



'Knots': Drawing out Threads of the Literary Laing

Adrian Chapman
University of Roehampton

Abstract

R. D. Laing's critically neglected verse volume *Knots* (1970) is treated as a literary text and related to games, game theory and Cold War politics. The main focus is Laing's use and view of language. He attempts, Zen-like, to reveal its conventionality and point towards another order of being. *Knots* participates in several genres and Laing - someone who sought to dissolve the doctor-patient distinction - transgresses what, he implies, are merely categories existing in language's zone of illusion. His view of language relates, I argue, to his movement away from the speaking cure and towards greater interest in the body and pre-linguistic experience. While the countercultural Laing looks forward to the complete untangling of psychic, somatic and social knots, his presentation of such knots also suggests their unavoidability. If unavoidable, this text could help readers relate differently to their own knots and perhaps tie some more interesting ones.

To cite as

Chapman. A., 2014, 'Knots': Drawing out Threads of the Literary Laing', *PsyArt* 18, pp. 323–339.

Introduction

The radical Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing's *Knots* (1970) - "a disconcerting, unclassifiable book ... sort of a collection of logico-psychological poems", in the words of Félix Guattari (37) - sold 75,000 copies in the first few weeks of sale in the US and soon became a film and a BBC radio play (Burston and Miller). It also inspired a song of the same name by a British 1970s progressive rock band, Gentle Giant; and, more recently, it inspired a dance piece by an Irish company, Coisceim Dance. Yet Laing scholars have seldom taken it very seriously.

There are numerous references to *Knots* in Laing scholarship but an absence of sustained critical engagement. The word appears, for instance, in a chapter heading of a study of Laing (Kotowicz 30) and the title of journal article (Antonio Palomo-Lamarca's "Existential Knots", an article on Laing and Kierkegaard); but there is no journal article dedicated to *Knots* and no book chapter on it.¹ Biographers and commentators tend to lose interest in Laing's writing (if not his life story) around the time of *Knots*. It is as though Laing ceases to become interesting as a thinker and practitioner. I disagree: *Knots*, I find, is a text worthy of consideration in itself and a good starting point for thinking more widely about Laing.

My reading of *Knots* will show, I hope, not only that it is a text we should return to but also that while Laing has usually been studied in the Psychology or Sociology, or in psychotherapeutic training institutes or (rarely, admittedly) medical schools, he is also an author worthy of study in the English department. My focus, then, is on what I term the 'literary Laing', with the main emphasis being on Laing's use and view of language. I certainly do not want to suggest here that interest in Laing today is or ought to be 'merely literary.' Rather, focus on his language can open new ways of understanding and valuing Laing. My stress on language leads to several foci: relations between *Knots*, Laing's other work, *Knots*' inter-texts and historical contexts; author-reader relations; genre and disciplinarity; strategies of persuasion; the relation between *Knots* and Laing's therapeutic practice; the reference to and realization of *Knots* in other art-forms.

While the term 'literary Laing' might be new, and, I hope, serves to represent approaches to Laing that focus on language, sustained attention to Laing's language is not new (and such attention is not restricted - and nor should it be - to literary scholars). Of especial note is the work of Martin Howarth-Williams, Donald Vanouse, Gavin Miller and Allan Beveridge. Beveridge has shown how a biographical approach to Laing can also focus closely on language, and Miller has shown how Laing's ideas can provide a frame for understanding the Scottish writer Alasdair Gray ("We Are All Murderers").

I open my reading of *Knots* by outlining the text's structure and thinking about games, a reference to which appears on the first page of the text. Thinking about games – and game theory and therapeutic and popular ways of thinking about games - leads to consideration of Laing and politics, and to the Zen master-like position that he takes up in relation to the reader, who is invited

¹ Adrian Laing gives us no more than a page in his biography of his father (147) and neither Zbigniew Kotowicz in his book on Laing (41) nor Daniel Burston (112-3) offer any more. These critics note the schematic nature of the text and its literariness. John Mullan gives us four pages focused on a defence of Laing writing artistically and for a large audience (129-133) and John Clay's biography largely replicates Mullan's biographical material about Laing having worked on the text for several years (151-3). Andrew Collier gives us two pages (174-5) in which he notes the dizzying spirals of misunderstanding in the text.

to move beyond usual games of reading in order to cut through what are presented as illusory (Gordian) knots. I focus too on how Laing, the countercultural guru, who had already found language problematic in *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*, now problematizes language again. We can relate Laing's suspicion of language, I argue, to his move as a therapist away from the speaking cure and towards a greater interest in the body and pre-linguistic experience. I also examine the generic and disciplinary nature of *Knots* and find that while the text participates in several genres, it shows us its author - a doctor who sought to dissolve the doctor-patient distinction - transgressing what, he implies, are merely categories existing in language's illusory "web of maya" (to use Laing's phrase from *Knots*' Introduction). Laing's sixties hopefulness about transcending illusion co-exists with his convincing presentation of knots' inevitability, and I close by considering how the text might contribute to making an inevitably knotted life livable.

