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Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Madness and the Matter of the Body

by

Kerry Sara Myler

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2010
Errata
With the publication of *The Divided Self* in 1960, R. D. Laing initiated the British ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement which was to challenge the hegemony of conventional medical and psychoanalytical models of madness during that decade and beyond. Anti-psychiatric thinking coincided with the beginning of the second wave of feminism and the two movements coalesced within a number of literary texts, most notably Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*. However, whilst Lessing appears to agree with Laing’s account of schizophrenia and, indeed, largely bases her own representations of madness on his understanding of that experience, her texts nevertheless struggle to fully realise the potential of his theories for women. With reference to *The Golden Notebook* and her later novels *The Four-Gated City* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, I argue that Lessing’s fiction complicates Laing’s theories by demonstrating the significance of the sex/gender system, so conspicuously absent in his works, to women’s experiences of schizophrenia. Lessing’s ‘madness novels’ suggest that Laing’s ultimate aim to deconstruct the sanity/madness binary remains unrealised for the madwoman because of his inattention to that binary’s associative opposition: male/female.

This thesis examines Lessing’s engagement with Laing and argues that any straightforward relationship between his theory and her fiction is complicated by the discourses of gendered embodiment he fails to account for but which continues to define and bind Lessing’s female characters. Using contemporary feminist body theory, I read the female body as a site of contention in and between Lessing’s and Laing’s texts and, finally, as (an) irresolvable ‘matter’ in anti-psychiatry’s understanding of the experience of madness.
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Declaration of Authorship

I, Kerry Myler

declare that the thesis entitled

Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Madness and the Matter of the Body

and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
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- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
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Introduction

That was how they would see her, when it was all over, as she saw herself now: an angular, ugly, pitiful woman, with nothing left of the life she had been given to use but one thought: that between her and the angry sun was a thin strip of blistering iron; that between her and the fatal darkness was a short strip of daylight. […] Step by step, she had come to this, a woman without will, sitting on an old ruined sofa that smelled of dirt, waiting for the night to come that would finish her.

Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* (1950)

She lay on her back on the green satin cover, but her legs were chilly. She got up, found a blanket folded into the bottom of the chest of drawers, and carefully covered her legs with it. She was quite content lying there, listening to the faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river.

Doris Lessing, ‘To Room Nineteen’ (1963)

Though the ‘madwoman’ has long been a staple of Western literature, she has perhaps never been quite so visible or articulate as in the second-wave feminist texts of Doris Lessing and her contemporaries. Twentieth-century feminist criticism, in its effort to excavate and establish a literary history of women’s writing, has focused much attention on the madwoman. This criticism has charted and theorised a history of the madwoman in literature, both as the imagined fate of the potential female artist (Woolf’s ‘Judith Shakespeare’, for instance), and as a recurring textual motif of struggle against, and acquiescence to, patriarchal oppression – as in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Gilbert and Gubar argue that the madwoman in nineteenth-century literature acts as the female author’s ‘dark double’, a ‘projection’ of her ‘anger and dis-ease’.¹ The authors also suggest that the continuing presence of the
madwoman in twentieth-century literature can be accounted for by the theory of the ‘schizophrenia of authorship’:

In fact, so important is this female schizophrenia of authorship that, as we hope to show, it links these nineteenth-century writers with such twentieth-century descendents as Virginia Woolf (who projects herself into both ladylike Mrs. Dalloway and crazed Septimus Warren Smith), Doris Lessing (who divides herself between sane Martha Hesse and mad Lynda Coldridge), and Sylvia Plath (who sees herself as both a plaster saint and a dangerous ‘old yellow’ monster). (78)

Maroula Joannou, in Contemporary Women’s Writing, also neatly ties contemporary representations of women’s mental illness to the literary history of the madwoman: she writes that

like the mad woman in the attic in the nineteenth-century novel, the figure of the isolated woman going mad ‘in spite of husband and children or rather because of them’ [The Golden Notebook] is an arresting image which prompts questions about the links between the society in which the woman lives and her precarious state of mental health.²

Despite Joannou’s emphasis on the impact of society on women’s mental health she, like Gilbert and Gubar, readily links Doris Lessing’s mid-twentieth century madwomen to a literary history of nineteenth-century representations of female madness. Yet while there is undoubtedly an ongoing concern with the connections between woman’s madness and her gendered position within patriarchal society, nineteenth and twentieth-century representations of the madwoman do not so easily converge. Such manoeuvres fail to acknowledge the significant efforts of contemporary women writers to refigure the madwoman as an intelligible subject in her own right.

Gilbert and Gubar’s theory of the schizophrenia of authorship suggests that the author can be divined somewhere between the sanity of her heroine and the madness of her ‘double’, but this does not apply so readily to the more recent incarnations of the madwoman in literature. Madness in these later texts is not so much a representation of a (metaphorical) schizophrenia of unconscious authorial intentions but more often a much more literal, conscious exploration of the nature and construction of clinical schizophrenia. Doris Lessing, to use Gilbert and
Gubar’s example, does not lurk furtively between the characters of ‘sane Martha Hesse and mad Lynda Coldridge’ and, in fact, the text reveals that Martha is no more ‘sane’ than Lynda and Lynda no more ‘mad’ than Martha. To seek out Lessing in these characters is to miss the far more pertinent connections that The Four-Gated City and Lessing’s other ‘madness novels’ draw not between author and character, but between discourses of madness and discourses of sex/gender from within the text. No longer confined to the margins of the narrative or to be read as mere ‘dark doubles’ of their author, these new heroines not only embody the ‘dis-ease’ caused by patriarchal oppression but are able to articulate their *experience* of that ‘dis-ease’. In the latter half of the twentieth century Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys, Penelope Mortimer, Marge Piercy, Erica Jong, Toni Morrison, Janet Frame and Margaret Atwood, among others, have helped to make madness a contemporary feminist issue in Western literature and criticism. These twentieth-century reincarnations of the madwoman continue to suggest links between madness and patriarchal oppression, or women’s mental health and the sex/gender system, but they do so from the *centre* of the text with the madwoman as subject and they also begin to question the methods, indeed the very bases, of Western psychiatry and its complicity in gendered structures of power. In these texts the ‘treatments’ of conventional psychiatry, including institutionalisation, insulin shock and electro-convulsion shock treatments, lobotomies, leucotomies, and medications which numb, deaden, and anaesthetise, are often figured as ‘punishments’ for defying prescribed gender norms and/or methods of (re)indoctrination. This is at a time when those norms and the very definition of ‘woman’ were being fought against and re-imagined by women’s liberation movements. In various ways and to varying degrees these women writers were utilising the growth of the feminist movement to explore and explain the mental health of the ‘modern woman’ – and vice versa.

Not only were these texts caught up with the beginnings of second-wave feminism but they also coincided with the rise of the ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement, largely established by R. D. Laing in Britain and Thomas Szasz in the United States. The publication of Laing’s *The Divided Self* in 1960 instigated a theoretical, clinical and cultural break from the monopoly of the traditional
psychiatric establishment and its reliance on the medical model of madness. The
anti-psychiatrists rejected many of the principles upon which traditional
psychiatry was based; they were suspicious of how madness was understood,
diagnosed, classified and treated in medical/biological and psychoanalytical
terms. Laing and his fellow anti-psychiatrists began with the premise that mental
illness can be made ‘comprehensible’ by attending to the individual patient’s
particular experience of ‘being-in-the-world’. Later Laing would re-imagine
madness as a potentially positive and regenerative experience. It is not surprising
then that Western women writers interested in madness and gender were drawn to
anti-psychiatric thinking and its turn from the biological to the social, its
discrediting of conventional psychiatric ‘treatments’, and its attention to the
experience and even the potential of mental illness. Although many of the women
writers listed above refrained from engaging with the more specific theoretical
concepts of the movement, they nevertheless incorporated its spirit and its
challenge to the hegemony of conventional psychiatry.

There were a number of British texts, both literary and auto/biographical,
that engaged more explicitly with the details of Laing’s work during anti-
psychiatry’s heyday. These include Jennifer Dawson’s *The Ha Ha* (1961),
Penelope Mortimer’s *The Pumpkin Eater* (1962), Clare Marc Wallace’s *Portrait
of a Schizophrenic Nurse* (1965), Morag Coate’s *Beyond All Reason* (1965), Mary
Barnes and Joseph Berke’s *Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through
Madness* (1971), Clancy Sigal’s *Zone of the Interior* (1976), and David Reed’s
*Anna* (1976). To varying degrees these texts all examine the effects of anti-
psychiatric ideas on mad women. But of all the writers interested in madness and
anti-psychiatry during this period, it was Doris Lessing who most explicitly,
persistently, and critically engaged with discourses of mental illness. Lessing’s
early representations of madness, in *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and ‘To Room
Nineteen’ (1963), for instance, present a more conventional narrative of women
driven mad by their domestic spheres and end in death/suicide. At the end of *The
Grass is Singing* and ‘To Room Nineteen’ they are ‘waiting for the night’ and
‘drift[ing] off into the dark river’. However, her later ‘madness novels’ engage
far more explicitly with contemporary debates within the psychiatric
establishment and, in particular, with anti-psychiatric ideas. These texts go beyond
the ‘darkness’ of madness to consider how ‘the cracked mind of the schizophrenic
may let in light’. These are: *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *The Four-Gated City*
(1969), and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971). In fact, these three novels can
be seen to closely chart – and, I want to argue, constitute a critical dialogue with –
the rise and fall of Laing’s anti-psychiatry movement.

