the uncomfortable experience of living with an inner reality which does not correspond to the apparent outer reality of the world’ (Brittain, 1972, p. 9).

In other words, we are living within a family embedded in a society, which teaches us to play roles and fulfil functions, which cut us off ‘... from our deepest feelings and needs: it alienates us from ourselves’ (Berman, 1970, p. 1). This realisation, which we have to believe is true, is an appalling indictment of human social organisation. Religion can also be seen in this light, not as a pathway back to our true self, but as another aspect of the societal divisions. The only way left out of this trap – a way which Laing saw for himself as the Buddhist path – is the very difficult and lonely one of both finding and then maintaining one’s personal integrity, in spite of other people’s reactions and contradictions. And that was Laing’s paeon in both his personal activities and in his professional practice with patients.

Few people at that time had been able to get through to mental patients, who were hiding their true selves within a closed schizophrenic world,

behind the locked doors that we imposed on them. Laing was able to make this particular form of 'being-in-the-world' more intelligible. He explored their underworld journey into madness even further and was still able to return and to tell the tale.

This can be seen when giving Jesse Watkins, the late well-known sculptor, an opportunity in *The Politics of Experience* (in Chapter 7) to recount his Ten-Day Voyage, full of painful treasures from having gone inside and downwards, thereby freeing himself from his anxiety of living his life, letting go of the protective false self which served as a detached, disembodied hiding place for his core being.

When I came out of hospital, I was there for about three months altogether, when I came out I supposedly felt that everything was much more real and that it – than it had been before. The grass was greener, the sun was shining brighter, and people were more alive, I could see them clearer. I could see the bad things and the good things and all that. I was much more aware. (Laing, 1967, p.136)

Watkins describes how he was suddenly enriched with an enormity of inner and outer knowing. He experienced his journey, as several others have managed to do before and after him, as a natural way of healing. In his first famous work, *The Divided Self*, Laing, who took on the role of becoming a specialist in these events in inner space and time, made a profoundly deep impact in his appeal that the plight of those who suffer from mental disturbances needs to be taken absolutely seriously. This message is still with us today.

Our desire to put pen to paper in order to commemorate the publication of *The Divided Self* just over half a century ago went out to many colleagues and friends. We did this first for a special issue of the *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, (Volume 15, No. 2, 2011). When thinking of expanding it into a book, we chose to ask more widely and to include others than the same dear folks who have already written extensively about Ronnie Laing since his untimely death 23 years ago.

His many books, *The Divided Self*, *The Self and Others*, *The Politics of Experience*, *Knots*, and *The Politics of the Family*, as well as his advocacy for expressed emotions and clarification of mystification in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, all made a profound impact not only on our profession, but also on masses of lay people. John Clay brought this to a point:

Many readers felt their own voices were being articulated for the first time; Laing's genius lay in the ability to say what so many knew intuitively, but had never thought to articulate before. His writings touched people's secret minds. (Clay, 1996, p. 270)

Some of the authors in this book knew Laing personally as a friend, colleague and teacher. One, Benjamin Sünkel-Laing, knew him for five years as a father; others only knew him from his work, either through his writing, lectures or film appearances.

In 2006, another book entitled *The Divided Self* was published by D.J. Goldberg, Rabbi Emeritus of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, London. He focused on ‘the survival strategies that have been pursued throughout the centuries’ of Israel and the Jewish psyche today. Maybe, in several ways, it is the same struggle.

Contents

So what is on offer in this volume? In the first section, Conversations, we encounter ‘His Master’s Voice’: Laing himself was broadcast on Swiss-German-Radio, DRS2, on 4th January 1983. Here, you can read the first publication of the transcript of that broadcast. Then follows a ‘Conversation in Two Beds’, an edited recording of a meeting between Phyllis Chesler and R.D. Laing. This is the first publication of part of the edited transcript (42 pages long) from the unreleased documentary film, made whilst Laing was meeting Chesler at the Algonquin Hotel, after giving a talk in New York, on his USA lecture tour in 1972.

