

BOOK REVIEWS

In this issue, along with reviewing a wide range of books from research to practice to philosophy we have two ‘doubles’. The first of these is something we have done before, which is to have more than one person review the same book. The book in question is Greg Madison’s *The End of Belonging*. The second ‘double’ is to have an author respond to the review of their book in the same issue as the review. The book in this case is *Therapy with Children: An Existential Perspective* by Chris Scalzo and it has enabled the writer and the reviewer to have a dialogue about some of the issues addressed in this kind of therapeutic work.

We begin though with a book about the early work and influences of R.D.Laing. There have been personal biographies published before, but this book concentrates on his early life and uses material that has only recently come to light. It is an academic biography and shows how his immersion in the philosophical and psychiatric literature from quite a young age made it possible for him to become such an original and influential writer.

A review of a general textbook on counselling and psychotherapy follows. Montaigne is not one of the philosophers that existentialists tend to be very familiar with, and a review of a new book about his life makes a strong argument for why this should no longer be the case.

Also in this issue, a review of a much needed and quoted book some readers will be familiar with, on the case for research in psychotherapy.

The rise of technology has seen a rise in the technologising of humanity and it is easy to be taken in by the rhetoric. The final review is of a book that is long overdue by Raymond Tallis, which explodes this myth in a very convincing way.

Portrait of the Psychiatrist as a Young Man: The Early Writing and Work of R.D. Laing. 1927-1960.

Allan Beveridge. (2011). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

‘If I could turn you on, if I could drive you out of your wretched mind, if I could tell you, I would let you know.’

RD Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise*

Ronald David Laing was an accomplished pianist and classicist, and in all likelihood, was the most famous (and infamous) psychiatrist of his time – and perhaps, indeed, of the Cold War era. Laing was deeply versed in existential-phenomenology, theology and literature, and as a result many of my generation were first introduced to existentialism and

phenomenology by reading his books. His first book, *The Divided Self*, was written to make the process of going mad intelligible to ordinary people, and to chastise behaviourists, psychoanalysts and Kraepelinian psychiatrists for their lack of real empathy or understanding for psychotic patients, and their tendency to over-compensate for this failure by de-humanising and objectifying patients, and then wrapping themselves in dense theoretical formulations that gave themselves and the unsuspecting public the appearance of understanding (Laing, 1960.) Laing's reputation and influence grew steadily from 1960 to about 1974, when his rambling and intemperate public appearances, and deteriorating authorial powers, started to harm his (already somewhat mixed) reputation. By 1984, when his medical license was finally revoked for drug possession, he was already regarded in many circles as a relic of the Sixties, whose renown was due less to the merit of his ideas than the power of his prose, and the fact that he was in the right place at the right time.

Allan Beveridge's new book, *Portrait of the Psychiatrist as a Young Man*, is the latest in a series of biographical studies of Laing, most of which date back to the Nineties (Laing, A. 1994; Mullan, 1995; Burston, 1996; Clay, 1996.) Unlike those efforts, however, this one focuses primarily on Laing's life and career from his high-school days to the publication of *The Divided Self*. Unlike many of his predecessors, Beveridge, a psychiatrist who practices in Dumferline, Scotland, had unobstructed access to all the papers and correspondence now housed in the Laing Archive at the University of Glasgow, and makes excellent use of these resources throughout. He says comparatively little about Laing's early childhood and relations with his mother and father, his wife and children, etc., and a great deal more than previous authors did about Laing's literary affinities, his personal mentors, and relationships with colleagues and patients. The result is a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of the range and complexity of the young Laing's mind and his intellectual milieu than we've had so far. Among other things, Beveridge gives us a useful account of Laing's relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers, and with Heidegger's translator John Macquarrie. In the process, he reminds us that the Glasgow of Laing's youth was not some provincial backwater, but a centre for existential and phenomenological philosophy, and a magnet for German-Jewish refugees in academia and psychiatry. Beveridge gives us an instructive account of his Laing's somewhat ambivalent relationship with Jung's Jewish disciple, Karl Abenheimer, and his fond relationship with neurologist Joseph Schorstein – a rabbi's son whose religious doubts precipitated bouts of severe depression, much like Laing's own. Beveridge also gives us a clear and candid account of Laing's own religious torment and his debts to existential philosophers, including militant atheists like Nietzsche and Sartre, and believers like Kierkegaard, Berdyaev, Buber, Tillich and the

Scottish Hegelian and personalist, John MacMurray.