**Laing and Anti-Psychiatry**

The anti-psychiatry movement came into being with the publication of R. D.
Laing’s *The Divided Self* in 1960. Laing’s subsequent texts, including *Self and
Family* (1964, co-authored with Aaron Esterson), and *The Politics of Experience*
(1967), as well as texts by Laing’s colleagues, including David Cooper (who
coined the term ‘anti-psychiatry’ in his 1967 publication *Psychiatry and Anti-
Psychiatry*) and Joseph Berke (co-author of *Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a
Journey through Madness*), together, constitute and trace the development of the
British anti-psychiatry movement which began with the aim of making ‘madness,
and the process of going mad, comprehensible’. *The Divided Self* signalled a
break from the psychiatric establishment and its reliance on institutionalisation,
physical treatments, drug therapy, and ‘brainwashing’ psychoanalysis, and
instead envisioned an equal relationship – a partnership – between psychiatrist and
patient in which the primary aim was to understand the patient’s particular sense
of ‘being.’ This leads Laing to question the very status of schizophrenia as a
‘medical’ disease. Jane Ussher, in *Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental
Illness?* (1991), explains that ‘if we see schizophrenia as comprehensible, even
adaptable, we cannot see it as illness’ (137). Instead of understanding
schizophrenia as a disease to be diagnosed and cured, Laing re-imagined it as ‘a
special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation’. As
such, Laing proposed that this form of madness was no longer to be linked to
the biological body but rather to one’s position within familial and social
structures. Indeed, Laing courted controversy with the publication of *Sanity,*
Madness and the Family when he identified the family unit as a prime example of that ‘unlivable situation’. Laing’s hypothesis was further radicalised in The Politics of Experience in which he claimed that much of what we might consider mad is actually a perfectly valid and sane response to what has become a mad world. Here, Laing argues that by journeying into one’s ‘inner space’ (that is, by going mad) one can emerge with a far greater understanding and experience of the self and, indeed, the nature of humanity.15

Interest in Laing’s theories, it is important to note, were not limited to clinicians within the field: Laing, his books and his ideas had worked their way into popular consciousness during the 1960s and 70s, thanks in part to David Mercer’s film Family Life (1971), directed by Ken Loach, which draws on Laing’s understanding of schizophrenia as symptomatic of the disturbed family.16 Laing’s name soon became synonymous with the anti-establishment culture of the period as he fashioned himself as the ‘charismatic’ figurehead and ‘powerful spokesman’ of the anti-psychiatry movement.17 Carole Klein, in her (unofficial) biography of Lessing, writes that ‘by the mid-sixties Laing was in great demand as a lecturer, and the darling of a burgeoning television industry’.18 The working-class Glaswegian was born in 1927 and educated in state schools. He graduated with a degree in medicine from Glasgow University in 1951.19 It was during his early years of practising medicine in a Glaswegian psychiatric hospital that Laing researched and wrote what was to become a seminal text for both the dissenters within his field and, later, the decade itself. Elaine Showalter writes that ‘with the publication of The Divided Self in 1960, he became the mentor of the counterculture in all of its political, psychedelic, mystical, and especially artistic manifestations’ (233). It is a little surprising then that, as David Reed writes in Anna (1976), ‘much of it, for such a well-known and well-quoted work, was technical and remote’.20 Likewise, Peter Sedgwick, in ‘R.D. Laing: self, symptom and society’ writes that ‘there is not a hint of mysticism in [this work]’.21 The ‘psychedelic’ and ‘mystical’ aspects of anti-psychiatric thinking are difficult to detect in Laing’s early writing and really only become explicit in his 1967 publication The Politics of Experience.22 And yet, despite its rather scientific and methodological tone, The Divided Self spoke to a generation of anti-establishment
intellectuals as well as desperate patients, spouses, and parents searching for answers and understanding. Despite his initial reservations, Reed concedes that ‘in the context of what was happening here in my own life almost every word had relevance and added significance’ (36). Indeed, for many of those first readers Laing’s text encapsulated the trend towards dissidence and anti-authoritarianism that was to characterise the upcoming decade.

**The Divided Self (1960)**

*The Divided Self* begins with the assertion that in order to understand the experience of madness one must engage with the ‘person’ as opposed to the ‘organism’. The anti-psychiatrist must look outside of the biological body to consider the patient’s social circumstances, their experiences with others, their ‘being-in-the-world’. Laing writes that

> unless we begin with the concept of man in relation to other men and from the beginning ‘in’ a world, and unless we realize that man does not exist without ‘his’ world nor can his world exist without him, we are condemned to start our study of schizoid and schizophrenic people with a verbal and conceptual splitting that matches the split up of the totality of the schizoid being-in-the-world. (19-20)

Laing’s application of Heidegger’s philosophy to the field of psychiatry requires him to resituate the schizophrenic from within the medical model of madness, in which she is a mere ‘organism’, to an existential model in which the patient is understood in terms of her relationship to the world and others. For Laing this means that the purpose of the psychiatrist is not to identify the ‘signs’ and ‘symptoms’ of the disease but to relate to the patient by attempting to understand her individual sense of ‘being-in-the-world’. In order to achieve this, the anti-psychiatrist ‘draws on his own psychotic possibilities, without forgoing his sanity. Only thus can he arrive at an understanding of the patient’s *existential position*’ (34). Early in Laing’s work there is already the suggestion that all people contain ‘psychotic possibilities’ and that there is a way of tapping into these possibilities outside of the concept of mental illness. It is this view of madness, still tentative in 1960, that fuels Laing’s foray into the mystical in *The Politics of Experience*
and informs the connections Lessing makes between the psychotic and the psychic

towards the end of *The Four-Gated City*. But in *The Divided Self*, Laing is, for

now, simply advocating an equal relationship between psychiatrist and patient and

a method of ‘treatment’ centred on understanding one another’s particular

experience of ‘being-in-the-world’.

The explanation for schizophrenia that Laing proposes in *The Divided Self* is

connected to the degree to which a person feels that their ‘being-in-the-world’ is

secure. This is measured by the patient’s ability to feel alive and ‘real’ within the

world and in relation to others. Laing begins by theorising that an ‘ontologically

secure’ person experiences her identity and autonomy as givens but that the

‘ontologically insecure’ person is one that ‘cannot take the realness, aliveness,

autonomy, and identity of [her]self and others for granted’ (42). This person must

continually battle to preserve and protect her sense of self from the threats posed

by the unpredictable world and others in it. Laing charts the progression of this

battle through the stages of the ‘schizoid way of being-in-the-world’, including

the process of disembodiment, the institution of the false-self system, and the

experience of crippling self consciousness, to the point at which the divided self

collapses and the patient enters the ‘psychotic way of being-in-the-world’. 23

The primary method by which the ontologically insecure person can ensure

her survival is to remove the ‘self’ from the world it so fears. In order to achieve

this the self becomes dissociated from the boundary at which the self and world

meet: the body. Laing explains this process by reference to the ontologically

secure person’s ‘sane’ response to a moment of crisis or severe distress. Within

this moment, she might understandably seek a temporary dissociation from the

body, allowing the ‘self’ to withdraw from the world. By retreating ‘in to’ the

mind and ‘out of’ the body, she is removed from the threatening situation. Laing

explains that this ‘normal’ person becomes a ‘mental observer [who] looks on

detached and impassive, at what his body is doing or what is being done to his

body’ (79). But, when the crisis is over, the self will return to its ‘original

embodied position’ (69). In temporarily removing one’s self from the body the

self experiences a fleeting sensation of escape, a moment in which to pause and

gain a different perspective on the world. Martha Hesse, at the beginning of *The
Four-Gated City, experiences this kind of positive dissociation of self from body. In this episode Lessing seems to suggest, as Laing does, that sometimes ‘the individual should try to disentangle himself from his body and thereby achieve a desired state of discarnate spirituality’ (66, my italics). However, the division of the mind from the body is not always so positively experienced nor so temporary. The idea that the mind-self can exist as independent from the body is extremely seductive to the ontologically insecure person who imagines the body as a target towards which the dangers of the external world are directed. Laing writes that

the divorce of the self from the body is both something which is painful to be borne, and which the sufferer desperately longs for someone to help mend, but it is also utilised as the basic means of defence. This in fact defines the essential dilemma. The self wishes to be wedded and embedded in the body, yet is constantly afraid to lodge in the body for fear of there being subject to attacks and dangers which it cannot escape. (161)

In these cases the process of disembodiment can lead to a sustained rupture between the ‘inner’ self and the real world and the person will enter the schizoid state.

While the ‘inner’ self might be dissociated from the world by way of a division between mind and body, the body still remains as a visible/external object and must interact with the external world and perform the external functions of selfhood. The body is therefore the site upon which the ‘false-self system’ (73) is constructed. Laing theorises a division between a ‘true’ inner self (the unembodied self) and a ‘false’ self (performed by the dissociated body) which acts as a walking, talking decoy. Laing writes that ‘the basic split in the schizoid personality was a cleft that severed the self from the body … Such a scission cleaves the individual’s own sense of being in two, in such a way that the I-sense is disembodied, and the body becomes the centre of the false-self system’ (174). As the schizoid condition worsens the inner self becomes more and more withdrawn and the false-self system more and more pervasive. Laing writes that ‘the “inner” secret self hates the characteristics of the false self. It also fears it, because the assumption of an alien identity is always experienced as a threat to
one’s own’ (103). To the inner self, the false self/body is dead, futile, hypocritical, and belongs not to the self but to the external world which it so fears.