While on a visit to Zurich in 1981, Ronnie Laing wanted to meet, for the first time, Professor Manfred Bleuler. Theodor Itten called Bleuler up and organised this meeting, as well as noting down the conversation that you can read here, also published for the first time, as ‘R.D. Laing in Conversation with Manfred Bleuler’, made at Zollikon, on Thursday 16th April 1981.

In the next section on Praxis and Process, we first have ‘Take as Long as It Takes’, the core of which is an account of some things that Laing said to Mina Semyon at one point in her psychotherapy with him. She reflects succinctly and openly on how she got to know Laing, first as her psychotherapist, and then as a friend.

As befits a demystifying mystifier like Laing, David Abrahamson reflects on Laing’s (and others’) discrepant accounts of the by-now well-known ‘rumpus room’ experiment at Gartnavel Royal Hospital. Laing’s actual interactions in the ‘rumpus room’ were not always quite as he made them out to be, and apparently, they became somewhat divorced from clinical realities, as others witnessed them. This is an excellent insight into the other side of the looking glass.

Leon Redler, long-time colleague and friend of Laing’s since Kingsley Hall, recounts his approach in psychotherapy as being very much informed

and influenced by what he experienced in 40 years of being around Ronnie Laing and of being in the Philadelphia Association which Laing and others founded in 1965.

Voyce Hendrix was one of the first staff members of Soteria House, founded by Loren Mosher in California. Following the latter's stay in London in the mid-1960s, learning from Anna Freud as well as Laing, Mosher went back home and founded Soteria, which became a major continuation of the concept of therapeutic housing, first tried out by Laing and others in Kingsley Hall. Soteria (in both California and later in Berne, Switzerland) became the best social phenomenological empirically researched alternative to traditional mental health establishments (Aebi, Ciompi & Hansen, 1993). Hendrix's account demonstrates his and others' skilled humane interventions, in being with, rather than doing for, the residents, and this allowed a high rate of social and psychological recovery without psycho-pharmacological medication.

In '50 Years Since *The Divided Self*' by Murray Gordon, the author describes his journey from apartheid-torn South Africa to study with Laing in London, and then later meetings with Laing in New York. There is a prophetic warning in the penultimate paragraph.

Bruce Scott, with a Ph.D. in Psychology and recent graduate of the Philadelphia Association's training program in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, lets us in on his experience of the inner self's gestation of becoming a professional in 'soul-making'. Being a patient in psychotherapy and training as a psychotherapist have roots in the similar experiences of exploring the inner world of the self. Many a patient has identified with his or her psychotherapist, wanted to, and later became a therapist, and then realised there was no inner calling per se, other than the fascination of the exploration of these internal mysteries.

Courtenay Young, in his very personal and autobiographical exploration about experiencing himself being caught up in a web of 'divided selves', dares, in a manner that befits a psychotherapist of today, to be as healingly open as (perhaps) Laing was in his own personal musings in *The Facts of Life and Wisdom, Madness and Folly*.

This sort of inner journey is a modern example of the ancient dictum: 'Healer, heal thyself!' a theme that Tom Ormay picks up later on in his contribution.

Emmy van Deurzen, Professor in Psychotherapy, reflects on her encounters with Laing and the Arbours Association, as well as the Philadelphia Association and the anti-psychiatry movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, with a very candid touch. Here we can witness how

projections onto Laing, as the great existential thinker, are taken back and made good use of when going one's own way.

Andrew Feldmár portrays Laing through his experience of 'Love, Will, and the Hatred of Reality'. Laing never acted as a result of theoretical considerations; he just *was*. Andrew calls our attention to two aspects of Laing's work that are usually dismissed. First, his strong suspicion that trauma, even as early as conception, arrests growth, and second, the place of psychedelics, as adjuncts to psychotherapy, in Laing's work.