Playing at playing a game

A knot might be an intellectual problem, a knotty problem, and the poems in Laing's text certainly express problems (or rather, the poems in the first four sections do). Specifically, Laing's knots are about the ways in which people - and Laing's focus is on dyads - intersubjectively 'fit together.' (The ways in which people are 'bound' together, and in particular the double bind, a situation in which someone's position is rendered untenable as the result of being subject to contradictory messages, had long interested Laing.) A knot is also an imperfection in the grain of some wood, and Laing's knots, despite being about how people 'fit together', foreground states of habitual, 'ingrained' discomfort. The knot, too, is a symbol of marriage. We speak of a couple 'tying the knot', and the love knot is a symbol of constancy and devotion. 'Love knots' too are a focus of the text. Another kind of knot is the bodily knot, the knottiness of muscular discomfort; and I shall have more to say about the body later.

Knots is in five parts. In the opening section, we are presented with familial knots (1-13) and in the second section the love knots of Jack and Jill and their problems of wanting, devouring, getting and having (14-54); the third and fourth sections again feature Jack and Jill, with the third being about the knottiness of knowing, or rather not knowing (55-76), and the fourth characterized by fear (77-81). The fifth section (77-90) is of a rather different character and I shall be discussing it in later - it is very much about a smoothed out or unknotted state of being. The first poem presents a knot as a kind of game, and it is with games, and politics, that I want to begin my discussion.

They are playing at playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I

shall break the rules and they will punish me.
I must pay their game, of not seeing I see the game (1).

For the left-wing critics Peter Sedgwick (109) and Guattari (37-41), *Knots* was a sign of Laing's political degeneration and his drift into hopeless mysticism. It is as though there is nothing interesting in the text: it is merely an index of betrayal. True, in his mini-introduction (just a brief paragraph), Laing makes no attempt to contextualize the coming presentation of dyadic relationships in terms of wider social forces. He tells us merely that the patterns of "human bondage" are ones he has "actually seen"; he admits that the material is rather schematic but hopes readers might refer the content back to experience; and he says that he hopes the patterns he presents will succeed in revealing a "formal elegance in these webs of maya" (Introduction). The key word here, the one with which Laing ends the 123-word introduction, is "maya": magic, illusion, the phenomenal world as an unreality; an Indian word refers the reader to the philosophy of the East and not to the family or to society's economic base or ideological superstructure or to relations between states. Here Laing is far from the concerns of the Old Left and, as I have argued in an article on *Zone of the Interior*, Clancy Sigal's satirical novel about British anti-psychiatry, such a distance is quite characteristic of Laing ("Into the *Zone*"). There is, clearly, a movement into mysticism here, and I shall have more to say about this; yet a political reading of the text is still possible.

Near the very beginning of the 1962 *Port Huron Statement*, the foundational document of the North American New Left, there is reference to "the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb [which] brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract 'others' we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time" (Students for a Democratic Society 7). This "enclosing fact" is also recognized by Jeff Nuttall in the title of his 1968 chronicle of British counter-culture, *Bomb Culture*, a text that contains numerous references to Laing. It is not difficult to find references to post-war superpower conflict in the work of Laing, who is at his most political in his contribution ("The Obvious") to "The Dialectics of Liberation", a gathering in London in 1968 that included appearances by Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman and Allen Ginsberg. In his Preface to the second edition of *The Divided Self*, too, Laing pointedly refers to the madness of the supposedly sane world:

A little girl of seventeen in a mental hospital told me she was terrified because the Atom Bomb was inside her. That is a delusion. The statesmen of the world who boast and threaten that they have Doomsday weapons are far more dangerous and far more estranged from 'reality' than many of the people on whom the label 'psychotic' is affixed. (12).

But where is the bomb in *Knots*? While it is nowhere to be found, the influence of game theory links the text to the bomb, as Adam Curtis notes in his TV documentary about post-war paranoia, “The Trap.” What interested Laing about game theory, a branch of applied mathematics, was not really specific game scenarios such as the chicken game or the prisoner’s dilemma or the Cold War game of mutually assured destruction. Game theory’s appeal to Laing was rather in its emphasis on each player making moves in the context of another’s (or others’) moves. Moves and strategies, then, cannot be understood in isolation: they are implicated in each other – folded in or knotted together. Schizophrenia, for Laing, is a strategy that makes sense in the context of some family games, and this is something he explores especially in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, co-written with Aaron Esterson. In *Knots* we can see how two characters named Jack and Jill are knotted together. The moves in their games are primarily mental. The couple, mirroring each other, reproducing each other’s game in inverted form and exhibiting a dreadful state of precarious balance, are like the two Cold War superpowers: intimate strangers, looking (as Herbert Marcuse told his readers in *One Dimensional Man and Soviet Marxism*) more and more like each other, identical in their differences. The interpersonal, it seems, is geopolitical. We see this, for instance, in the poem in which “Two people who originally / wished to devour and be devoured / are devouring and being devoured”:

She is devoured, by him being devoured by
her devouring desire to be devoured
He is devoured by her being devoured
by him not devouring her (17).

