



Into the Zone of the Interior: A Novel View of Anti-Psychiatry

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Abstract

Zone of the Interior is a satirical novel by an American, Clancy Sigal, about 1960s British anti-psychiatry, in particular, R. D. Laing, the radical Scottish psychiatrist and his idea (shared most notably by David Cooper, another existential therapist working in England) that schizophrenic breakdown might be a natural, healing process. Sigal's little-known novel can help us think about the nature of anti-psychiatry and contribute to the resurgence of interest in it as we approach the 25th anniversary of Laing's death. While Sigal, who was a patient and collaborator of Laing and worked in a democratized hospital unit set up by Cooper, lampoons anti-psychiatric doctors, the novel is a fundamentally sympathetic critique of anti-psychiatry: patients and nurses are the heroes, ordinariness wins out over madness as self-discovery, and anti-psychiatry is skillfully linked to issues of class, gender and New Left politics.

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Zone of the Interior is a satirical novel – published in the 70s in the US but not until 2005 in the UK - by an American, Clancy Sigal, about anti-psychiatry in Britain in the 1960s. Sigal, a novelist, journalist and left-wing political activist - who appears, transformed, as Saul Green in *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing - was a patient and later a collaborator of the radical Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing. With Laing and others, Sigal played a part in the setting up and running of a therapeutic community, Kingsley Hall (1965-1970) in London's East End. This was a place where, it was hoped, residents who might otherwise be hospitalized as schizophrenics could experience madness as a natural voyage of self-reconstitution and discovery. Sigal was also involved as a “barefoot doctor” at Villa 21 (“A Trip”), an experimental ward (1962-1966) in a large psychiatric hospital in Hertfordshire, England, that was set up by David Cooper, another radical psychiatrist and the person who coined

the term 'anti-psychiatry' in his 1967 volume *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry*. Sigal, together with Cooper and Laing and others were founders of the mental health charity The Philadelphia Association (which still exists today as an organization that provides psychotherapy and training in therapy, and therapeutic households for people suffering mental distress). *Zone of the Interior* tells a story that draws on Sigal's actual experience of involvement with British anti-psychiatry. We need not read the novel, however, as merely a more or less accurate account of people and events. The text can, rather, provide us with new ways of thinking about anti-psychiatry.

Sid Bell, the narrator, is an American writer, an ex-pat, a former GI, left-wing activist and Hollywood blacklisted (we could say just the same for Sigal himself). Suffering dreadful stomach cramps he thinks of as psychosomatic and having already visited several psychotherapists, Bell consults a radical Scottish existential psychiatrist, Willie Last, who impresses him with his frankness, relaxed manner and playfulness. Last introduces LSD into the therapy and soon takes acid with Bell, who joins Last in setting up a charity devoted to ameliorating mental health, Clare Council, an organization that eventually sets up a therapeutic household, Meditation Manor, in Brixton, South West London. In order to learn more about madness, Bell helps out at Connolly House, a democratized wing of a state psychiatric hospital that has been set up by Dr. Dick Drummond. We are encouraged to compare Connolly House and Meditation Manor, which, to anyone who knows anything about British anti-psychiatry, point towards Kingsley Hall and Villa 21. In a parody of the valuing of schizophrenic breakdown as a potentially healing journey found in the work of Laing and Cooper, Sid Bell longs to go mad, to experience the truth that, supposedly, can be revealed only by schizophrenia. The novel moves towards its climax, Bell's epiphany, his seeing into the truth of himself and his place in the world in a moment of transcendence. When the epiphany occurs, far from being a moment of sublimity, it is one of bathos. The spirits and demons that Bell has been reading about and conjuring are nowhere to be seen. No arcane secrets are finally revealed. But Bell does meet God – and the deity is in the form of a trade unionist, an activist from the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies), who tells Bell to quit focusing on high-falutin radicalism and return to the world of the everyday. Bell recognises what is really important to him: his life as a writer, his commitment to his friends and neighbors, his need to mourn people to whom he was close and who died recently, his commitment the quotidian world.