According to Laing, the fear of the false self is manifested in a crippling self-consciousness and preoccupation with image. Laing writes that ‘the schizoid individual is frequently tormented by the compulsive nature of his awareness of his own processes, and also by the equally compulsive nature of his sense of his body as an object in the world of others’ (106). Only by being highly self-conscious and vigilant can the schizoid person assure herself of her own existence (as an object of the gaze) and the existence of others (as the origin of the gaze). By existing as body-object in the external world (as opposed to only an unembodied self in her own inner world) she confirms her existence. But actually, the ‘self’ that attracts attention is a false self: ‘The body in action is no longer the expression of the self. The self is not actualized in and through the body. It is distinct and dissociated.’ The schizoid desires the gaze/attention as self-confirmation of her existence but the ‘real’ self remains hidden ‘behind’ the false self. However, while on the one hand the schizoid craves confirmation of her existence through the gaze of the other, on the other, she fears the gaze and the exposure to danger it might provoke. Laing writes that ‘self-consciousness, then, may be the apprehensive awareness of oneself as potentially exposed to danger by the simple fact of being visible to others’ (109). As dissociated from the world and yet continually in fear of exposure, the inner self is not the safe haven it initially promised to be and swiftly becomes no more authentic than the outer false self. The inner self lives in fear of its own false self and is so removed from the real world that it becomes isolated, stunted, obsessed with imagos, and gradually withers until it completely breaks down. The breakdown and exposure of the inner self signals, according to Laing, the advance from the ‘schizoid state’, which he maintains is the relatively ‘sane’ condition, to ‘schizophrenia’, the psychotic condition. At this point ‘the task in therapy then comes to be to make contact with the original “self” of the individual which, or who, we must believe is still a possibility, if not an actuality, and can still be nursed back to a feasible life’.
Sanity, Madness and the Family (1964)

While The Divided Self concentrates upon the experience of madness, Laing’s later works are more concerned with the origins of madness. In Sanity, Madness and the Family (1964) Laing and A. Esterson bring together a body of research in order to set about constructing a hypothesis for the causes of schizophrenia. Sanity, Madness and the Family presents eleven (of twenty-five) case studies which span five years of research. Each case study consists of the transcribed recordings of interviews with the patient and her family and is followed by a commentary by Laing and Esterson. In order to understand how and why a person might become ‘schizophrenic’ they adopt Sartre’s concepts of praxis, process and intelligibility: events may be caused by an agent (praxis) or be the outcome of a continuous series of operations that have no agent (process). Therefore, what ‘happens in a group will be intelligible if one can retrace the steps from what is going on (process) to who is doing what (praxis)’. It is by way of this methodology that Laing and Esterson come to the conclusion that ‘schizophrenia’ can be attributed to the immediate social group in which a person must function: that is, the family unit. Laing and Esterson re-situated the cause of madness, if not the experience of madness, from the patient to the patient’s untenable existence within an oppressive and restrictive social/familial framework. In doing so, however, they emphasised specifically the ‘abnormality’ and disturbing potential of what came to be known as the ‘schizophrenogenic mother’.

Laing and Esterson write that ‘not the individual but the family is the unit of illness: not the individual but the family, therefore, needs the clinician’s services to “cure” it: the family (or even society at large) is now a sort of hyperorganism, with a physiology and pathology, that can be well or ill’ (23). Despite this claim, the solution to these untenable familial situations was to simply remove the schizophrenic from that situation. For Laing this did not mean committing those daughters to the confines of an asylum but rather introducing her to a communal living space specifically for schizophrenics and where she would be free to ‘be schizophrenic’. This was realised in the communities Laing and the Philadelphia Association set up during the 1960s, the most famous of which was Laing’s ‘Kingsley Hall’ community which ran from 1965-1970. Mary Barnes and Joseph...
Berke’s *Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness* is an account of Barnes’s experience of schizophrenia and her time as Kingsley Hall’s ‘model patient’. Another such experiment was initiated by fellow anti-psychiatrist David Cooper at ‘Villa 21’ at Shenley Hospital. This community ward is the model for ‘Conolly House’ in Clancy Sigal’s *Zone of the Interior*. These communities were, as Sigal writes in his 2005 introduction to the UK edition, ‘not a halfway house or a hospital but a community of souls searching for the Light each in our own way’ (vii). As Laing says in *The Politics of Experience*, healing was a matter of ‘ex-patients helping future patients go mad’ (106).

*The Politics of Experience (1967)*

Stephen Frosh summarises the progression of Laing’s work as a ‘gradual broadening of the context employed to make schizophrenia comprehensible – from the existential state of the individual, to her family context to, in *The Politics of Experience*, the whole mad world’. In *The Politics of Experience* Laing goes beyond his concern with the experiences and causes of schizophrenia to consider the potential of this state of being. Laing re-imagines schizophrenia not as ‘disease’ but as a gateway to a journey of discovery and enlightenment. Indeed, Laing states that ‘this process may be one that all of us need, in one form or another. This process could have a central function in a truly sane society’ (107). This is Laing’s ultimate thesis: that in order to cure the world of its modern madness, *all* people must journey into their own ‘inner space’, explore that terrain, exorcise their ‘false’ and inauthentic beliefs, allow the ‘external’ self to die, and finally emerge existentially reborn as a ‘higher self’. If all people, to a greater or lesser extent, were to undertake this journey – whether occasioned by a schizoid state or by the simulation of such a state of being – the world might be cured of its madness. Laing does not say that this journey is easy or danger-free – in fact, he recommends that anyone embarking on such a journey into their ‘inner space’ have with them a ‘guide’, a prophet-like, *Laing-like*, escort into this potentially dangerous psychic space. While it was this text that sealed Laing’s fame and notoriety it also signalled his downfall – he had become the ‘maverick guru of schizophrenics’.
Published alongside *The Politics of Experience* is a more creative, experimental narrative entitled *The Bird of Paradise*. This text appears to be an account of Laing’s own journey into ‘inner space’. It has no introduction or accompanying commentary and it is unclear how the text has been written and edited for print; it therefore remains unclear to what extent this text can be considered a reliable account of an ‘inner journey’ and how it was initiated: that is, through ‘madness’ or through the use of hallucinogenic drugs. What is perhaps most interesting about this piece of writing, whether autobiographical or fictional, drug-induced or fantasy, is the numerous references it contains to the material body, including: womb imagery, foetuses, tumours, bodies cut and torn, wounds, dismemberment, ‘rectum, vagina […], urine, faeces’, ‘fingertips, legs, lungs, genitals’, ‘blood, tissues, muscles, bones’, ‘vomit, sperm, smegma, diarrhoea, sweat’, and ‘piss, shit, […] come, mucoid, […] tears of eyes, ears, arse, cunt, prick, nostrils’.\(^35\) This might be a ‘transcendental experience’\(^36\) but it remains very much caught up with the imagery and materiality of the body.

**Laing, Madness and Women**

Laing’s understanding of both the experience and causes of mental illness were to become an asset to the later field of ‘women and madness’ but also, more generally, to the women’s movements of the 1960s. Juliet Mitchell, who devotes two chapters to Laing in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), writes that ‘Laing’s early analyses of schizophrenia as a disturbance induced by immediate interaction within the family helped to introduce a new phase of radical humanism to which the women’s movement is heir’.\(^37\) Even at the most basic level, it seems quite clear that women, as an oppressed group, are far more likely to feel ‘ontologically insecure’ than the proverbial white, middle-class, heterosexual male. Showalter writes that ‘Laing’s exposé of the assumptions about feminine dependence, passivity, chastity, dutifulness, obedience, and docility that governed the behaviour of his eleven families towards their daughters gave feminists important ammunition in their analysis of women’s oppression’ (222-223).

Laing’s work aided the feminist cause by placing madness within a sociological framework, separating it from the biological. However, he fails to address the
question of sex/gender difference in his theories, despite his publications being full of ‘madwomen’, thus making his work problematic for appropriation by the women’s movements.

Laing is writing almost exclusively about women – each of the eleven case studies in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* focuses on a female patient and six of the nine patients in *The Divided Self* are female – but he is in no sense writing *explicitly* about women. In the introduction to *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, Laing and Esterson set out the criteria for the families they will examine: ‘We wished to investigate the families of (i) women (ii) between the age of fifteen and forty, (iii) who had been diagnosed as “schizophrenic” by at least two senior psychiatrists and who were regarded as such by the staff’ (15). Exactly why they only chose to examine female patients between the ages of fifteen and forty is never explained and the particularly gendered aspects of their social/familial situations are likewise never acknowledged. In Laing, the evident, if implicit, association between madness and women, and in particular women’s embodiment and sexuality, remains unexplored. Showalter writes that ‘in Laing’s early work, the majority of case studies describe women struggling with conflicting messages about femininity from their family and the society, but these potential theories of gender are not developed in the studies themselves’ (231). Laing’s silence on issues of gender in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* means that the study serves less as an ‘exposé’ and more of a commentary that, by itself, only perpetuates the kinds of assumptions it proposes to critique. Laing’s failure to attend specifically to issues of gender – or rather his implicit gendering and explicit universalising – ultimately serves only to perpetuate the gendering of madness within the field of psychiatry (of which anti-psychiatry is, despite its claims to the contrary, still unavoidably a part).

Laing’s body of work argues that madness can be made comprehensible when it is understood as a response to one’s untenable position within the family unit, and, by extension, social structures; however, he does not go so far as to consider how one’s sex/gender, sexuality, class or race might be a factor in that ‘untenability’. This is especially odd considering the extent to which Laing’s understanding of the experience of madness is bound up with the body.
Disembodiment, the false-self system and self-consciousness all revolve around one’s relationship with the body, the fashioning of the body, and the visibility of the body as both a boundary and a conduit between the self and the world. If the body is so crucial to Laing’s understanding of madness then why is the *gendered* body missing in his texts? How can sex/gender not be a significant factor in the way in which madness is experienced when that experience is bound up with the body? And how then can Doris Lessing appropriate a Laingian framework in her own examination of the experience of madness when her understanding of that experience is inextricably gendered? In writing the madwoman Lessing finds that her engagement with Laing’s ideas is not straightforward. Indeed, I will argue that Lessing’s novels provide a critical reworking of those ideas through a *gendered* rewriting. The gendered bodies missing in Laing’s work resurface in Lessing’s novels.