We can also relate *Knots* to contemporaneous interest in games beyond game theory. The English humorist Stephen Potter’s *Gamesmanship* (1947), *Lifemanship* (1950), *One-upmanship* (1952) and *Supermanship* (1958) provide a useful contrast here. Gamesmanship, getting the better of one’s opponent, involves a clear-headed awareness of rules and how far they can be stretched without being broken. Being one-up on the other in a tennis match, in the boardroom or the saloon bar, involves being able to predict, too, the moves your opponent is likely to make. Laing’s games, by contrast, are ones that people not only play but that also play (or devour) those who take part in them. There seems to be no escape; games have a momentum of their own. This we can see here:

it hurts Jack
to think
that Jill thinks he is hurting her
by (him) being hurt
to think

that she thinks he is hurting her
by making her feel guilty
at hurting him
by (her) thinking
that he is hurting her
by (his) being hurt
to think
that she thinks he is hurting her
by the fact that
da capo sine fine (13).

Note the musical terminology here: not *da capo al fine* (back to the beginning to the end) but *da capo sine fine* (back to the beginning without end). Apparently under its own momentum, the game goes on and on, round and round forever, the knot wound tighter and tighter.

Closer to Laing's interest in games but clearly distinct again is the work of Eric Berne and the school of transactional analysis. Berne's *The Games People Play*, published six years before *Knots*, was a best-selling work of popular psychology. Berne does much more work than Laing on behalf of the reader. In *The Games People Play*, the reader is given an introduction that sets out the tenets of transactional analysis and the conception of games that underpins it. Each game in the text is given a name and illustrated by a brief narrative. After the tale comes a brief commentary that offers an explanation and the possibility of a new game in which, instead of simply re-playing old scripts, one might recover genuine agency through moving on to a new sort of ground. The text is clearly instructional: if the reader recognizes him- or herself in the narrative and is able to reflect on the story and its personal relevance after reading the commentary, there is the possibility, it is implied, of personal development. Formally, Berne's narrative presentation of games and advice on how to overcome them recalls the fable, with a brief tale followed by a *moralitas*. In his epigraph to his second monograph, *The Self and Others*, Laing gives us the words of Confucius: "The way out is via the door. Why is it that no one will use this method?" Berne makes it clear where the door is and how to open it. In *Knots* we have only a very brief introduction; no links are made to Laing's previous work. There are no commentaries on individual knots – no instructions on how to read them, or what their significance might be. Where, then, is the door here?

Playing at playing a game

With the 1967 publication of *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise*, Laing acquired counter-cultural guru status on both sides of the Atlantic. *Knots* reinforced this status, and a significant reason for this, I suggest, is the Zen-like quality of the text. Zen, a playful, anti-intellectual,

doctrine-disdaining form of Buddhism had appealed to the Beat sensibility of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder, and had been popularized by lectures and texts by D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts and Paul Reps.² To many in the sixties, Zen seemed to offer the path, or at least one of several possible routes, of spirituality beyond the confines of Western religion. The poems in which Laing explores knots are not koans, the brief, amusing, perhaps infuriating and often paradoxical and strange tales presented to the novice by the Zen master. But there are affinities here: Laing's knots seem to call for some kind of unraveling, some kind of solution, just like the koan; and, like the koan, the knots are brief, puzzling and frequently amusing. Here we have an example (actually the last two stanzas of one poem):

You are cruel
to make me feel bad to think
I am cruel to make you feel cruel
by my feeling bad that you can be so cruel as to think
I don't love you, when you know I do.
If you don't know I do there must be something the matter with you (12).

Like a Zen master, Laing offers no commentary and makes no claims to understanding the truth of the texts he presents. And where is the novice searching for enlightenment here - he or she who struggles to make sense of the text in order to gain enlightenment? This is how the reader is positioned.