The novel, as Sigal himself notes, was published in America in 1976 but publication in the UK was delayed due to “vague threats” of libel (“Trip”). It was not finally published in the UK until 2005. Laing, who died in 1989, did not like the novel - and with good reason. The names Sigal gives to the novel's principal two characters clearly point towards himself and Laing. 'Sid Bell', with its two syllables and 'L' consonant ending, sounds very much like 'Sigal'. And the name Willie Last, with the Christian name having two syllables ending

with the 'e' sound and the single syllable surname opening with an 'L', clearly points towards Ronnie Laing. Last is presented as a manipulative, drug- and mysticism-guzzling, power-crazed, promoter of madness as hyper-reality. Willie Last is a name that poses a question: will he last? Do the ideas of Laing have any lasting worth? Let us consider how well Laing has endured.

The high point of interest in Laing was the late sixties and early seventies. The 1967 volume *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise*, which followed several earlier texts, in particular the pioneering work of existential psychiatry *The Divided Self*, brought Laing fame on both sides of the Atlantic. While Laing never liked the term 'anti-psychiatry' - David Cooper's term - he was part of a wave, albeit not a uniformly characteristic one, of radical critiques of psychiatry. This included, in the States, the work of Erving Goffman and Thomas Szasz; in France, the work of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari; in Italy, the work of Bassaglia and *Il Movimento Democratica Psichiatrica* (Democratic Psychiatry Movement); in Germany, the SPK, *Das Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv* (Socialist Patients' Collective) at Heidelberg. Laing's fame outshone other anti-psychiatric voices. In 1972, for instance, on a US lecture tour, Laing, having already featured in a *Life* photo essay the year before, not only featured in an *Esquire* interview but it was also possible to buy "I'm mad about R. D. Laing" bumper stickers; and in the *Village Voice*, two young women looking for dates presented themselves as "Two chicks who dig Coltrane, The Dead and R. D. Laing" (Sedgwick 67).

But the question posed by Clancy Sigal is *will he last* – Willie Last? While in the 70s and 80s a number of books were published about Laing (e.g. Boyers, Collier, Jacoby, Sedgwick), his star has faded in the academy. The work of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari is standard fare in the European and Anglo-Saxon academy, but interest in Laing has declined considerably. For several years, not even The Philadelphia Association, the organization he co-founded, taught his work on its training course. There is, though, what might be the beginning of a renaissance of interest in Laing. Last year's Turner Prize, the UK's premier prize in contemporary art, featured a film about Laing by the Scottish artist Luke Fowler (*All Divided Selves*). Another filmmaker, Tony MacDonald, with a script based on a biography of Laing by his son Adrian, is looking for the funds to make a biopic (P. Miller 2012). *The Guardian* newspaper, now, though its website, very much an international organ, devoted an editorial in 2011 to R D Laing and called for a reappraisal. "He's been unfashionable for decades", reads the editorial, "but in an era of big-pharma and proliferating diagnoses, is it time to reassess?" ("Unthinkable?"). All this comes after several biographies and critical appraisals of his work that followed his death in 1989 (e.g. Burston, Clay, Kotowicz, A. Laing, G. Miller, Mullan). With the 25th anniversary of his death just a year away now, it seems that interest in Laing is gathering a head of steam. And there is not just increased interest in Laing. Last year, there was a partial re-enactment of the 1967 London Dialectics of Liberation conference, an event that in the 60s

brought together radicals who, alongside Laing, included David Cooper (who edited a volume named after the event), Herbert Marcuse, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Goodman and Stokely Carmichael. The commemorative event was held at Kingsley Hall, the site of the therapeutic community of the same name. Recently, too, a book of photographs of former residents of Kingsley Hall has been published (Harris 2012).

