



## R.D. Laing: 50 years after 'The Divided Self'

Edited by Theodor Itten & Courtenay Young

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We thank you very much for your interest in this – our – collection. We are still convinced that this book of ours is far and away the best, widest and most comprehensive selection still available about R.D. Laing and his work. In all fairness though, there is another relatively recently published book, *The Legacy of R.D. Laing: An appraisal of his contemporary relevance*, Guy M. Thompson (Ed.) (2015, Routledge), which also contains a substantive article by Theodor Itten. This collection may also be of interest to you. Most of Laing's original writings are still in print, as well. Happy reading!

With best wishes,

**Theodor Itten & Courtenay Young**

## DESCRIPTION & REVIEWS OF THIS BOOK

*“First published in 1960, *The Divided Self* by Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1927 - 1989) set out to explain psychosis as an ordinary and understandable human experience. Laing's insight was absolutely revolutionary in its humane approach. One commentator described it as 'that particular touch of genius which causes one to say "Yes, I have always known that; why have I never thought of it before?"”*

*Collected in these pages are writings critically appraising Laing's life, work, frailties, brilliance, and his wide and varied influences over the last half century. You will find transcripts, memoirs, newly commissioned articles and a few previously published papers. Contributions have come from colleagues, friends and clients, as well as people who never knew him personally, yet deeply appreciate his work. Each is different in tone and character. Each captures something unique about Laing and his work. R.D. Laing was famous for his empathic perception, sagacious intellect and wisdom of the heart, as well as his rebelliousness and falling from grace. In reading this book you may be made to rethink some of your assumptions. We hope that you will find more than a little inspiration.”*

Publisher's Cover Description

*Yet another book on R. D. Laing may appear self-indulgent. In fact, several of the contributions to this edited collection do seem to be of this nature. However, the title registers the half-century anniversary of Laing's *The Divided Self*, first published in 1960, which the authors and editors 'commemorate and celebrate in [their] various ways' (p. vii). The book appraises 'Laing's life, work, frailties, brilliance, and his wide and varied influences' (back cover).*

*The editors are both on the editorial board of the International Journal of Psychotherapy (IJP), which published a special R. D. Laing issue in 2011. These essays and articles have been reused in this book. I found the collection something of a hotch-potch, including some transcripts of somewhat vacuous interviews that had previously, perhaps understandably, not been published, and some reprinted material from the British Journal of Psychiatry and The Guardian. Of the new material, I thought the best chapter was that by Chris Oakley, entitled 'Where did it all go wrong?' His simple and simplistic answer is 'alcohol'. But the more complex version is that Laing was engulfed by his desire for adulation, becoming the tolerated and celebrated psychiatric superstar, operating on the edge of madness. To be clear, Laing was not mad but became the product of others, who twisted and obfuscated his message, for example undermining him by repeatedly calling him an 'anti-psychiatrist'. Laing's capacity to sabotage may explain his demise but he did provide a vision of the uncertainties and enigmas of personal interaction.*

*The other chapter that I appreciated was by Emmy van Deurzen, who established an existential therapy school at Regent's College and set up the Society for Existential Analysis. As she says, her form of existential psychotherapy is indebted to Laing's ideas and she came to work with what she thought would be existential therapy at the Arbours and Philadelphia Associations. However much Laing may be associated with existential psychotherapy, she argues that in practice he provided no practical direction for its development, instead turning to psychoanalysis and rebirthing.*

*The opportunities for new inspiration about R. D. Laing may be limited but there are a few, if far between, in this book.*

Book review: *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2013, 202(5), 387-388

*As its title indicates, this co-edited volume marks the half-century since the publication of *The Divided Self* (1960), the first book by the radical Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1927-89). Since his death, Laing's work has undergone re-appraisal by health professionals, academics and service users, as well as by artists and film-makers such as Luke Fowler (short-listed for the Turner Prize in 2012). This volume is a relatively late arrival in the process of sifting through Laing's legacy. It consists of four loosely categorized sections: 'Conversations', 'Praxis and Process', 'Reflections and Theories', 'Echoes'. These contain respectively: interviews and conversations with Laing; a number of often autobiographically inflected reflections on Laing's therapeutic methods and personality; a series of more theoretical or philosophical analyses of Laing's legacy; and a miscellany of late reviews and correspondence, accompanied by some aphoristic quotations from the man himself.*