Laing's knots, like the koans of Zen, are not, however, texts to be untangled. To attempt to do so would be to look for a knot in a ring – to become absorbed in an illusory problem – and, perhaps, to end up a knot-head, a fool. They are not logic problems or texts the subtleties of which must be painstakingly interpreted. On the one hand, *Knots* is a highly readable text: no prior knowledge of Laing's previous work is required; there are no terms of specialized discourses to master. On the other hand, *Knots* can be unreadable. In the Jack and Jill sections, for instance, such as the one I have already discussed, it can be difficult – impossible at times – to tell who is who. Laing often gives us thoughts about thoughts, fantasies about fantasies (and fantasies about fantasies about fantasies). The text becomes frustratingly, ridiculously difficult – quite unreadable. But that is precisely the point. Like the baffling koan of Zen, Laing's poems, it seems, are designed to exhaust the reader's thinking and, finally, to suspend the compulsion to make sense of the text. Laing's knots are Gordian knots and what is required is a different way of reading, one that does not grasp on to details or force interpretative connections in an attempt at unraveling.

² See, for instance, Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*; Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*; Suzuki's *Studies in Zen*; Watts' *The Way of Zen*; and Reps' *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*.

Many prior to Alexander had tried to untangle the Gordian knot, and each had failed. The greatness of Alexander lay in him seeing the problem differently. Rather than carefully and patiently trying to untangle the knot, and inevitably giving up because of the impossibility of the task, he simply took out his sword and with a single swish cut straight through the problem – and so it became clear that he was to gain the prize of Asia and maintain it by the sword. Laing's reader, it is implied, must also avoid getting tied up in problem solving or interpretation, which, after all, are simply more knots. This is what the Zen novice must learn, too, with the koan, something that might be pondered over not just for hours and minutes but days, months and years. Enlightenment, however, is to be found in an instant, in the moment of *satori*, a moment that instantaneously cuts through veils of illusion – through the *webs of maya*, we could say – and into the nature of reality. The reading of the koan only makes sense when the reader stops making sense: so it is, Laing suggests, with his poetic knots.

Laing points towards what he understands as the nature of reality in the final part of *Knots*, in which he eschews koan-like obscurity and, while certainly writing in a Zen-like idiom – he writes, for instance, of a finger pointing at the moon (87-90) – he is quite explicit in his meaning. A finger might point at the moon but the two entities remain of fundamentally different orders of being. The moon, of course, is distant, a dead lump of rock (at least it seems so to us so far) and far larger than a person's finger. Yet examined from a certain perspective, a finger can seem larger than the moon. One might forget about the moon almost entirely. (How many know of the phase of the moon at any given time?) Never the less, we must admit that there is an irreducible difference between finger and moon. So there is, Laing wants to make clear, between language and experience and that to which language 'points.' The web of *maya* to which Laing refers at the start of the text, then, lies not simply in that which is presented by the words on the pages that follow. The zone of illusion is language itself – again a point congruent with a Buddhist perspective. We are tangled up not only in our game-playing, inter-implicated points of view but also, and more fundamentally, in language, something in itself empty, merely conventional. And if we are subjects of language, we are constituted out of knots. How postmodern Laing seems here. We might note also that Samuel Beckett, an author Laing admired, has a character called Knot, someone who, while never appearing in the novel *Watt*, functions as a structuring absence.

Laing had already problematized language, and especially writing, in *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*, a text that begins and ends with the problem of writing. There Laing wonders whether or not, in the Western world's benighted situation of Cold War alienation, writing is worth doing or is even possible. "Few books today are forgivable," he writes: "Black on the canvass, silence on the screen, an empty white sheet of paper, are perhaps feasible" (11). At the close of the text, finishing *The Bird of Paradise*,

Laing says, “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” (156). Aside from the obvious drug reference here – ‘turning on’ to psychedelic experience – there is a question about how effective words can be: how far can they touch, turn on, the reader? Laing, whose words had touched many, clearly had his doubts at this point about the value of verbal communication. *Knots* represents another strategy of reaching readers, another way of ‘turning them on’ – an attempt to employ words to explore the limits of language.³

Politics helped establish Laing as a counterculture philosopher. *Life* magazine presented him as “a professional scholar transformed into an oracle and a prophet” (qtd. in A. Laing 161). The tone of *Politics* is frequently impassioned and anguished as Laing inveighs against not only the institution of psychiatry but also familial socialization into what he presents as insane sanity. In the context of Western society’s thoroughgoing assault on humankind’s possibilities, the mad person becomes “a hierophant of the sacred” (109), someone who, it seems, might trace a route back to lost wholeness and authenticity. *Knots* has none of the anguish and commitment of the previous text. Nor, it should be noted, is there mention of psychiatry, of madness, of doctors and patients or psychoanalysis. Adrian Laing sees the text as part of his father’s “bridge out of psychiatry and into a more creative world” (147); and Nick Crossley remarks on Laing’s movement, which begins with *Politics*, away from medicine and psychiatry and towards the counterculture (“Contesting Psychiatry” 113-4). These are good observations; certainly, Laing here effectively rejects the psychiatric and psychoanalytic establishments. But we need to attend also to the ways in which the text links to Laing’s previous (and subsequent) work and we must attend to the particular quality of the language Laing uses rather than simply categorizing the text as non-medical or literary.