Zone can help us reappraise Laing and the scene of British anti-psychiatry. On its initial publication, the novel was positively reviewed in the States. Roberta Rubenstein, a Doris Lessing scholar, writing in *The New Republic*, for instance, remarked that Sigal succeeds in revealing “the excesses of the madness school of inner development without sacrificing compassion for the genuine sufferers” (31-32). On the text's much later publication in the UK, *Zone*, despite being chosen by the novelist Margaret Drabble as one of her books of the year (“Our Critics Choose”), attracted the attention not of literary critics but of psychotherapists. And the therapists found themselves interested most in how far Sigal's work corresponds to the truth of events to which it alludes. Rosemary Moore, for instance, provides a ‘key’ that enables us to link characters and places in the novel to historical places and characters, and presents evidence that corroborates some of the material in *Zone* (371-74). Joseph Berke, Marv Munshin in *Zone*, writes of how Sigal is successful in showing how Laing “always positioned himself with those around him so that he knew what they were thinking about each other, but that they did not know what he was thinking about them ... that way he gained great power over others” (378). Guy M. Thompson, in his review of the novel, is most protective of the reputation of Laing. Thompson sees Laing been unjustly maligned by Sigal, someone, according to Thompson, of a distinctly grandiose bent. Responding to a passage in the novel in which Last makes a sexual advance to Bell, Thompson remarks that Sigal's resentment of Laing “smacks of the rejected lover, of the wound that never heals.” The review is concluded with a diagnosis: “Sigal continues to suffer from an unresolved - and at some eighty years of age, probably unresolvable - transference. Perhaps this is how he maintains his connection with Laing” (379-86).

Thompson's reaction to the novel represents, I would argue, almost a parody of a certain kind of psychoanalytic criticism – the kind that closes down rather than opens up discussion. Truth belongs to the analyst, who has nothing to learn from the text under analysis. The other therapists who are interested in the novel as something providing a displaced account of actual people and events are also imposing limits on what the reader can get out of this novel. Clearly there are links between the novel and the scene of anti-psychiatry; that is undeniable. But if we can get beyond a focus on whether or not the novel represents Laing truthfully or faithfully or respectfully – whether it pays tribute to him or betrays him - and beyond worrying about the reference to actual, specific events, the novel has much that can help us think. A good term for the novel, I think, is the sociologist Nick Crossley's reference to it as a

“fictionalised critique” (89). What I want to focus on is the novel as a fundamentally sympathetic critique of anti-psychiatry, one that encourages us to think about the nature of community, about issues of class and gender, and about the place of anti-psychiatry as part of the New Left.

Sigal is critical of the doctors in *Zone*: Willie Last, with Marv Munshin and Boris Petkin, for instance, forcibly inject Bell with the major tranquilizer Largactil (chlorpromazine) after Bell’s decision, following his epiphany, to leave Meditation Manor, the therapeutic community; and Dr. Dick Drummond, Sigal writes, wallows in a paralysis of indecision – “Perched uneasily on a cot, he swings his chubby legs back and forth like a moonstruck child” (229) - rather than involve himself in a crisis over a patient’s care in Connolly House. This is not a novel, though, in which the problems of anti-psychiatry are measured against a standard provided by, say, psychoanalysis or psychiatry. When nurse Dave Foster remarks that at Connolly House remarks, “Sometimes I wonder who’s mad and who’s sane”(76) this is not a criticism: Sigal is sympathetic to the anti-psychiatric project of breaking down boundaries between the mad and the supposedly normal, and constructing communities in which people might live with greater tolerance of others' eccentricities and even craziness. The novel’s two therapeutic communities, Connolly House and Meditation Manor, demonstrate different models – one is a wing in a state hospital and consists of predominantly working class patients (as in Villa 21, all men); the other, a house in the community, consists of middle-class residents and helpers with no institutional links. It is clear that Sigal is much more sympathetic to the community that approximates the Villa 21, a brief experiment in democratic ward-life in a state hospital led by David Cooper. Cooper and Villa 21 might have been largely forgotten, but *Zone* provides a reminder - as does Sigal again in an article published soon after Cooper's death in 1986 ("Society Tomorrow") and as does Oisín Wall in a recent article (“The Birth and Death of Villa 21”) - that anti-psychiatry's ideas of community began in a state hospital and not in Kingsley Hall.