In addition to all this, Beveridge explores Laing's debts to various existential and phenomenological thinkers, and American (or American based) pioneers in the psychotherapy of schizophrenia such as Sullivan, Fromm-Reichmann, Sechehaye and John Rosen, and his vivid – and surprisingly early – love of European and Russian literature. He quotes extensively from Laing's detailed case notes for patients who are known to posterity as John, Peter, Rose and Julie (among others), and demonstrates in some detail that Laing, like Freud before him, often embellished or omitted important clinical details to make a theoretical position seem more persuasive. And he does not stop with his case histories. Beveridge describes Laing's ideas about dream analysis, group psychotherapy, and analyses the nature and extent of Laing's relationships with psychiatric colleagues, demonstrating that Laing's autobiographical accounts of his extreme isolation early on in his career were exaggerated for rhetorical effect – again, like Freud's. By way of conclusion, Beveridge gives us a measured and thoughtful commentary on some of the controversies surrounding the work of Gavin Miller, an extraordinary Laing scholar who stresses the Scottish character of many of Laing's early influences and ideas (e.g. Miller, 2008a; Miller, 2008b; Miller, 2009.)

When my own book on R.D. Laing appeared in 1996, I wrote to Rosemary Dinnage at *The New York Review of Books* that Laing had been subject to scathing dismissals, on the one hand, and uncritical adulation, on the other. Neither were all that useful, finally. I described my own project as an effort to salvage the treasures of Laing's (early) work from the wreckage of his (later) life. I still think that is a serviceable metaphor for what I was up to then, and in the years that followed, had often wondered if others would eventually follow suit. Thank goodness they have! Reading Beveridge's book, I realise now how much I idealised the younger (as opposed to the middle-aged) Laing in *The Wing of Madness: The Life and Work of R.D. Laing* (Burston, 1996), and how a deeper acquaintance with Beveridge's sources might have corrected those errors in judgment. At the same time, I hasten to add, Beveridge corroborates many features of my earlier portrait. For example, I am happy to report that I am not alone in believing that Laing's catastrophic discovery (at around age 5) that Santa Claus does not exist, which he described in *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* (1985), shattered his trust in his parents' truthfulness and in his own powers of judgment. According to Beveridge, this oft-remembered experience was a genuine trauma, and not some vague or contrived reproach made grudgingly to justify his lingering animus toward his parents, as another Laing biographer has suggested (Laing, A. 1994.) Beveridge also plumbs the depth and severity of Laing's spiritual anguish, and evokes Laing's early ambition to be a preceptor to all humanity, his astonishing breadth of knowledge, his life long (and somewhat uncharacteristic)

philo-Semitism, and the corrosive effects of fame (and the longing for fame) on the attitudes and behaviour of the older Laing. (Toward the end of his life, Laing could be quite caustic, mean-spirited, and abusive, especially when friends lacked the courage to confront and contain him.)

Last but not least, I am happy to report, Beveridge and I are both still convinced of his continuing relevance to the theory and practice of psychotherapy. If I have one (very minor) reservation about this book, it is that Beveridge did not fully explore the implications of Laing's decision to side with Sartre against Camus. But he does note – quite rightly – that Sartre believed that our original, primordial mode of relatedness to others is conflict, and wonders whether, or to what extent, Laing was able to reconcile this bleak outlook on human relations with his evolving philosophy of human engagement, which stressed empathy and solidarity with the mad – ideas that owe more to Martin Buber and to Laing's Scottish intellectual roots.

A labour of love and of considerable insight, Beveridge's new book is 'must reading' for anyone interested in existentialism and phenomenology, the history of psychiatry, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy in the UK, in Scottish cultural and intellectual history, and/or psychiatry and literature. Now that neo-Kraepelinian psychiatry has shown its limitations quite clearly, let's hope that this book heralds a revival of interest in Laing at his best.

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