In contrast to *Politics*, in *Knots* Laing avoids highly charged language. In *Politics* Laing writes about using language “to convey what it cannot say – by its interstices, by its emptiness and lapses, by the latticework of words, syntax, sounds and meanings” (35). In *Knots*, Laing writes in verse and does so in a way that foregrounds the patterns, the “webs of maya”, which are to be found, he implies, in language itself (Introduction). Laing, then, attempts to use language against itself, in order to “convey what it cannot say.”

Laing employs means in this text to render language ridiculous. As a child I used to play a game that involved repeating the same word over and over again. I suspect it is a common childhood game. It does not matter which word you choose. After a short while the word starts to lose its meaning and becomes a mere thing, a sound of no necessary sense-making quality, something crass, ridiculous. The signifier starts to detach itself not only from its signified but

³ I deal at greater length with *The Bird of Paradise* in a forthcoming article on that very text in *Literature and Medicine* (“Dismemberment and Re-membering”).

also from the field of other signifiers. Language, it seems, starts to fall apart or at least begin to reveal its conventional nature. Laing employs repetition in order to do this. He employs repetition, in fact, to the point where his text becomes unreadable – but that, of course, is precisely what he wants. His knots are not to be read and interpreted but rather to be cut through. Unreadability is especially evident in the knot given on pages 41 to 47, a poem that recalls the work of Gertude Stein. The words repeated again and again are “me” and “mine” (Laing is clearly problematizing the ego and egoic attachment). Here is just a small illustration:

If it is mine it is mine
If it is mine it is not mine
If it is not mine it is mine
If it is mine, it is mine
If it is mine, it is not mine
If it not mine,
It is me
If it is me it is mine
If it is mine it is not me (46).

It is no coincidence that *Knots* has inspired artists working in mime, dance and music. Laing points beyond words in the text; and non-verbal artists, I suggest, have picked up on this. Edward Petheridge widely employed his skill as a mime in the film version of *Knots*, directed by David Munro. A twenty-first century dance version of *Knots* by an Irish company, Coisceim Dance, featured the knotting together of bodies onstage. A musical response to the text entitled “Knots” by Gentle Giant, a British progressive rock outfit of the 1970s, consists of rapidly chanted, heavily layered vocals that render individual words and phrases difficult to hear: the listener is left rather with the experience of the materiality of sound. The very title, *Knots*, refers not only to a mental or interpersonal tangle but also to a bodily state, to muscular knots: the implication here is that when we are ‘hung up’ or ‘hunched up’, we are not merely minds but rather psycho-physical subjects, body-minds. Words alone do not tell the whole story.

In his therapeutic practice, Laing never utterly rejected words. In his later poetic work *Do You Love Me?* one character speaks of the necessity of finding the right words: “if I could say”, she points out – if, that is, she could articulate the nature of her distress – “I wouldn’t be in it” (25). For Laing, though, therapy becomes something conducted through more than speech alone. His one-time colleague David Cooper had speculated about intra-uterine experience in *The Death of the Family* and went so far as to wish his readers a “Happy Pre-birthday” (153-55). Laing became interested in perinatal psychology and in *The Facts of Life*, the text he publishes after *Knots*, he speculates widely on intrauterine experience and its effects on life after birth. He refers positively to

his contemporaries, the French obstetrician and pioneer of natural childbirth, Frederick Leboyer (64), and the American psychotherapist Elizabeth Feher (68-69). Feher practised rebirthing, a physical form of therapy that tries to enable people to re-experience the trauma of birth – to be born again. Laing was fascinated by this practice, which seemed to offer a way of transcending therapeutic problems inaccessible to language. In *The Facts of Life* he writes of his involvement in rebirthing sessions in the UK and presents the benefits of these in terms that suggest conversion experiences. “The most remarkable changes came over people in fifteen to twenty minutes,” he says (69). How far away from the talking cure we are here, then.

Playing at playing a game

“*Knots* is not written in a formal academic style, nor in the polemical tones of *The Politics of Experience*, but in a poetic, playful and occasionally quite schematic style,” Daniel Burston and Gavin Miller inform us in their online entry “R. D. Laing: *Knots*” in *The Literary Encyclopedia*. Burston and Miller continue: “publishing companies in England and the USA did not know whether to classify it as poetry, philosophy, or psychology.” In an article on Laing, Guattari writes of *Knots* as “a disconcerting, unclassifiable book” (37). I want now to consider the generic and disciplinary status of the text, especially ambiguity in these respects, which, I think, can be linked to Laing’s view of language as an illusory “web of maya.”