**Lessing and Laing**

Lessing’s body of work features a plethora of mentally ill characters, female and male, depressive and psychotic. In her works Lessing explores sociological and psychological aspects of the self and the body, particularly with regard to women’s lived experiences. Lessing’s novels attempt to represent and explore female identity in terms of both the personal and the political (where the personal is political) and she constructs that identity by reference to one’s position within society, one’s experience of the body, one’s sexuality and, perhaps most radically, one’s sense of inclusion within a collective human consciousness. It is primarily in and through madness – especially madness as re-imagined by Laing – that Lessing seeks to chart the complexities of human experience and its potential for spiritual enlightenment. In doing so Lessing’s ‘madness novels’ constitute a sustained, critical engagement with anti-psychiatric thinking.

Marion Vlastos writes that ‘the idea of madness as potential salvation for the contemporary world is not [Lessing’s] alone. Not only in her emphasis on madness but also in her very articulation of its value she shows a striking similarity to the views of R. D. Laing, unorthodox psychiatrist and cultural theoretician’. Lessing’s preoccupation with the complexities of the mind, her
critique of the psychiatric establishment, and her belief that madness might be re-imagined in positive terms do not merely coincide with the rise of anti-psychiatric thinking but rather constitute a dialogue with that discourse of madness. Lessing was familiar with the anti-psychiatry movement from its beginnings and even questions Laing’s claim to being the forerunner of the movement: in the second volume of her autobiography she writes that

the sixties were on us, and the romanticising of lunacy. The theme of people ‘breaking down’ into greater understanding of themselves and their times was very much to the taste of the sixties. Just ahead were Ronnie Laing and his associates. They were supposed to have introduced the theme, discovered it, been its originators. But I wonder.39

Lessing is here thinking specifically of Bert Kaplan40 whose collection of essays and extracts from various memoirs and writings, entitled The Inner World of Mental Illness, was, however, not published until 1964, four years after Laing’s The Divided Self.41 Lessing laments that Kaplan is not sufficiently acknowledged by the anti-psychiatrists, although actually Laing does mention and quote from his collection in The Politics of Experience.42 Despite these inaccuracies, the point Lessing is trying to make is that this ‘theme’ arose out of a particular set of circumstances at a particular cultural moment, as opposed to one man and ‘his’ movement. For Lessing then, this renewed interest in the politics of madness emerged organically and disparately out of the growth of a politically aware 1960s counter-culture and should not be solely credited to Laing or his associates. That said, Laing’s The Divided Self was the first comprehensive text to address madness as it is experienced and it undeniably increased the awareness of the schizophrenic condition in Britain.

Despite her protests it is clear that Lessing’s novels are informed not simply by the ‘theme’ of madness but by the very language and theoretical frameworks Laing employs in his works. Echoes of Laing’s rhetoric and vision resonate throughout The Golden Notebook (published two years after The Divided Self), The Four-Gated City, and Briefing for a Descent into Hell (which is extensively informed by Jesse Watkins’s account of his ‘inner journey’ in The Politics of Experience). Indeed, Lessing admits that Laing was a ‘key authority figure’43 of
the decade and told Joyce Carol Oates in 1973 that ‘we were both exploring the phenomenon of the unclassifiable experience, the psychological “breaking-through”’ that the conventional world judges as mad’. And Lessing’s knowledge of Laing is not merely academic. They moved in similar, if not quite overlapping, social circles. The extent to which Lessing and Laing interacted on a personal level is unclear; in her autobiography Walking in the Shade (1998) Lessing makes only a brief reference to Laing and anti-psychiatry though she does write about her relationship with Clancy Sigal who ‘physically’ connects her to Laing (Sigal was Lessing’s lover and Laing’s patient). Sigal is the model for the ‘Saul Green’ character in The Golden Notebook and Lessing is, quite feasibly, the ‘Coral’ character at the beginning of Sigal’s own account of anti-psychiatry, Zone of the Interior (1976). Elaine Showalter describes the three’s relationship as ‘a circle of almost incestuous mutual influence’ (238). If Laing and Lessing’s interactions were not quite personal they were certainly textual. Laing supplied a wealth of literary material for both Lessing and Sigal who, in their writings on madness, provided not only personal, political, cultural and literary contexts for the anti-psychiatry movement but, particularly in the case of Lessing, re-worked Laing’s ‘technical and remote’ theories to more fully represent and explore the (gendered) experience of madness.

Scholarly criticism on the intersections between Laing and Lessing has been most prominent in the field of cultural history/women’s studies, as in Showalter’s seminal work The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980 (1985). A more recent study by Lisa Appignanesi, Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors From 1800 to the Present (2008), covers similar ground. These texts offer an overview of Laing’s work and brief summaries of the literature and films influenced by his theories of schizophrenia. Both studies give significant space to Lessing’s novels and both employ a feminist framework through which to examine the cultural impact and historical implications of the anti-psychiatry movement. Showalter’s chapter on Laing briefly summarises a number of literary texts that engaged with his theories during the 60s and 70s, including Doris Lessing’s three explicitly anti-psychiatric novels and a number of those literary and auto/biographical texts listed above. Because of
the breadth of Showalter’s project (an overview of British cultural imaginings of madness from 1830-1980) her examination of anti-psychiatric literature is necessarily brief but it nevertheless constitutes an impressive overview of anti-psychiatry’s literary influence on British post-war literature. Showalter focuses upon the disjuncture between Laing’s positive and redemptive rethinking of the schizoid condition and the tragic stories of female patients as recounted in the auto/biographical accounts in his texts. Showalter sees this as representative of the ways in which, despite the insights of ‘great’ men, female patients have always remained silenced. She writes that ‘like other radical movements of the 1960s, anti-psychiatry in practice was male-dominated, yet unaware of its own sexism’ (246). Showalter’s chapter is, in many ways, the starting point for my own research. Showalter’s ‘second wave’ analysis of the cultural representation of femininity and madness situates the madwoman within a patriarchal framework that defines mental illness in gendered terms. She argues that women’s madness is a consequence of women’s roles.

The influence of Laing on Lessing’s novels has also not gone unnoticed by Lessing scholars and most studies of her fiction dutifully include a nod to Laing in terms of, most often, his misgivings about traditional methods of psychiatric treatment and the idea of madness as potentially liberating. Literary critics who have written more extensively on the connections between Lessing’s and Laing’s works include Marion Vlastos, Barbara Hill Rigney, and Roberta Rubenstein. Marion Vlastos’s article ‘Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy’ (1976) considers The Four-Gated City and Briefing for a Descent into Hell and compares Lessing’s and Laing’s approach to solutions for social change. She argues that both represent the solution in terms of the ‘revolutionizing’ of the ‘consciousness of man’ (126). Barbara Hill Rigney’s Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Brontë, Woolf, Lessing and Atwood (1978) examines selected works from those women writers through the lens of Laing’s theories, writing that ‘in the absence of any other available and widely recognised authority, then, Laing may serve to provide a base from which to begin a feminist psychoanalytical approach to literature’. Rigney includes a chapter on Lessing’s The Four-Gated City in which she reads Martha’s madness in terms of Laing’s
reversal of the sanity/madness binary. She argues that by the end of the text, despite being subject to a ‘schizophrenogenic mother’, Martha is able to assume a ‘disinterested, nonpossessive maternal role’ in her relationships with Lynda, Mark and finally the children on the island and guide the human race to a ‘rebirth of the world’ (87-88). Roberta Rubenstein’s *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness* (1979) is a book-length study of Lessing’s representations of consciousness in her body of work. It is the most extensive study of the mind and madness in what she calls Lessing’s ‘break through’ texts. Rubenstein does examine Laing as an influence on Lessing but her analysis is more Jungian than Laingian in its focus. Nevertheless, Rubenstein’s study constitutes the most thorough investigation of the mind and madness in Lessing’s post-war writing to date. Of particular interest, and much quoted in other works, are Lessing’s letters to Rubenstein, one of which, bizarrely, denies that she had any knowledge of Laing’s *The Politics of Experience* before writing *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*.49

More recent literary criticism on Lessing has tended to neglect the theme of madness in her novels. In the wake of Lessing’s 2007 Nobel Prize for Literature award, two significant collections of critical essays have been published on Lessing’s works, as well as a book length study by Susan Watkins. The first collection, Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins’s *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings* (2009), focuses on Lessing as a writer who ‘travels across borders “geographical, ideological and generic”’.50 This collection of essays emphasises and encompasses the breadth and complexities of Lessing’s oeuvre over the last 60 years, including her (often contradictory, as the editors of *Border Crossings* argue51) postcolonial, feminist, Marxist, literary and even eco-political concerns. It does not, however, include her examination of the ideological border between madness and sanity, even as a peripheral ‘topic’ that intersects with many of those other concerns in her texts. Debrah Raschke, Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis, and Sandra Singer’s *Doris Lessing: Interrogating the Times* (2010) re-examines Lessing’s political and ideological concerns in the light of their continued relevance to contemporary themes, which include the postcolonial, the feminist, the literary, the postmodern, history, trauma and terrorism. Again, but for a brief
mention of Laing’s influence on Lessing in Suzette Henke’s contribution on *The Golden Notebook*, there is little discussion of the significance of madness as a ‘theme’ in its own right or as tangential to these critics’ broader concerns. Susan Watkins’s book length study, *Doris Lessing* (2010), is one of a series on ‘Contemporary World Writers’ and hence considers her work, including her more recent novels, primarily from a postcolonial perspective. Recent critical work on Lessing has tended, then, to favour themes of empire, race, gender, and politics, as well as questions of literary form. Lessing’s representations of madness and, more specifically, her engagement with anti-psychiatric discourses in the 1960s and 1970s, have tended to be overlooked in the context of current critical preoccupations.