In her recollection from 1987, 'Possibility of Reprieve', the renowned author Susan Griffin takes us back to the days of the 1960s and 1970s when a new feminist movement was beginning, to which she was lending her voice in many publications. On her own bookshelf there were several of Laing's books, and she tells us how they inspired and informed her.

Chris Oakley rounds off this section on practice and process with his ingenious reflections on 'Where Did It All Go Wrong?' It was not only 'everything is up for grabs'; the Philadelphia Association, chaired by Ronnie Laing, was also a cultivated wilderness, where orientation to the quirks of the mind could be found among the companions of the merry heart. His story on the perception of the shadow is a simile on truth, which is rather difficult to explain. His explicit criticisms, similar in some ways to those of Emmy van Deurzen's, are mirrored by implicit (underlying) admiration and respect, tinged with deep sorrow and some historical bitterness.

The third section on Reflections and Theories begins with Professor Anthony David, from the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, who wrote a new introduction to the Penguin Golden Jubilee edition of *The Divided Self*. David entertainingly sets Laing's famous text in a rich and valuable contemporary context. This introduction is here re-published with the kind permission of the author.

Theodor Itten's musing considers Laing's issues in *The Divided Self*, with their claim for existential analysis's aid to lost souls. How Laing's 'warming up' and 'uniting of divided souls' works can be witnessed and comprehended through his case studies, and are spread like field notes in all his latter books, as true voices of experience. He did lend his voice to the experience of madness in order to convey how we can understand persons diagnosed as so-called 'psychotics'.

Putting Laing clearly into the context of post-modern thinking is the great ability of Ron Roberts, in his essay on 'Sanity, Madness and Memory'. As a well-versed Ph.D. and senior lecturer in psychology at Kingston University, London, he argues that the legacy of Laing's work extends far beyond the practical and theoretical realms of the service user's emancipation.

How Laing's theoretical ideas, based on his experience in the field of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and family therapy, were taught over a period of 40 years at an English university is then shown by Dr. Brian Evans. Itten was one of his students, at Enfield College (1974–1978) who picked up his critical enthusiasm for Laing and his work. Evans tells a vivid story of change in both students and teaching context in his unique paper on the impact of the ideas of Laing on English psychology students from the 1960s into the 21st century.

Philosopher and writer Ljiljana Filipovic, from 'Zagreb, takes up the thread that she explored in her book on Laing, challenging our profession and society by questioning the meaning and role of the psychotherapist professionals, as well as the concepts of sanity and madness which form the axiomatic ground for theory-making.

Then Brent Potter, director of the Internet 'Society for Laingian Studies', shows in his contribution on 'Demystifying Madness' how Laing was a renegade phenomenologist, a highly original and controversial thinker, and a spokesman for the marginalised. He presents aspects of Laing's life and work in a clearer light, in order to demystify some of the misunderstandings currently surrounding them.

Tom Ormay, a previous editor of the *International Journal of Psychotherapy* and also a babysitter (when living in London in the 1970s and 80s) of one of Laing's children, writes humanely and positively about Laing, the young psychiatrist, whose publication of *The Divided Self* turned him into a writer and social philosopher. Ormay shows how Laing took on the trouble of life's professional challenge, which nearly all therapists have to face. Laing made it clear that the role of psychiatry in our society was not to make symptoms disappear. Symptoms of a sick society appear in its individual members, and we can diagnose society via the symptoms of its members. But if psychiatry attributes those symptoms entirely to the individual, we cannot find the real cause of mental problems.

Benjamin Sünkel-Laing, one of Laing's six sons and now a medical doctor, aims to specialise in ophthalmology while maintaining an academic interest in both psychiatry and neurology. In his chapter 'Psychiatry and the Limits of Dualism' he describes how the mind and brain are still considered as conceptually separate entities. The 'root' of mental illness is presumed to reside within the brain, although any associated brain pathology is significantly lacking. The 'brain talk' that predominates today is a consequence of repeated marginalisation of alternative theories of psychiatric illness. Mental illness is intrinsically mysterious, but – as we have seen – not necessarily so, given the conflicts that many of us are afflicted with.