Crossley, recalling *Interpersonal Perception*, a text published in 1966, writes of Laing’s fascination with the abstract representation of relationships. Crossley says that at the peak period of Laing’s “scientific revolution” he presents us with a “graphic transcription system for mapping interpersonal relations which bears all the hallmarks of scientific rhetoric” (R. D. Laing 884). Here we are far from the case history, far from individual traits and traces. We find such attempts at transcription also in *Self and Others* and *The Politics of Experience*. But as John Heaton notes, “Laing had doubts even fairly early on in its value” (515) and Laing himself points out in *Self and Others* that “It is doubtful if the Logical Type theory, which arises in the course of the construction of a calculus of proposition, can be applied directly to communication” (129).

Nevertheless, *Knots* has an abstract, schematic quality. An advantage of this for Laing, is that, writing in lines – in free, unrhymed verse – he can foreground the patterning, “the formal elegance” of the “webs of maya” (Introduction) and show the seductiveness, the beauty of knots. We can see such elegance here in a poem that presents a knot wound from complementary fantasies, ones that balance each other, fitting all-too snugly:

Jack is afraid
Jill thinks he is like her mother

and that Jill is afraid
Jack thinks she is like his mother
Jill is afraid
Jack thinks she is like his mother
and that Jack is afraid
Jill thinks he is like her mother (15).

There are no fleshed-out individual characters in *Knots*. Only two even have names: Jack and Jill. These are names drawn from the nursery rhyme genre. (Jack and Jill go up a hill to fetch a pail of water and end up getting into problems executing a perfectly straightforward task.) Apart from this, though, Jack and Jill could be any Tom, Dick or Harry (and Tom, Dick and Harry are precisely names used in Laing’s next literary text, *Do You Love Me?*). Jill and Jack, the message is clear, are really no one in particular, could be anyone, and could – perhaps – be the reader. Laing’s poems, being schematic, being abstract, invite readers to add flesh, bone and particular character to the knotted persons of the text. Burston questions the relation between the schematic representations in *Knots* and lived experience and finds it rather strange that Laing, someone renowned for his interest in phenomenology, should move so far into abstraction (113). Yet with the text having been so widely read, it seems reasonable to assume that people were quite able relate their lived experience to the writing. Laing’s brief poems, rather abstract, perhaps containing or at least suggestive of wisdom are akin, too, to the aphorism, a genre that also features pithy, frequently abstract, often highly patterned and paradoxical texts that require of the reader that he or she bring personal experience to the text in order to ‘flesh it out.’

Knots is not only abstract and schematic but the poetry also refers to the language of logic. This is clear, for instance, in opening stanza of the following knot in which the opening line serves as a premise and the words “*therefore*”, “If” and “because” all evoke logical demonstration:

I am not entitled to what I have
therefore everything I have is stolen.
If I’ve got it,
and I am not entitled to it,
I must have stolen it,
because I am not entitled to it (34).

This knot is also presented in circular form (35, 52) and in a form that features arrows (40) between groups of words. Laing’s text, then, participates in the genres of the diagram and concrete poetry. And there are yet more genres in which the text participates. Some knots are explicitly flagged in dramatic terms, with speakers’ names given as they would be in the script of a play (18, 20-222, 25, 30). We can find, too, references to literature’s sister art of music,

with musical terms given in Italian (e.g. “moderato” and “poco a poco accelerando al fine”, 42-3).

Knots is a text about serious issues, certainly, and it refers back to Laing’s previous ideas as we have seen. Laing’s poems, however, are not bound to seriousness; on the contrary, they are often very funny. The form Laing employs allows him to express serious ideas in direct, economic and humorous ways; ways that open up his ideas to a wider audience. His critique of familial invalidation of disturbing or dissident members, for instance – familiar from his early work - is presented briefly, starkly and with dry humor here:

There must be something that matter with him
because he would not be acting as he does
unless there was
therefore he is acting as he is
because there is something the matter with him (5).

While the text is written in verse, it is also evident that it participates in a number of genres. In placing *Knots* in terms of discipline and genre, the reader encounters a problem similar to that of determining quite what kind of text is *The Bird of Paradise*, the fifteen-page text that follows and was published in the same volume as *The Politics of Experience*. The same problem occurs with Laing’s 1977 *The Facts of Life*, a text that, like *The Bird of Paradise*, includes prose and verse, and references to literature and philosophy as well as psychology. Which discipline are we in and which genre? The same Laing who sought to overcome the division between patient and therapist in his practice seeks to transgress literary and disciplinary boundaries. *Knots* participates in several genres, as I have shown. Laing is as transgressive in his writing as he is in his therapeutic practice. His point, though, surely, is precisely to baffle his reader on the issue of genre and the question of discipline. The attempt to determine genre, to limit the work, to articulate a distinction is, again, by Laing’s way of thinking in this text, just another knot, just another way of getting tangled up in the web of maya. Laing draws our attention to the conventional nature of forms and disciplines and their relationships.