Actually, critical interest in anti-psychiatry, for Lessing and her critics, did not really outlast the 1970s. In fact, even Laing distanced himself from the movement, stating in *Wisdom, Madness and Folly: The Making of a Psychiatrist, 1927-1957* (1985), ‘I have never said that parents or families or society “cause” mental illness, genetically or environmentally. […] I have never called myself an anti-psychiatrist. […] However, I agree with the anti-psychiatric thesis that by and large psychiatry functions to exclude and repress those elements society wants excluded and repressed’. By the beginning of the 1980s the ‘heyday’ of anti-psychiatry was over and with it, it seems, any critical interest in Lessing’s literary involvement with the movement. Subsequent writing on the relationship between Lessing’s novels and Laing’s theories is confined to a footnote/nod to the influence of his work upon hers or appears in studies, like Appignanesi’s, that chart a cultural history of mental illness.

Lynn Sukenick writes in 1974 that ‘a study of madness in Lessing’s work – beginning with colonial eccentricity and ending with her ideological apprenticeship to Laing – deserves a book of its own’. Such a study remains unwritten and yet Lessing’s literary involvement with Laingian anti-psychiatry does warrant further investigation. It is Lessing’s engagement with particularly Laingian conceptions of selfhood and humanity that, I will argue, inspires, complicates and ultimately frustrates her attempts to realise the potential of madness for women (to ‘free’ them), and in fact precipitates her move into ‘outer
space’ fiction. This thesis, then, seeks to explore the period during which Lessing offered her most sustained examination of the subject of mental illness, in her most ‘Laingian’ novels, but it does so not by way of simply cataloguing the influence of Laing upon Lessing but by challenging the very notion that Lessing’s engagement with Laing can be reduced to an ‘ideological apprenticeship’ and suggesting that the relationship between Laing’s theory and Lessing’s texts is, in fact, deeply problematic. Laing’s texts do offer a theoretical framework through which to understand Lessing’s representations of madness and her sustained critique of the psychiatric ‘machine’; but Lessing is doing more than merely reflecting and fictionalising his theories.

**Lessing Beyond Laing**

In Lessing’s 1971 preface to *The Golden Notebook* she writes that the ‘central theme’ of her text is ‘this theme of “breakdown”, that sometimes when people “crack up” it is a way of self-healing, of the inner self’s dismissing false dichotomies and divisions’. Lessing’s novels take Laing’s theories and case-studies as starting points for her own fictional representations of madness so that Laing and Lessing seem, at first sight, to be writing from a similar position. *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, published in the same year as the preface, even appears to fictionalise one of the case-studies in *The Politics of Experience*. Like Laing, Lessing critically engages with the psychiatric establishment, challenging its authority and exploring new ways to understand madness. Lessing seemingly shares Laing’s aim of finding a way of comprehending madness, of shifting the emphasis from diagnosing and treating the illness, to understanding and valuing the patient. Both writers were trying to escape the rigid and compartmentalised system of signs and symptoms put forward by the psychiatric establishment, and favoured instead a more fluid and intuitive representation of madness. In her fiction, however, Lessing can also move beyond the clinical limitations of Laing’s case studies and flesh out the stories and worlds of her madwomen to more fully explore Laing’s theories. Indeed, her novels take Laing’s ideas into territories and utopian spaces that his case studies cannot reach: for example, in *The Four-Gated City* Lessing re-imagines madness as a reaction to society’s denial of telepathic
abilities and has her heroine survive an apocalyptic disaster to help create a future in which extra-sensory perception constitutes an evolutionary leap. In her fiction, then, Lessing can take Laing’s theories and, with them, create new worlds and new ways of ‘being-in-the-world’. This is particularly pertinent to Lessing’s other ‘theme’, the ‘sex war’. Laing’s theories might just have the potential to help Lessing to imagine new ways of being-a-woman-in-the-world. However, in ‘fleshing out’ the madwoman Lessing is also confronted with a much more fundamental and problematic limitation in Laing’s works: his inattention to gendered embodiment.

When asked if she knows R. D. Laing in an interview conducted by Studs Terkel in 1969, Lessing replies ‘Yes, I do, and his work. I think he hasn’t gone far enough. I admire him because he has battled with the English medical establishment and changed the plan so as to make it possible to ask questions in a way it simply wasn’t possible before’. Exactly what Lessing means by ‘going far enough’ is unclear. She goes on to discuss doctors locked away in Britain and the Soviet Union researching the links between schizophrenia and extra-sensory perception, an idea explored in The Four-Gated City. Yet it seems the most obvious way in which Laing has not ‘gone far enough’ is to theorise madness, a madness he has re-imagined as a sociological problem as opposed to a biological illness, in terms of women’s oppression and the long history of connecting madness to the female body. It is particularly surprising then that when Terkel asks Lessing if ‘these characters, Lynda and Martha [from The Four-Gated City], could’ve as easily been two men?’, she answers, simply, ‘Yes’ (31). This answer is followed and compounded by Terkel’s closing comment: ‘we come back to this theme that man has not yet discovered his possibilities’ (31, my italics). Lessing’s ‘yes’ and Terkel’s use of the generic ‘man’ is far removed from the dichotomy set up in The Four-Gated City between the technological and destructive ‘possibilities’ of man (generic and gender specific) and the extra-sensory and evolutionary ‘possibilities’ embodied by the women in the novel. Indeed, Lessing’s denial of the importance of gender in The Four-Gated City is echoed in her dismissive attitude to the ‘sex war’ theme in The Golden Notebook and in her decision to feature a male protagonist in Briefing for a Descent into Hell.
In another interview, during the same period as the Terkel interview and the writing of the preface to *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing says that ‘we should all go to bed, shut up about sexual liberation, and go on with important matters’. Those ‘important matters’ include global politics, war and the nuclear threat, but, as the 1971 preface makes clear, they also include the state of Britain’s mental health system and, more broadly, exactly what madness might be and the status of those discourses that construct conceptions of madness. The appeal of Laing to Lessing might not simply reside in his re-imaginings of madness but in his very disregard for gender when theorising those re-imaginings. When Lessing writes in the preface that she wrote *The Golden Notebook* as if women’s liberation had already happened, she is looking to move beyond a simple representation of, or lament upon, women’s second class position, patriarchy and misogyny – and also, I think, how those ‘sex war’ issues have been historically caught up with issues of madness. Laing’s inattention to gender, the ‘gender neutrality’ of his case study patients and their bodies, particularly in *The Divided Self*, appears to offer a freer discourse through which to write about madness. However, in nevertheless combining themes of madness, gender and politics, Lessing’s texts themselves resist such efforts at neutrality. Gendered bodies continually assert themselves in her novels, demanding the reader’s attention and forging undeniable links with the madness that is, inextricably, experienced on and through those bodies. Lessing’s novels challenge Laing’s universalising – and therefore implicit gendering – of the schizophrenic by sexing and embodying the madwoman he presents but does not represent. Lessing’s compulsion to faithfully and intimately represent women’s day to day lives, including their neuroses, along with the sheer number of women who suffer from mental breakdowns in her texts, belies any para-textual unwillingness to embrace the gender implications of her representations of madwomen.

The difficulties of bringing together the themes of gender and mental illness (even mental illness as reframed through anti-psychiatric ideas) without simply perpetuating those same unsubstantiated connections between madness and the ‘hysterical’, unruly female body that have dominated the history of madness, is evident in the textual complexities of Lessing’s ‘madness novels’. 
These texts attempt to encompass the political need and struggle for women’s emancipation while simultaneously exploring an anti-psychiatric (and ‘gender neutral’) understanding of madness – these attempts become increasingly problematic as the two themes overlap and trouble one another. The texts demonstrate that gendered embodiment cannot be disregarded when attempting to construct new discourses of madness because gendered embodiment is essential – pivotal – to constructions of selfhood. Subjectivity, identity and, by extension, discourses of normality and intelligibility, are constituted by way of the gendered body. Madness may or may not be ‘of’ the body in terms of neurological or biological origins, but discourses of madness, including anti-psychiatric discourses of madness, are necessarily founded upon discourses of selfhood that, as Judith Butler argues, are constituted by way of constructions of gendered embodiment. Lessing’s texts do not simply demonstrate how madness and gender are historically and culturally connected but reveals how discourses of madness and gender in fact consolidate one another: madness and gender are inextricably linked because of the very madness of gender – the madness of constituting subjectivity and intelligibility through the gendered body.

**The Matter of the Body**

Together, Laing’s theories and Lessing’s novels (as well as those other literary and auto/biographical narratives of anti-psychiatry) constitute a particular moment in Britain’s psychiatric and cultural history and contribute to a wider countercultural revolt against discourses of difference and oppression during this period. Although this particular intersection between the theoretical and the literary is, in itself, interesting, this thesis seeks to go beyond that broader reading of these texts and focus, rather, on where the meeting point between them becomes problematic: that is, on the matter of the body. Anti-psychiatry, despite its turn to the socio-cultural causes of madness, is still very interested in the way in which the body figures in experiences of madness: in Laing’s *The Divided Self*, for instance, selves are either ‘embodied’ or ‘unembodied’ and the degree to which the self is embodied is directly proportional to the degree to which that self is ‘sane’ (65).
However, Laing does not take into account that the sex/gender of that body might have any significance for the patient’s experience of madness. It is this lacuna that I want to argue complicates any assumptions about an easy, straightforward relationship between Laing’s texts and Lessing’s fiction. Lessing engages with and finds hope in Laing’s work but ultimately her texts fail to reconcile Laing’s ‘gender neutral’ schizophrenic bodies with her explicitly gendered schizophrenic heroines. Lessing’s novels, then, expose the difficulty in adapting Laing’s ‘gender neutral’ theories for women as well as, more fundamentally, the significance of gender to the experience of schizophrenia.