If there are heroes in the novel, they are the young male patients of Connolly House and the nurses of the unit. The patients suffer terribly but tend to be genuinely supportive of others’ eccentricities or at least frankly unsupportive. When, during a crisis, the patients take over the care of one of their number who is particularly disturbed (and disturbing), we see a real community in action. The nurses, too, are given a voice in the novel. Repeated sections entitled ‘Les Speaks’ give voice to the contradictions of being a nurse, someone low down the hospital pecking order but traditionally in control of patients, in a hospital that attempts to democratize care. Les, for instance, speaks of how the nurse must bear the brunt of innovation and how, long after experiments have ceased and innovating doctors have moved on, the nurse will most likely be in the same job. The two therapeutic communities are separated by social class. In Meditation Manor, Sigal writes, "Clare Council’s liberal Hampstead bias effectively screened out tough working-class nuts like Jerry

Jackson and Wally Walters in favor of types like Anna Shepherd and Sir Marlo, people whose private hells were socially insulated by professional status, expensive educations or artistic ability" (261). There is a telling passage toward the end of the novel when a group of Connolly House patients see their radical doctor, Dick Drummond, on television. "Tie askew, beard uncombed, he's pissed" [completely drunk]. The young men, far from feeling betrayed or feeling any moral repugnance at indecorous behavior, simply "stare at the screen." What amazes them is the license afforded to Drummond by his status. As one of the boys remarks, "What would happen if any of us did that?" (315).

Sigal, a writer who in *The Secret Defector* details humorously his own painful engagement with feminism in the 1970s, employs lively satire to alert us too to matters of gender. The doctors treat their wives appallingly. While at a Connolly House meeting Dick Drummond waxes lyrical about "bourgeois marriage, love's murder", his wife, literally left to hold the baby, interrupts – and radically undercuts the position of her husband - with the words, "Baby, I sure got those nuclear family blues. You'now, locked up inside a nut house all day like I am is just like bein' in the' movies. You ever see *The Snake Pit*?" When Boris Petkin's wife, "Tired of Boris's radical sounding rationalizations of his tomcatting around" leaves her husband, "Petkin lamented, 'Poor Viv. It's all my fault for not equipping her better to grasp the nettle of the sexual emancipation.'" And "Later, as the doctors' marital situations went into 'a state of flux and reflux, crystallizing at higher stages of understanding, if necessary of spiritual separation and purification,' as Dick described it," – here Sigal parodies the 'love and madness' idiom of Cooper's *The Death of the Family* – we got used to their new girlfriends' (214-215). We are left in no doubt of the gendered nature of 'sexual liberation' and, Sigal suggests, anti-psychiatry's failure to address matters of gender.

Sigal's irony is at its sharpest when he comically presents male competition for possession of sexy schizophrenics. At Meditation Manor, male 'guides' to the schizophrenic voyage engage in what Sigal calls "Jurisdictional disputes" over attractive women: Sid Bell struggles with Marv Munshin over "curvy Jenny Potts" and with Chuck Beiberman over "luscious, mute Taya." Davina, Girl Friday to the Brothers of Clare Council, given the role in the novel of commenting tersely on matters of gender, remarks drily as she watches Boris Petkin "wrestle with hysterical, chair-smashing Trish Wakefield (36" – 22" – 36") ... I suppose she's got something I haven't. Schizophrenia, I mean" (281).

Yet anti-psychiatry positioned itself as politically progressive and Sigal is drawn to it not only for personal reasons but also because of its political stance, the linking of madness to a mad world. A good way into the novel is to begin with the title. *Zone of the Interior* suggests the interior world, of course. To those who know something of anti-psychiatry it might suggest the journey backwards and inwards, towards transcendence and religious truth, the inner voyage outlined by Laing in *The Politics of Experience*. Sigal satirizes this stress on the inner world. Satire often, but certainly not always, works by

making a comparison between a deleterious state of an affairs and an ideal. Sometimes the ideal might be quite abstract ('goodness', 'honesty') and at other times the ideal might be embodied in a character, real or fictional (e.g. Lord Burlington in Alexander Pope's 'Epistle to Burlington' or the King of Brobdingnag in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.) Where there is no discernible ideal or where this ideal is weak or undermined, as in some of Swift's work, the text is likely to be very unsettling. Where, if anywhere, is the ideal in *Zone of the Interior*? We have to wait until right at the end of the novel to find anything like a clear ideal. At the novel's close, Sid Bell gains what he has been working towards for the entire novel: a breakthrough into another level of consciousness, a vision that enables him to reach a new level of understanding of himself and the world around him. Bell's vision, however, is not a transcendental one. On the contrary, the vision is one of down-to-earth ordinariness, embodied by the figure of a union leader, the Wobbly. What is at once a moment of supreme bathos, a rapid sinking from the sublime to the ridiculous, is also a triumph of the ordinary, a splendid and splendidly ironic return of the earthbound and quotidian.