Playing at playing a game

While *Knots* is a text that has been little considered by Laing scholars, it is deserving of close attention. Given its richness for literary scholars, it is surprising, indeed, that it has not been engaged with at length until now. My reading of it, an approach that focuses on the literary Laing, shows, I hope, that Laing aims at baffling our endeavors to draw disciplinary and generic boundaries as he attempts to use verse to tease away at the possibilities, limitations and, as he sees it, the illusory nature of language. The way beyond language, Laing tells us, is through seeing beyond the mendacious distinctions

with which it articulates experience and the world - and if we could only do so we would come to agree with his position (as he puts it at the start of the text's final section):

All being in each being
Each being in all being
All in each
Each in all (82).

The individual mind, the self, is to be transcended. As this poem ends, "All distinctions are mind, by mind, in mind, of mind / No distinctions no mind to distinguish" (82). In the first four sections of the text, though, Laing is so effective in showing us that being in the social world, being subject to and subjects of language, involves necessarily a limited perspective. But we should not simply claim Laing as a postmodern contemporary. While the postmodern sensibility claims there is no pure position from which to apprehend reality, truth being perspectival – outside the box there is just another box, and beyond that another, and so on – Laing's position, by contrast, while strongly suggesting such a view is, finally, one of sixties hopefulness. He longs to apprehend directly the nature of reality – to move beyond being tangled up in points of view and break on through to the other side. In his emphasis on the grasping of ultimate reality through the attainment of a state of enlightenment, the countercultural Laing presents us with a mystical version of the sixties project of self-fulfillment, authenticity and total liberation.

We can, of course, read Laing against the grain. We can unknot ourselves from the intention of the implied author, and need not subscribe to the mysticism in *Knots* in order to gain something from the text. If there is no final deliverance from knots, what can Laing tell us to make life livable? I take my cue here from his Introduction, in which he writes of the "formal elegance in these webs of maya." He is referring to the patterned structure of knots – patterns brought out by his verse presentation of them. We might think of elaborately tied ornamental knots, which can certainly be impressive; but we should not lose sight of the irony here. Our knots, convolutions of mind, body and relationships, might also be beautiful. Now if knots are inevitable but can also be beautiful, we might, I suggest, come to accept them at least with an ironic forbearance – not as perversions of our nature but as expressions of it. And Laing can help us here. Knots are not only frustrating, debilitating and perhaps even maddening. They are not only tangles of psyche, soma and social world. And it is not only the case that they might be beautiful in their complexity and patterning. They are also funny.

While I have already considered the humor of Laing's use of condensed, patterned verse to present schizophrenic family communication, it is worth dwelling further on humor in *Knots*. In thinking carefully through the text, it is possible to lose sight of what to the casual reader might be obvious and,

certainly, what has been made clear to me by my reading the text aloud to students with no prior knowledge of Laing and very little awareness of 60s counterculture. *Knots* is amusing. Now this amusement might take the form of reading the poems as expressions of others' ridiculous or perhaps ridiculously charming situations or practices. If, however, knots are inevitable, our amusement, I suggest, might turn to ourselves. I am not thinking of being amused at ourselves here but rather being amused *with* ourselves: not a snort of self-derision but an inward chuckle that, combining self-criticism and recognition, might, if just for a moment, loosen a knot's tie. Humor might be of further aid, too. If knots are inevitable, it could help make them bearable. More than that, though, it might help open up the possibility of tying new, more interesting knots – knots which, in time, will require loosening themselves and replacement with further knots.

The Oxford English Dictionary's first recorded use of the colloquial phrase 'to get knotted', once used frequently in school playgrounds throughout Britain, is from 1963. In the definition for "Knotted" we are offered the synonymous phrase "Go to hell!" and told also that 'get knotted' is usually an impolite way of saying "stop annoying me!" To knot, however, is to bind. To tell someone to get knotted – so heatedly to dismiss someone – is to bind oneself to precisely the person one wants to go to hell. Now we might want to utterly unbind ourselves from our knots. We might want to tell our knots to get knotted. But to attempt to do so would be just another knot - and if knots are here to stay, this would be the most insoluble one of all. While there might be no way of not being knotted, though, it might well be worth unbinding some and tying new ones. The challenge is in finding what can and cannot be loosened and re-tied differently.

References

- Beckett, Samuel. *Watt*. Paris: Olympia Press, 1953. Print.
- Berne, Eric. *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*. New York: Grove Press, 1964. Print.
- Beveridge, Allan. *Portrait of the Psychiatrist as a Young Man: The Early Writing and Work of R.D. Laing, 1927-1960*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.
- Burston, Daniel. *The Wing of Madness: The Life and Work of R.D. Laing*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996. Print.
- Burston, Daniel, and Gavin Miller. "Knots." *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 29 August 2005. Web. 23 June 2014.
- Chapman, Adrian. "Dismemberment and Re-membering in R. D. Laing's *The Bird of Paradise*." Forthcoming in *Literature and Medicine*.
- . "Into the *Zone of the Interior*: A Novel View of Anti-Psychiatry." *PsyArt: An Online Journal for The Psychological Study of the Arts*, 17 January 2014. Web. 19 October 2014.