We, the editors, have inserted here a section about the changes to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. Laing wrote about this and had clear views on this. Some of these views are now being echoed again with the draft proposals for *DSM-5*.

For many, the names of Szasz and Laing are synonymous with the critiques of modern psychiatry. Roberts and Itten reflect on their common cause in attacking the medicalisation of human distress and the coercive nature of early and modern psychiatry. Yet Szasz has frequently expressed considerable antipathy towards Laing. To understand the tensions which existed between them, it is necessary to examine the respective and different philosophical and political traditions within which their work is situated.

In the final section, Echoes, befitting a long friendship with Laing and 20 years of dedicated work within the Philadelphia Association's study and training programme, social anthropologist Francis Huxley comes second to none with his obituary words on 'The Liberating Shaman of Kingsley Hall', spelling out his sympathy for Laing, whilst not flinching from shining his torchlight on Laing's darker sides.

Two informative retrospective reviews of *The Divided Self* by doctors, the late Andrew C. Smith and Lawrence Ratna, have previously been published in the pages of *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, and they appear here in an exclusive reprint with the kind permission of the editors of the *BJP*. Parallel to these, an editorial and two recent letters in *The Guardian* demonstrate that some of the controversies around Laing are still very much alive.

A brief biographical sketch of R.D. Laing (1927–1989) gives us a rough overview of the various stages in his life. As a vibrating finale of this collection, some compiled R.D. Laing quotations will see you – hopefully clearly – onto the road ahead: your own path.

We, the editors, know that Laing's legacy is a charmingly mixed bequest. But then whose isn't? For Laing once said, 'It does not disturb me to be a human being.' We hope you take to this rich and varied selection and allow your notes of life, work and therapeutic thought to become allied with ours, and be re-stimulated by the work of R.D. Laing.

Once again, we would like to express a grateful and heartfelt *Thank you* to all the authors and editors who have generously contributed to making this book happen.

Theodor Itten & Courtenay Young
St Gallen, Switzerland and Edinburgh, Scotland, June 2012

I

CONVERSATIONS

VARIATIONS ON MY THEME: AN INTERVIEW WITH R.D. LAING

HANSPETER GSCHWEND

Foreword

The reader of this contribution will soon realise that this is not an ordinary interview but has long stretches of monologue. In fact, I intended to do an interview, particularly about possibilities of expression, which, for Laing, reside both in analytic-theoretical, and also in poetic, thinking and reading. Yet, I quickly realised that my first question to Laing had triggered him to provide a grandiose summary of his life and professional path. Since I always see that my main task as an interviewer (like a psychiatrist) is to listen to the partner in the conversation, it resulted in this highly asymmetric form of conversation in which further intervening questions would only have disturbed the flow.

HG: What were you first in your life, a poet or a psychiatrist? RL: The first thing I hoped to be was a musician. But when I was 16, I broke my left wrist playing rugby. That meant the end of my ambition to become a first-rate professional pianist. My father was a very good singer; he was the principal baritone at the Glasgow University Chapel Choir and had met Albert Schweitzer; he sang when Schweitzer played the organ. He met several of the great musicians of his time. He was the first to sing a song in Italian over the Scottish radio; this is one of the things he was most proud of in his life. I was much imbued with music and there was lot of music in the house as well.

I went into medicine, not with any idea at that time of pursuing a career in medicine. But Chekhov had been a doctor, and Somerset Maugham, and I thought that medicine would give me an entry into some forms of human suffering that the ordinary person is excluded from; extreme physical wreckage and death. And that this would be a

better education for myself then: it never occurred to me to study literature or philosophy at university. I wasn't interested in doing that unless I could study apprenticeship-style with a great philosopher, a great writer, a great painter, or musician. By the time I was 19, I think I felt my main identity to be that of a prospective intellectual – in the broadest sense of therapeutic philosopher; my greatest heroes were Socrates, Pascal, Montaigne, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. I fell in love with my first girlfriend, partly because she was the first girl I'd ever met who had read Kafka. I didn't feel within myself multiple, different tracks between being a doctor, being a writer, being an intellectual, or being a musician, or being a poet. I wanted to write; I taught music, played music and was a medical student.