Laing’s primary aim is to deconstruct the madness/sanity binary which divides and separates those who are, in Butler’s terms, ‘intelligible’ (xviii) from those who are not. While this might have offered an opportunity to rethink and destabilise other such oppressive binaries (male/female, white/black, rich/poor, heterosexual/homosexual, abled/disabled, etc.) Laing’s lack of attention to matters of gender – as well as race, class, sexualities, disability – mean that when his theories are translated into real, lived experience those other discourses of difference once more come into play and thus reconstruct the intelligible/unintelligible binary from which they all stem. Although all of these structures of difference are significant it is the male/female binary which seems most relevant to Laing’s challenge to the sanity/madness construct: firstly, because of the female body’s long history in discourses of madness and, secondly because the madwoman is so prevalent in his case studies while sex/gender difference is seemingly so insignificant to his theories. Through analysing Lessing’s responses to Laing’s theories, and considering the problems she encounters in trying to adapt them to woman’s experiences, it becomes clear that the sanity/madness binary is inextricably bound up with the sex/gender system and that to deconstruct the sanity/madness binary one would need to risk and upset that system – otherwise the division between intelligible and unintelligible is simply reinstated.

**Reading the Body in Lessing and Laing**
Rubenstein supports her particular approach to Lessing’s novels by arguing that ‘the common denominator in [her] fictional world is the mind: the mind discovering, interpreting, and ultimately shaping its own reality’ (7). What Rubenstein’s study overlooks is the way in which one’s shaping and experience of one’s ‘own reality’ is a ‘lived’ experience and therefore always also an embodied experience. Laing’s phenomenological framework means that he is attentive to lived experience as embodied (or ‘unembodied’ for the schizoid person). In Space, Time and Perversion, Elizabeth Grosz writes that the concept of the ‘lived body’ is ‘prevalent in psychology, especially psychoanalysis and phenomenology’ and ‘refers largely to the lived experience of the body, the body’s internal and psychic inscription’. For Laing, then, the body is constructed by way of the psyche’s projection of ‘the body-schema’ (33) onto its surface. However, Grosz writes that ‘the [psychically] inscribed surface is not neutral but may require different typographical procedures and result in very different kinds of meanings, depending on the type of (sexed) materiality to be described’ (36). Laing attempts to present his theories of schizoid embodiment/disembodiment in terms of a ‘gender neutral’ body but, if ‘lived’ bodies’ are, as Grosz argues, ‘always already sexually coded’ (36) then Laing’s theories fail to fully account for ‘lived’ embodied experience.

In contrast, Lessing’s heroines are always conscious of their gendered embodiment but their bodies more readily lend themselves to Grosz’s second approach to conceptualising the body, what she terms the ‘inscriptive’ (33). Grosz writes that the inscriptive model ‘is derived from Nietzsche, Kafka, Foucault, and Deleuze’ and it ‘conceives the body as a surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed’ (33). Both models read the body as a site of inscription – the first originating from an interior ‘self’ that constructs the body in terms of an ‘imaginary anatomy’ (33) and the second from external socio-political forces that mark, sculpt, libidinize, medicalize, mechanise and, significantly, normalize the body according to dominant discourses of intelligibility (33-35). These external socio-political inscriptions render the body into a decipherable text while
simultaneously generating a sense of ‘an interior, an underlying depth, individuality, or consciousness’ (34). Grosz writes:

It is not clear to me that these two approaches are compatible or capable of synthesis. Nevertheless, each may provide some of the theoretical terms necessary to problematize the major binary categories defining the body – inside/outside, subject/object, active/passive, fantasy/reality, and surface/depth.

The body can be regarded as a kind of hinge or threshold: it is placed between a psychic or lived interiority and a more socio-political exteriority that produces interiority through the inscription of the body’s outer surface. Where psychoanalysis and phenomenology focus on the body as it is experienced and rendered meaningful, the inscriptive model is more concerned with the processes by which the subject is marked, scarred, transformed, and written upon or constructed by the various regimes of institutional, discursive, and nondiscursive power as a particular kind of body. (33)

In reading Lessing’s ‘madness novels’ and Laing’s theories alongside one another the two sets of texts meet at the ‘hinge or threshold’ of the body. Lessing’s novels inscribe the body in terms of the social-political by way of the inscriptive approach whilst Laing’s theories inscribe the body in terms of the psyche by way of the ‘lived body’ approach. Where the texts overlap these conceptualizations of the body come to trouble one another and the very stability of a fixed, known body. Together these texts, therefore, have the potential to problematise those binaries that define the body and perhaps also those binaries that take as their basis the mind/body opposition, namely sanity/madness. However, combining the two approaches does not eliminate the ‘incompatibility’ of Lessing’s gendered bodies and Laing’s purportedly ‘neutral bodies’. How might sex/gender complicate the potential to trouble ‘major binary categories’?

Later Grosz writes:

With Foucault I agree that sex is a product, an end effect, of regimes of sexuality (which is another way of saying that the inscription, functioning, and practices of a body constitute what that body is). With Butler, against Foucault, I want to argue that both sex and sexuality are marked, lived, and function according to whether it is a male or female body that is being discussed. (213)
Judith Butler’s body of work negotiates between Grosz’s two conceptualisations of the body, the ‘inscriptive’ and the ‘lived body’, primarily by examining Foucauldian (inscriptive) accounts of formulations of subjectivity alongside psychoanalytical (lived body) accounts. Butler reads the body through these theoretical perspectives in order to account for constructions of gendered subjectivity and to formulate possible methods of resisting/subverting heteronormative discourses. Like Laing, Butler begins with an engagement with phenomenological thinking, specifically Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) which she interrogates in her first work *Subjects of Desire* (1987); this theoretical perspective also informs her subsequent writing, not least *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). However, it is in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) that Butler most thoroughly examines the ways in which bodies are constructed as an effect of discursive systems and practices that create, maintain and perpetuate the heterosexual matrix. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler sets about ‘rethinking […] some parts of *Gender Trouble*’, specifically the missing ‘matter’ of the body:

To claim that sex is already gendered, already constructed, is not yet to explain in which way the ‘materiality’ of sex is forcibly produced. What are the constraints by which bodies are materialized as ‘sexed,’ and how are we to understand the ‘matter’ of sex and of bodies more generally, as the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility? Which bodies come to matter – and why? (xii)

Butler answers:

The category of ‘sex’ is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a ‘regulatory ideal.’ In this sense, then, ‘sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls. Thus, ‘sex’ is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, ‘sex’ is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that
bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that regulatory law. (1-2)

Grosz likewise understands the body as something ‘incomplete’: ‘By “body”, she writes, ‘I understand a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves and skeletal structure, which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and form through the psychical and social inscription of the body’s surface. The body is, so to speak, organically, biologically “incomplete”’ (104). As ‘incomplete’ this body requires ‘social triggering, ordering, and long-term “administration”’ (104). As Butler makes clear, the forces that ‘trigger’, ‘order’, and ‘administer’ the body are forces invested in the maintenance of ‘normative’ identities and this begins with the ‘materialization’ – and ‘forcible reiteration’ – of a sexed body and therefore an intelligible sex/gender identity. But she also argues that the very nature of this process, of the ‘incompleteness’ of the ‘materialization’ of the body, creates fissures within which the performance of sex/gender might draw attention to itself (that is, to its ‘performativity’ (x) and those processes of ‘materialization’) and thus ‘trouble’ the system by which it is bound.

This thesis will draw on both Grosz’s and Butler’s theories about the construction and ‘materialization’ of sex/gender identities.64 It will use this as a framework through which to examine Lessing’s attempts to reconcile the ‘lived’ ‘gender neutral’ but ‘always already sexed’ bodies of Laing’s anti-psychiatric theories with the ‘inscriptive’ bodies of her madwomen. Janet M. Stoppard, in her essay ‘Women’s bodies, women’s lives and depression: towards a reconciliation of material and discursive accounts’, writes that ‘a perspective that can encompass both material and discursive aspects of lived experience, that can keep both aspects in view, at this juncture appears to have the most to offer in the search for more emancipatory understandings and explanations of the “problem” of depression in women’.65 This thesis pursues a material-discursive approach to the ‘problem’ of anti-psychiatric conceptions of schizophrenia for women by examining the troublesome ‘matter’ of the female body in Lessing’s novels.
In this thesis I analyse Lessing’s three most anti-psychiatric ‘madness novels’: *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *The Four-Gated City* (1969) and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971). I read these texts alongside Laing’s three core texts: *The Divided Self* (1960), *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (1964) and *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (1967). Part One and Part Two of the thesis focus upon the two major works: *The Golden Notebook* and *The Divided Self*. Parts three and four examine *The Four-Gated City* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* in terms of *The Politics of Experience*. I consider Laing’s *Sanity, Madness and the Family* in connection with *The Four-Gated City* in Part Three, Section One.

Part One, ‘The Divided Self: A Feminist Study in Women and Madness’, begins with the challenge the text poses to Anna and Molly’s claim that they are ‘free women’ and the way in which constructions of womanhood are implicated in the numerous references to madness and psychoanalysis that permeate their discussion at the opening of the novel. The second section focuses upon the ways in which *The Golden Notebook* disentangles itself from conventional (gendered) discourses of madness (that is, the medical and the psychoanalytical models of madness) and examines the gendering of the mind/body division on which those models are predicated. As these discourses of madness prove themselves inadequate, the text moves towards a far more anti-psychiatric model of madness and begins to register the potential as well as the limitations of Laing’s understanding of the schizophrenic experience.