- Clay, John. R.D. *Laing: A Divided Self: A Biography*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996. Print.
- Collier, Andrew. *R.D. Laing: The Philosophy and Politics of Psychotherapy*. Hassocks, UK: Harvester Press, 1977. Print.
- Cooper, David. *The Death of the Family*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971. Print.
- , Ed. *The Dialectics of Liberation*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1968. Print.
- Coisceim Dance. "Archive 2006. Knots." 2006. Web. 18 June 2014.
- Crossley, Nick. *Contesting Psychiatry: Social Movements in Mental Health*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- . "R. D. Laing and the British Anti-Psychiatry Movement: A Socio–Historical Analysis." *Social Science and Medicine* 47.7 (1998): 877-89. Print.
- Curtis, Adam, Dir. *The Trap*. London: BBC, 2007. Television.
- Gentle Giant. "Knots." Shulman, Derek, Phil Shulman, Ray Shulman, and Kerry Minnear. *Octopus*. Vertigo, 1972. Vinyl recording.
- Guattari, Félix. "The Divided Laing." Trans. Gary Genosko. *The Guattari Reader*. Ed. Gary Genosko. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. 37-41. Print.
- Heaton, J. M. "On R. D. Laing: Style, Sorcery, Alienation." *Psychoanalytic Review* 87.4 (2000): 511-26. Print.
- Howarth-Williams, Martin. *R D Laing : His Work and its Relevance for Sociology*. London: Routledge, 1977. Print.
- Kerouac, Jack. *The Dharma Bums*. New York: Signet, 1959. Print.
- "Knotted, adj." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, September 2014. Web. 5 October 2014.
- Kotowicz, Zbigniew. *R.D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Laing, Adrian C. R.D. *Laing: A Life*. London: Peter Owen, 1994. Print.
- Laing, R. D. *Do You Love Me? An Entertainment in Conversation and Verse*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1977. Print.
- , H. Phillipson, and A. R Lee. *Interpersonal Perception: A Theory and a Method of Research*. London: Tavistock, 1966. Print.
- . *Knots*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1970. Print.
- , and Aaron Esterson. *Sanity, Madness, and the Family : Families of Schizophrenics*. London: Tavistock, 1964. Print.
- . *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Ed. Anthony David. London: Penguin, 2010. Print.
- . *The Facts of Life*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1977. Print.
- . *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967. Print.
- . *The Self and Others*. London: Tavistock, 1961. Print.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964. Print.
- . *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis*. 2nd Ed. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958. Print.
- Miller, Gavin. *R.D. Laing*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. Print.
- . "R. D. Laing's Language of Experience." *PsyArt: An Online Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts*, 3 December 2006. Web. 17 October 2014.

- . "'We Are All Murderers and Prostitutes': R. D. Laing and the Work of Alasdair Gray." *PsyArt: an Online Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts*, 25 November 2002. Web. 17 October 2014.
- Mullan, Bob. *R.D. Laing : A Personal View*. London: Duckworth, 1999. Print.
- Munro, David, Dir. *Knots*. New York: Arthur Cantor Films, 1975. Film.
- Nuttall, Jeff. *Bomb Culture*. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968. Print.
- Palomo-Lamarca, Antonio. "Existential Knots: Laing's Anti-Psychiatry and Kierkegaard's Existentialism." *A Parte Rei. Revista de Filosofia* 25.4 (2003). Web. 17 October 2014.
- Potter, Stephen. *One-Upmanship. Being Some Account of the Activities and Teaching of the Lifemanship Correspondence College of One-Upness and Gameslifemastery*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1952. Print.
- . *Some Notes on Lifemanship. With a Summary of Recent Researches in Gamesmanship*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1950. Print.
- . *Supermanship, or, How to Continue to Stay Top without Actually Falling Apart*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958. Print.
- . *The Theory & Practice of Gamesmanship; or, the Art of Winning Games without Actually Cheating*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1947. Print.
- Reps, Paul. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Rutland, VT: 1957. Print.
- Sedgwick, Peter. *Psycho Politics*. London: Pluto Press, 1982. Print.
- Snyder, Gary. *Mountains and Rivers without End*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996. Print.
- Students for a Democratic Society. *The Port Huron Statement*. New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1964. Print.
- Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro. *Studies in Zen*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1955. Print.
- Vanouse, Donald. "Pattern, Perception and Presence: Issues in the Struggle for Narrative Meaning in the Writings of R. D. Laing." *Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis, London, July 1991*. Ed. Frederico Pereira. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada, 1992. Print.
- Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1957. Print.