I consulted with philosophers and theologians and writers and poets. I was also very caught up in politics. I was a member of an extreme Trotskyite group. I gave lectures to the [local] Communist Party on Marx, Lenin, Bukharin, Trotsky, and so on. I was doing all this as a student and I had no idea which way I would go, in terms of my professional life. It began to be clear to me that I was involved with the puzzle of human misery, and one of the things that deeply disturbed and puzzled me was why the world we live in was such a miserable, cruel and violent place.

Remember, I was born in 1927, in the immediate shadow of World War I, and my father had been a lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps. 1927 was just nine years after the end of World War I. There had been general strikes in Britain and the rest of Europe; tanks were out in the streets of Glasgow in the year before I was born. The Spanish Civil War occurred in the 30s; Hitler occurred in the 30s. By the time I was in secondary grammar school, studying Greek, Latin, and so forth, it was 1937–38.

I think that almost everyone I knew believed that there was going to be another war, and that this war was going to be the last one. This was going to be a 'war to end all wars', in both senses of the term. It couldn't be a war that would bring peace; it was going to be a war that would go on and on until everything was destroyed. After World War II ended, no one I knew really believed that was the end of it. That was just a warming up; that was just a pose; that was the first epileptic fit, just a minor one, soon going on to the next one. The sense of the inevitability of atomic war, poison gas, chemicals, the use even of bubonic plague, together with the development of more and more sophisticated explosives now were nothing; it was now a meta-level of destruction, and the sense of the complete unavoidability of this was much more extreme after World

War II than I think it has been since. The feeling in the 60s – that something might be done about it – was not there in the early 50s; there was a greater sense of inevitability and desperation.

At that time, I was looking at many different approaches to these problems; the World Revolution – Trotsky fashion; Quietism – Buddhist fashion; Ghandi's harmlessness or pacifism; and Freud, who described the intimate mess-up of people's emotional and sexual psychic life in the earliest years, that rendered aggression, sadism, war and destruction inevitable when they grow up. I wanted to make some contribution to the commonweal¹ that might make it less likely that the human race would destroy itself, and most of the biosphere as well.

Then, after my experience first of all in neurology and neurosurgery, and being a psychiatrist in the British Army at the time of the Korean War in 1951–53, I realised that, if I was going to address myself to the macroscopic scale of things – economic disorder and social structure, the problematics of production and distribution, markets, and all the rest of it – it would take me at least another 10 years to master the basics of it.

In fact, what I was *actually* doing was spending my time with other human beings in the capacity of psychiatric patients and listening to them. I began to feel that, whatever else was wrong with the world, something was the matter with the intimate relationships between people, in and between people; that everyone has a field of distinctive competence, and that what I felt drawn towards, without clouding other things, was addressing myself to the problematics of how could I – being the person I was and with my training and interests – contribute in theory and praxis to understanding the state of disorder and confusion in and between people. I eventually became extremely critical of the contribution that psychiatry, as a medical profession, as a branch of medicine, was making to this problem.

I began to feel that psychiatry was largely making matters worse, and that it was itself part of the social disease; a lack of ease, that it was trying to treat. Psychiatry was itself a symptom of the disease. This disease, lack of ease, seems to come largely out of the fear that people have – not necessarily obvious, or immediately emotionally felt; it might be embedded in the muscles, joints, tendons and sinews, and right into the bone marrow. I began to conclude that what most people were frightened of was both other people and themselves; but they were frightened primarily of themselves.

Now, I began to understand that the Self was not one person, or another person, but was somehow a collective, or expressed itself