*Some of the more valuable contributions to the volume recover Laing's own words in unfamiliar contexts. A lengthy transcribed conversation between Laing and Phyllis Chesler shows the former talking intelligently and respectfully with a leading feminist critic of psychiatry, and a similar dialogue between Laing and Manfred Bleuler provided by Theodor Itten also shows a high degree of thoughtful engagement. Both these conversations demonstrate that Laing was capable of far more than the agonistic intellectual combat with which he is too often associated.*

*The more theoretically orientated contributions are not of a uniformly high quality or significance. They contain rather too much recapitulation of familiar observations about Laing's life, methods, ideas and activities – issues that have been more thoroughly explored in the existing literature. However, a strong albeit previously published contribution is David Abrahamson's sceptical historical investigation of Laing's involvement with the so-called 'Rumpus Room' therapeutic experiment at Gartnavel Royal Mental Hospital. The most interesting and sustained original contributions comes from Ron Roberts. The first, 'Sanity, madness and memory: R.D. Laing and the post-modern', is a robust Marxist-Laingian critique of prominent contemporary formations such as post-psychiatry (or critical psychiatry) and trans-cultural psychiatry. According to Roberts, 'It is not post-psychiatry, or trans-cultural psychiatry, that is needed, but no psychiatry' (p. 206). The second of Robert's contributions, co-authored with Itten and entitled 'Laing and Szasz revisited', provides a sustained critical comparison of these two critics of psychiatry, challenging Szasz's work for its fundamentally atomistic model of morality, responsibility, and agency.*

*A distinctive feature of this volume is the number of contributions it contains that mix reflections upon Laing's life and work with autobiographical narrative. Sometimes Laing himself is known to the contributor and is present within the narrative (e.g. Chris Oakley's first-hand testimony to Laing's counter-cultural rise and fall, or Mina Semyon's account of her intense therapeutic relationship with Laing). In other contributions, Laing's presence is mediated; this is typically through his published works, but in one narrative, by Philadelphia Association therapist, Bruce Scott, Laing appears in a life-changing dream (pp. 109-110). (The dream-Laing also briefly appears in Itten's theoretical-historical contribution, 'From The Divided Self to The Voice of Experience'.) Some readers may find these narrative contributions frustratingly oblique, or even self-indulgent. However, such accounts shed light on Laing's legacy by revealing how his personality and ideas have entered into the lived experience of therapists and clients, alongside their intellectual affiliation to his work. Young's contribution, 'The "Divided Self": A very personal account' is a highly disgressive (the author's problems with domestic flooring appear at one point), but shows how Laing's work can function as an autobiographical template. Young's search for his 'true Self' (p. 135) behind the 'false self' as described by Laing, propels him on a partly therapeutic, partly spiritual 'seeking' that takes him into (and out of) the New Age community at Findhorn in the north-east of Scotland. Young's narrative may seem unusual, and at times bathetic (at one point, a sexual-cum-spiritual ecstasy is interrupted by the police breaking in to arrest a murder suspect (p. 126), but it poses indirectly a serious question that psychiatry may wish to reflect upon. How many psychiatrists – including those who might repudiate Laing's psychiatry – are in fact living and understanding their lives according to a post-1960s narrative template of the search for selfhood, one so eloquently developed and popularized by Laing?*

*As is often the way with edited volumes, where viability depends upon a critical mass of contributors, the essays in this book vary in quality. Nonetheless, there are a number of interesting contributions, particularly those which explore Laing's relevance for contemporary left-wing politics, and those which give a sense of a sense of his impact on biographical meaning-making.*

*Book review by Gavin Miller, University of Glasgow: History of Psychiatry, 2014, 25(3), 383-384*