In Part Two, ‘The Unembodied Self: The Female Body in Madness’, I examine the ways in which Anna’s gendered body troubles the schizophrenic experience as set out by Laing in *The Divided Self*. Section One reads Anna’s inability to sustain a state of schizoid disembodiment as directly related to constructions of female identity as caught up with the sexed body. The second section argues that Anna’s breakdown reveals how constructions of female embodiment are central to women’s experiences of madness and that in order to
confront her madness, as anti-psychiatry encourages, she must also confront her 'being-in-the-body'.

Part Three, ‘Sanity, Madness and the Mother: Re-imagining Discourses of Madness’, moves onto Lessing’s second ‘madness novel’, *The Four-Gated City*, and examines the ways in which Martha attempts to extricate herself from the sex/gender system in order to realise the potential of Laing’s theories in *The Politics of Experience*. Lessing, like Laing in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, represents the nuclear family as a damaging and psychically violent structure and explores the ‘nature’ of the ‘schizophrenogenic mother’ through Martha and her mother’s fraught relationship. But Lessing moves far beyond Laing in this text and uses his theories to imagine madness as not only ‘healing’ but as the expression (and suppression) of extra-sensory perception. When the narrative shifts into a post-apocalyptic landscape, Martha and Lynda become the evolutionary forerunners of a new human race. I argue that it is Laing’s theories that enable Lessing to go beyond the limitations of her realist narrative and imagine a new future for humanity; however, Lessing only achieves this by removing Martha and the superhuman children from those socio-political systems, including the sex/gender system, which continue to bind Anna at the end of *The Golden Notebook*.

Part Four, ‘The Politics of Experience: The Sexual Politics of Madness’, addresses Lessing’s decision to adopt a male protagonist for her most anti-psychiatric novel, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. Laing’s articulation of the ‘inner journey’ as a male, adventure-narrative suggests that the (implicitly) female schizophrenic bodies of his previous works have been replaced with an (implicitly) male transcendental self. *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* registers this shift and examines its implications for the female schizophrenic by way of the male protagonist and his claim to ‘masculine transcendence’. In doing so, I argue that *Briefing*, while appearing to be the most straightforwardly Laingian of Lessing’s novels, constitutes a feminist critique of the sex/gender assumptions underlying Laing’s theories and is, in the end, the novel that registers the least amount of hope for anti-psychiatry’s ability to ‘free’ the madwoman.
2 Contemporary Women’s Writing: From The Golden Notebook to The Color Purple (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 16. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
3 I use the term sex/gender in accordance with Judith Butler’s argument that ‘sex’ is ‘always already gender’ and that each term only re-inscribes the supposed ‘naturalness’ of the other. See Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 10-11. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
4 I use the terms ‘discourse’ and ‘discursive’ throughout in their Foucauldian sense. As Jane Ussher helpfully explains in Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness? (New York and London: Harvester and Wheatsheaf, 1991), this means as a ‘regulated system of statements, which has a particular history, […] a set of rules which distinguishes it from other discourses, establishing both links and difference. The discourse is what organizes our knowledge about a subject – in this case about madness – and about the relation of both the individual and society to that subject. Thus, the discursive practices which create the concept of madness mark it as fearful, as individual, as invariably feminine, as sickness; and they function as a form of social regulation’ (12). Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
7 Sigal’s novel Zone of the Interior [1976] (Hebden Bridge: Pomona, 2005) is the only text that focuses primarily upon the male patient but it is still interesting in its representation of the mad female characters: for instance, the greatest tragedies in the novel are all experienced by the mad women and the experimental anti-psychiatric community/ward which Sigal examines is a male only ward – the female ward in the hospital is run according to the conventional practices of psychiatry. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
10 Laing, p. 27.
11 Laing, p. 9.
12 Laing, p. 12.
14 It is important to note here that Laing is referring to a specific form of madness: schizophrenia. Neither he nor Lessing are arguing that all forms of madness are non-illnesses and, indeed, Laing is careful not to fully discount genetic or biological factors in the onset of madness, including schizophrenia. Likewise, when I use the term ‘madness’ in this thesis I am referring not to all mental illnesses but specifically to those schizoid states which Laing and Lessing suggest are causally linked to damaging familial/social structures.

18 Doris Lessing: A Biography (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2000), p. 198. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses. A particularly prominent television interview was with fellow psychiatrist Anthony Clare: *R. D. Laing with Anthony Clare*, Writers Talk Series (The Roland Collection of Films and Videos on Art, ICA, 1985).


20 *Anna* [1976] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 36. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


22 The various papers collected in this volume are all revised lectures and articles that appeared between 1962 and 1965.

23 Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 17.


25 Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 139-140.

26 Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 17 and p. 137.


30 Showalter, p. 232.


40 Lessing refers to Bert Kaplan as ‘Haimi Kaplan’ in *Walking in the Shade*, p. 313.


46 Among others, Gayle Green, in *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), claims that Lessing ‘was a friend of R. D. Laing, radical psychologist, and Clancy Sigal, American blacklisted writer (Saul Green in *The
Golden Notebook’ (8). While Lessing has discussed her relationship with Sigal (most notably in her autobiography Walking in the Shade, pp. 151-162, p. 261), she has not admitted to a personal relationship with Laing. In Doris Lessing: A Biography Carole Klein traces the relationship between Lessing and Sigal but cannot link Lessing directly to Laing. She does relate a story told by Dr. Bob Mullan in which he claims that Laing administered LSD shots to Lessing. Klein admits that ‘Lessing has never publicly acknowledged such treatments’ (197).

I do not intend to analyse Lessing’s use of Jungian psychoanalysis in this thesis. For a Jungian reading of her texts see Roberta Rubenstein’s The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1979). Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

Rubenstein, p. 196.


Laing, Wisdom, Madness and Folly, p. 8.


See Part Four for a discussion on Lessing’s denial that Briefing for a Descent into Hell was influenced by The Politics of Experience.


Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’ (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. xii. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

I will also draw on Foucault in terms of his significance to Grosz’s and Butler’s works. My use of Foucault throughout the thesis is in terms relevant to discursive structures of power only. I am in no way trying to equate Laing’s and Foucault’s ‘anti-psychiatris’’. Foucault’s Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) was published in 1961 (one year after Laing’s The Divided Self) and it is introduced by Laing’s fellow anti-psychiatrist David Cooper. Foucault considers
the British anti-psychiatry movement at the very end of his 1973-1974 lectures on psychiatric power, which have recently been collected in *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973-1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), and he reads the movement as essentially attempting to enact a ‘demedicalization of madness’ (346).

Foucault sees potential in anti-psychiatry’s opposition to institutionalisation and the anti-psychiatrist’s relinquishment of power in setting up an equal doctor-patient relationship (343-347). However, whilst Laing and Foucault were both critiquing conventional discourses of psychiatry in the same moment they were writing from within very different theoretical frameworks and with very different conceptions of the construction of selfhood.

This theme of ‘breakdown’, that sometimes when people ‘crack up’ it is a way of self-healing, of the inner self’s dismissing of false dichotomies and divisions, has of course been written about by other people, as well as by me, since then. But this is where, apart from the odd short story, I first wrote about it. Here it is rougher, more close to experience, before experience has shaped itself into thought and pattern – more valuable perhaps because it is rawer material.

But nobody so much as noticed this central theme, because the book was instantly belittled, by friendly reviewers as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war.

I have been in a false position ever since, for the last thing I have wanted to do was to refuse to support women.

Doris Lessing, ‘Preface to The Golden Notebook’
In her 1972 preface to *The Golden Notebook* Lessing laments the lack of attention afforded to what she considers the ‘central theme’ of the novel: ‘This theme of “breakdown”, that sometimes when people “crack up” it is a way of self-healing, of the inner self’s dismissing false dichotomies and divisions […] nobody so much as noticed this central theme.’ Instead, Lessing explains, the novel was interpreted as a tract on the ‘sex war’ (8). Women’s rights are of importance to Lessing but they are not of the *utmost* importance: ‘it is already clear that the whole world is being shaken into a new pattern by the cataclysms we are living through: probably by the time we are through, if we do get through at all, the aims of Women’s Liberation will look very small and quaint’ (8). For Lessing the sex war is a ‘minor thing’ and just one aspect of a much larger ‘war’ which she attempts to encompass in her fiction. As such, despite *The Golden Notebook*’s reputation as one of the first second-wave feminist novels, Lessing’s treatment of gender is never straightforward and cannot be easily unravelled or divided from the other ‘humanist’ concerns of her book. Indeed, Lessing’s understanding of humanism, as articulated through *The Golden Notebook*’s heroine, Anna Wulf, is based on interrelatedness, unity and coherence: ‘humanism stands for the whole person, the whole individual, striving to become as conscious and responsible as possible about everything in the universe’. This striving for ‘wholeness’ and the connection between the individual and the world is, however, thwarted by a present-day condition that appears to rely upon the fragmentation of the self. To be ‘conscious’ and ‘responsible’, then, is to set about healing the divisions and fractures that have appeared in the modern world, in terms of war, politics, race, and gender, and, consequently, in humankind’s experience of ‘the self’. Lessing explains that ‘the essence of the book, the organization of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize’ (10). The novel does this not by way of exemplifying coherence and unity but through representing and demonstrating how the experience of division and fragmentation leads to breakdown. Already, in Lessing’s descriptions of humanism, of the ‘essence’ of the novel, and of ‘cracking up’, there emerge links between her understanding of the modern
human condition and the ideas put forward by R. D. Laing two years earlier in his first work, *The Divided Self* (1960).