Bell's realization echoes the words of Tony, a character in Doris Lessing's 1959 play *To Each His Own Wilderness*. "We are bored with all the noble gestures", he cries. His frustration, not with radical psychiatry but with the empty gestures of politicians, leads him to say that "never in the whole history of the world have people made a battle cry out of being ordinary" (95). The theme of ordinariness and its virtues appears again in Sigal's novel *The Secret Defector*, in which he details his doubts – his uneasy defection – from the world of radical politics, which, he makes clear, all too easily loses touch with people's daily lives. Ordinariness is important too in the work of Laing, or at least Laing in the first two phases of his career: the Laing who in *The Divided Self* argues that through understanding the lifeworld of the supposedly mad person it is possible to relate alarming and extravagant fantasies to what has actually happened or is still happening in the patient's life. In Laing's second phase, too, when, drawing on Sartre's later philosophy and on US family research, Laing dissolves the schizophrenic symptom in the speech and action of the social network of the family: what might seem like unaccountably crazy behavior is intelligible in terms of how family members ordinarily relate to one another. In Laing's psychedelic phase, however, with the focus on schizophrenic breakdown as transcendence and a route to true sanity, which we find in *The Politics of Experience*, ordinariness rather melts away. It is far gone, too, later in the best-selling *Knots*, a book in which Laing invites us to "divine the formal elegance in [...] webs of maya" (Preface), nets of illusion that mask the nature of what goes on between people: *Knots* is a book precisely about not getting to the point, about avoiding what is fundamentally going on. Laing's final focus on birth and rebirth, literally this time and not as metaphor as in his earlier work and exemplified in *The Facts of Life*, also moves mental discontent away from life actually lived and the meanings that people ascribe

to themselves and each other. In his satirical presentation of Last, obsessed with mysticism and the truth as something revealed only to holy madmen - to "th' lead scouts of a Children's Crusade fightin' to retake th' Holeh Land of our Primal Unspoilt Selves" (19) - Sigal returns us again to the value of the ordinary. There is, though, a need to sound a note of caution here: that which is ordinary for me might well not be ordinary for you. Ordinarity is contestable. What Sigal does, contra Laing, is promote a particular kind of ordinarity, one that while not being psychoanalytical is certainly closer to Freud's recommendation, recalled by Erikson (264-65), of the good life being founded on love and work than it is to Laing's exhortations to transcendental experience.

In *Zone*, the return to the everyday is a return, too, to the political concerns of the old left - away from the zone of the interior, away from the New Left and back to the zone of the class struggle, the world of work. The novel's title, *Zone of the Interior*, as well as referring simply to the inner world, also has a military dimension: a 'zone of the interior', in military parlance, is a region that is part of the theatre of war but excluded, normally, from the theatre of operations. The 'zone' that had been excluded from the battle - the class war - of the old left, which Bell speaks of having been part of in the US and in England, was the zone of the interior, the mind. Broadly, the emphasis of the political struggle focused upon by the old left was rather the political as something 'out there'; political action was orientated primarily towards the economic base rather than the superstructure of capitalism. The idea of a politics of everyday life implied by the setting up of communities was something that had been dismissed as a sign of utopian socialism by Marx and Engels. Part of the project of the New Left was to reinvigorate radical politics by placing new emphasis on what had been seen as largely superstructural, secondary concerns. The nature of the family, therefore, became a political concern; so did the nature of learning and the organization of the university; so too did gender. And so also did madness.

