BOOK REVIEW


The series ‘International Perspectives in Philosophy and Psychiatry’ is the right place for this erudite review and commentary on the thinking, opinions and writings of R.D. Laing. The writings include previously unexplored clinical notes made by Laing, and his presentations to colleagues when a trainee psychiatrist as well as his diaries. Beveridge has not attempted a biography: others have written about the life of this larger-than-life figure of our times. Beveridge, too, is a psychiatrist, but this is not a psychobiography.

As is well known, Laing was critical to the point of lampooning ‘establishment’ psychiatry. Turning up drunk at Edinburgh University Medical School’s to give the 1967 ‘Annual British Medical Association Student Lecture’ was a needlessly demonstration of his contempt, when his writing had already elegantly made his best points. But perhaps he meant to treat us to an in vivo demonstration of one his themes much in vogue in that era—the corrosive unintentional harm committed by the family. He announced to us that his family had always told him that he took after a certain uncle. And at the age of 40 that uncle had become very ill with alcoholism. Laing then shared with us that he had just had his 40th birthday!

Beveridge structures his book into Laing and Theory—from student beliefs and aims, to his introduction to existential writers, and then his wide reading (exceptional for any medical student) in the great writers on the 19th and 20th centuries); followed by Laing and Practice: how his ideas influenced his own psychiatric practice, leading up to the first edition in 1960 of The Divided Self. Beveridge’s extensive knowledge of Scottish thought allows us a colourful and wonderfully fluent view of how Laing’s work evolved. He has even found accounts of the Glasgow philosophical discussion group that Laing attended in the 1950s (where he was deemed ‘gallus’—Scottish for over-confident, brash and reckless).

Readers of this Journal, who have pondered the links between creativity and alcoholism, will be interested in Laing’s beliefs about alcohol in his early years. He could certainly act the part of the stereotyped Glaswegian drunk even in his student days—like being drunk at his own final year dinner where he was billed probably along with some eminent professor as an after-dinner speaker.

In his notebooks written when a newly qualified doctor doing Army Service, he wrote ‘The essence of what it is that I seek to achieve by drunkenness is still unrevealed to me...I am very drunk as I write this and yet here I am coherent, articulate, coordinated, fluent...’

Some say that Laing did harm by romanticizing psychotic illness, idealizing the mad; others that he did a service by drawing attention to the suffering of those outcast because of mental illness. Some blame Laing’s drinking for undermining his future influence; others suggest a trajectory of hubris. One of the fascinating threads that go through Beveridge’s book is Laing’s sometimes stated intention to be great and famous, even to foster a myth about himself. Beveridge heralds his Portrait by quoting from an early letter of Laing to a girlfriend ‘......the business of distorting the Past. Forgetting, distorting, glamorizing, glorifying, idealizing, belittling, romanticizing—how oblique, how malleable the Past is’. Much later in his life, we see Laing quoting from Milton, about fame: fame ‘is that last infirmity of a noble mind’.

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