*Anything about RD Laing tends to be interesting reading because Dr. Laing was a controversial and charismatic figure. His ideas were not exactly new. It was common knowledge at the time that in the village of Gheel, Belgium, that families took in mentally ill people, providing adult foster homes in a sense, and that because those people were accepted by the community and treated with kindness and compassion, they did fairly well (i.e. they weren't acting out "crazy"). A similar situation existed in Hutterite communities living near the Canadian border, where mentally ill behavior was not a signal to the community to ostracize a person by sending him to an isolated state hospital, but to draw him in even closer to the community. Hutterites who suffered mental illness, unlike their counterparts in the United States, did not end up being repeatedly hospitalized (the "revolving door policy") but tended to do well.*

*Whether it is appropriate to treat schizophrenia without anti-psychotic drugs remains to be seen, but it was an interesting idea and popular among those who had been labelled schizophrenic who suffered from serious and sometimes devastating and dehumanizing side effects caused by anti-psychotic drugs. Some people seemed to do better without them. Whether these really were schizophrenics is unknown. At the time many mental illnesses were considered schizophrenia because mental health professionals did not yet understand things like bipolar disorders, post traumatic stress disorder or dissociative identity disorder (formerly called multiple personality). Much current evidence indicates true schizophrenia is a physical brain disorder, but surely it can be exacerbated by emotional abuse, stigma, side effects from drugs, etc. So it's hard to say whether Dr. Laing's theories were sound. ...*

*Review extract: Robin Ferrugia: "Soteria House – the reality". (2014) USA Amazon*

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Introduction by Theodor Itten & Courtenay Young

### I. CONVERSATIONS

1. 'Variations On My Theme': *Hanspeter Gschwend*
2. Conversation in Two Beds: *Phyllis Chesler and R.D. Laing*
3. R.D. Laing in Conversation with Manfred Bleuler: *Theodor Itten*

### II. PRAXIS and PROCESSES

4. Take as Long as It Takes: *Mina Semyon*
5. R.D. Laing and long-stay patients: *David Abrahamson*
6. Re-turning, Re-membering and Re-viewing: *Leon Redler*
7. Soteria - A different approach to mental health: *Voyce Hendrix*
8. 50 Years Since The Divided Self: *Murray Gordon*
9. 'Tales from the boiling pot': *Bruce Scott*
10. The 'Divided Self': A personal account: *Courtenay Young*
11. Personal recollections of Ronnie Laing: *Emmy van Deurzen*
12. Love, will, and the hatred of reality: *Andrew Feldmár*
13. The Fabric of Her Hope: *Susan Griffin*
14. Where did it all go wrong? *Chris Oakley*

### III. REFLECTIONS and THEORIES

15. A New Introduction to 'The Divided Self': *Anthony S. David*
16. From 'The Divided Self' to 'The Voice of Experience': *Theodor Itten*
17. Sanity, madness & memory: *Ron Roberts*
18. The impact of the ideas of R.D. Laing on UK psychology students: *Brian Evans*
19. More than fifty years after: Laing, Sartre & the Other: *Ljiljana Filipović*
20. Demystifying Madness: *Brent Potter*
21. 'Physician, Heal Thyself': The work of R.D. Laing: *Tom Ormay*
22. Psychiatry and the Limits of Dualism: *Benjamin Süinkel-Laing*
23. Re: DSM-V: *Editors' Insert*:
24. Laing and Szasz Revisited: *Ron Roberts & Theodor Itten*

### IV. ECHOS

25. The Liberating Shaman of Kingsley Hall: *Francis Huxley*
26. Two Reviews of 'The Divided Self': *A.C. Smith; L. Ratna*
27. The Controversy Continues: *Letters from The Guardian, 2011.*
28. R.D. Laing (1927-1989): A Biography: *Theodor Itten*
29. R.D. Laing Quotations: *Compiled by Courtenay Young*

### Editors:

**Theodor Itten** is a Swiss psychotherapist, who trained, in the 1970's with R.D. Laing and The Philadelphia Association in London. He runs 'The International R.D. Laing Institute' and was also (at the time) the Executive Editor of the *International Journal of Psychotherapy*.

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