Both Laing and Cooper were involved in the New Left. In Cooper's *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry*, the mad person is presented as someone who is a threat to the values of late capitalism. In *The Death of the Family*, Cooper takes up this theme again, as well as trying to think of ways of living beyond the nuclear family, something he again considers in *The Grammar of Living*. In *The Language of Madness*, Cooper writes sympathetically of the *Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv* (Socialist Patients' Collective) in Germany and of Bassaglia's *Movimento Democratica Psichiatrica* (Democratic Psychiatry Movement) in Italy, a movement inspired by the left. In *Qui Sont les Dissidents (Who are the Dissidents)*, Cooper, who casts the mad person as a dissident in what he terms the "*le Mega-Goulag de l'Ouest*" - the mega-gulag of the west (33) - engages at length with the nature of dissidence. The reader will search in vain, though, for detailed discussion of ways in which class is imbricated in issues of mental health, just as he or she will be frustrated in any

search for the specifics of quite how, practically, "The Love and Madness Revolution" that Cooper (101) writes of in *The Death of the Family* is linked to traditional political struggle.

Laing, we should remember, put the word 'politics' into the titles of two of his books: *The Politics of Experience* and *The Politics of the Family*. Laing's political 'turn' – his short-lived "Radical Trip" (67-101), as Peter Sedgwick calls it - begins with a review of one of the key texts, perhaps the key text of the New Left, Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* ("Review") and continues through Laing's contribution ("The Obvious") to the 1967 Dialectics of Liberation conference in London and into *The Politics of Experience*, a book that begins with a reference to Marcuse and, indeed, can be considered a response to *One Dimensional Man* and the question of how the dimension of resistance and the possibility of liberation might be added to the thoroughgoing state of alienation presented by Marcuse. Laing's conception of liberation is very much an individual one. While Marcuse finds reason for some hope in the margins of society such as racially excluded groups, Laing finds in the voyage of madness a possible way of deconstructing capitalist alienation and rearticulating the self as an authentic structure. In her discussion of *The Politics of Experience*, Marianne DeKoven helpfully points out, 'Laing locates all hope for change - which must be revolutionary change to count at all - in individual consciousness' (200). Class and the class struggle melt away: the key region of battle is the zone of the interior. Sigal's novel provides a critical rebuke to Laing and to Cooper.

When references to traditional political activity or political history do occur in the novel, the effect is comical. The gap between the individual and society, between the psycho-politics and traditionally conceived politics is presented humorously by Sigal when there is a crisis in Meditation Manor over the care of a patient. "Anna split the community into hostile camps": those who supported her on-going and disturbing regression and those who thought she should be curtailed. Two doctors, Last and Boris Petkin, argue the case in terms of the history of the Soviet Union. Ought "anti-social elements" be suppressed in order to maintain the revolution (Petkin's view)? Or did Anna represent "our revolutionary moment of truth, our Kronstadt" (Last's view). In the debate, attention to the person suffering fades away: "In their loud wrangles over Soviet history Anna got forgotten" (275).

Sigal does not tell us how to connect the micro-politics of everyday life to the world of macro-politics. Nor would we expect him to; his text is a novel and not a political program. What he does is pose the relationship between the two spheres as a problem. More specifically, his message is that the zone of the interior, the region of psycho-politics, ought not be abstracted from the concerns of traditional progressive politics. He encourages us, too, to think about the importance of community, class and gender. As I have shown, he does not simply dismiss anti-psychiatry. He champions solidarity amongst patients (or anti-patients) and tolerance of eccentricities. While referring to the

past, the novel also provides points of reference for the future. Thinking again about the novel on its UK publication in 2005, Sigal writes: " 'La lutte continue [the battle goes on], ' as the revolutionists say. Yes, ECT is back in vogue. The mind butchers never give up and keep coming back with fancier rationales for doing what they admit they don't understand. The task is as yet undone" ("Trip"). Through his fictionalized critique of anti-psychiatry, Sigal has given us a resource that might inform the carrying on of the task.

It is to be hoped that the current re-ignition of interest in Laing might lead to a wider reconsideration of British anti-psychiatry, one that helps us think again about therapeutic communities and about radical psychiatry and politics. We are approaching the 25th anniversary of Laing's death and we can take this event as an opportunity not just to remember Laing but also to re-think anti-psychiatry more generally. Sigal can help us here. *Zone of the Interior* deserves to be part of a reinvigorated scholarly conversation about anti-psychiatry.

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