Lessing and Laing are both expressing a deep dissatisfaction with current psychiatric methods in their texts and moving toward a new way of comprehending the experience of madness and its potential. For Lessing and Laing modern selves are necessarily divided selves, which become mad selves; however, this madness can, if experienced outside of the psychiatric machine, heal those same divisions that created and necessitated the madness. In *The Golden Notebook* Lessing is ultimately exploring the potential of madness to re-unite those divided selves in order to function within a fractured and unstable world. So, although Lessing’s heroine does not consult an ‘anti-psychiatrist’ in the text and Lessing refrains from discussing Laing’s work explicitly, there are strong resonances between Laing’s understanding of madness and what Lessing considers her first serious attempt to deal with the subject of mental illness. Lessing’s interest in Laing’s work continues into the 1970s and, at the time of writing the preface to *The Golden Notebook* in the summer of 1971, Lessing had just published her most ‘Laingian’ work *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. She had also only recently finished the final volume in her *Children of Violence* series, *The Four-Gated City* (1969), which deals extensively with the possibilities within the experience of madness as well as the state of Britain’s mental health system. Both of these texts draw heavily on Laing’s work and his particular re-imagining of the experiences and possibilities of schizophrenia. It is perhaps not surprising then that it is the ‘theme’ of madness that emerges as the most pertinent for Lessing when looking back at *The Golden Notebook* and its reception from ten years on.

Lessing’s continued interest in the subject of mental illness in 1971 provides a lens through which to view not only *The Golden Notebook* but all of her ‘madness novels’. Yet what is perhaps most interesting about this later preface is the very act of Lessing’s singling out of the subject of mental illness as ‘central’ while simultaneously expressing her disappointment over the ways in which readers and scholars have reduced the novel to various single themes. Lessing is arguing that the novel should be read as a collection of interrelated subjects but, in doing so, she grants one theme priority over the others. If mental illness is the
novel’s ‘central theme’ then the theme of women’s rights is, consequently, secondary. The reader’s tendency to value the theme of feminism over the subject of mental illness in the novel has, it seems, also served to eclipse the links between the two, so much so that Lessing, rather than demonstrate how the two themes are interconnected, simply reverses the argument and privileges the theme of mental illness over that of feminism. In Lessing’s definition of ‘cracking up’ there is a gesture toward this interrelatedness – after all, the ‘false dichotomies and divisions’ she believes are to blame for mental ill health are fundamentally linked to women’s experience in her novels – but Lessing does not make this connection the basis of her argument. In a novel all about the dangers of dividing up and separating out, it seems very strange that Lessing does not attempt to connect madness and gender and show them to be, as I intend to argue the novel does, intimately bound up with one another. This curious move not only risks undermining Lessing’s argument in the preface but also the ways in which the novel itself depicts a very particular experience of madness – a particularly gendered experience of madness.

_The Golden Notebook_ continually draws links between – and merges – experiences of womanhood and experiences of madness. Like Marguerite Duras who sees neurosis in millions of women ‘alone in […] their completely functional marriages’, Anna Wulf describes the housewives she meets while canvassing for the British Communist Party as ‘lonely women going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them’ (161). This is just one very explicit example of the way in which the novel represents women’s madness as directly connected to women’s socially prescribed roles – in this case, the traditional roles of wife and mother. Though Lessing is reluctant to relate mental illness to gender in the preface and, as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, appears to be in fact attracted to the gender neutrality of Laing’s bodies, the text nevertheless continually asserts the significance of the gendered body to experiences and discourses of madness.

Laing’s shift away from the traditional conception of madness as disease or neurosis understandably appealed to Lessing and provided her with a rich and complex area to explore in her writing. Laing’s ‘gender neutral’ bodies may also
have appealed to Lessing as seemingly providing her with a way to talk about madness without slipping back into those historical conceptions of madness as ‘feminine’ and causally connected to the female reproductive body. However, Lessing is not simply and uncritically regurgitating Laingian theory here; likewise, her texts resist any attempt to ‘neutralise’ the mad bodies it attempts to represent. It is in the coupling of anti-psychiatric thinking with a feminist agenda (however disavowed) that means Lessing’s novels offer a particularly gendered representation of the experience of madness that marks her work as not merely a recapitulation of Laing’s, but rather as a critical rethinking of both the potential and the implications of his theories for women.

**Free Women and Psychoanalysis**

Literature is littered with the bodies of mad women; these are women who prowl the proverbial attic, wade into churning waters of insanity, and knock against the glass ceiling of the descending bell jar. Lessing’s heroine, Anna Wulf, joins this literary canon of madwomen, but not as an hysteric, not as a woman scorned (although she is), and not as an institutionalised mental patient, not even as a syphilitic creole whore; rather, Anna joins this long line of madwomen as a ‘free woman’. This term, as well as providing the title for the ‘skeleton, or frame’ of the novel, is used throughout the text to describe the particular lifestyle of Anna and her friend Molly (as well as their fictional doubles, Ella and Julia, in Anna’s novel). To be a ‘free woman’ is to be unmarried (though not necessarily childless) and supporting oneself financially, if not always emotionally. This way of life that Anna/Ella and Molly/Julia are attempting to construct prefigures the kind of social changes women would gain through the work of various women’s rights movements over the following years. Lessing explains that *The Golden Notebook* was composed from a position that ‘skipped a stage of opinion. [...] This book was written as if the attitudes that have been created by the Women’s Liberation movements already existed’. But the novel is not simply prophetic: *The Golden Notebook* has helped to create and shape those ‘attitudes’ that have since become
synonymous with women’s movements and second wave feminist literature. Gayle Greene goes so far as to argue that

Lessing’s novels played a crucial role in the consolidation of the movement that took place in the course of the decade – that her works, along with Betty Friedan’s, Simone de Beauvoir’s, Germaine Greer’s, Shulamith Firestone’s, Juliet Mitchell’s, and the numerous other ‘mad housewife’ novels published during the sixties helped make the second wave of feminism.¹²

Lessing took the turn of the century ‘New Woman’ and re-fashioned her into the ‘free women’ that populate this novel, her subsequent writing, and second wave feminist thinking.¹³

Lessing’s interest in the connections between freedom, gender, the literary and madness is made clear by the way in which she ‘names’ her heroine. Anna’s Christian name links her to Freud and Breuer’s most famous patient ‘Anna O’ and consequently to an established idea of the hysterical female patient. Elaine Showalter writes that Breuer may have chosen the pseudonym ‘Anna O’ because ‘the palindromic form of “Anna” suggests the divided feminine psyche, while the “O” suggests the letter of the mad Ophelia, the symbolic circle or cipher of feminine sexual mystery’.¹⁴ As a palindrome, the name ‘Anjna’ might also serve to embody Laing’s notion of the divided self and therefore suggest not simply links to Freudian conceptions of womanhood but, simultaneously, Laingian conceptions of modern selfhood too. While Anna’s first name links her to theories of madness, old and new, her surnames link her to both her position as a woman and as a writer. It is only later in the novel, in an entry in ‘The Blue Notebook’, that Anna Wulf’s maiden name is revealed: ‘¹⁷th October, 1954: Anna Freeman, born ¹⁰th November, 1922, a daughter of Colonel Frank Freeman and May Fortescue […]; married Max Wulf 1945’ (411). This name does not necessarily suggest that Anna was ever originally ‘free’ – rather that she was the daughter of Colonel ‘Free Man’ – but it does couple Anna’s sense of identity with notions of freedom as well as the gender bias on which that freedom is based. When Anna marries Max Wulf she relinquishes the (limited) freedom she might have had as a single woman and conforms to her ‘proper’ gender role: she becomes a wife and a mother. Now divorced, Anna does not return to her maiden name – instead of
choosing to belong to the ‘free man’ (that is, any man) again, Anna chooses to be a ‘free woman’. In divorcing her husband Anna rejects the role of wife and by retaining her married name she refuses to return to the role of daughter and submit to the law of the father. By keeping her married name, ‘Wulf’ (read Woolf), Anna is tying her sense of self not to a father or to a husband but to a vocation: a female literary tradition. However, the name, while gesturing back to this tradition and her own successes as a published writer, also gestures forward to her later mental health problems and the loneliness she will experience as a ‘free woman’.

The first use of the phrase, as early as the second page of the novel, puts the very possibility of being a ‘free woman’ into question: “‘Free women,’” said Anna, wryly […] “They still define us in terms of relationships with men, even the best of them.” “Well, we do, don’t we?” said Molly, rather tart. “Well, it’s awfully hard not to,” she amended, hastily’ (26). Freedom, it turns out, requires more than a simple rejection of traditional wifely and motherly roles by way of living as a single parent, a party activist, an actress, or a (career) writer. The female characters find it difficult to assimilate their ‘free women’ attitudes with an emotional attitude toward men and their own identities that is still deeply entrenched in gendered, romantic and sexual myths. Molly’s response to Anna’s interrogation of the term ‘free women’ acknowledges this difficulty. Anna goes on to explore this further through the characters of Ella and Julia in her novel. When Julia tells Ella about the man who called her a ‘castrating woman’ (403) but later acted as if nothing had happened, Ella says: “‘My dear Julia, we’ve chosen to be free women, and this is the price we pay, that’s all.’ ‘Free,’” says Julia. “Free! What’s the use of being free if they aren’t? I swear to God, that every one of them, even the best of them, have the old idea of good women and bad women’” (404).

Ella and Julia find that to be a ‘free woman’ is to be considered a ‘bad woman’: that is, a sexually available woman and a woman who refuses to accept her ‘rightful’ place. The new ‘free woman’ role is simply reabsorbed into the existing framework that defines women through two opposing poles of sexual availability: virgin/whore. Woman has been defined either as the ‘weaker vessel’/‘angel in the house’ or the ‘fallen woman’.15 Betty Friedan, in The Feminine Mystique (1963), argues that this binary might be superseded by a second archetypal opposition: the
feminine woman versus the career woman. Friedan writes that ‘in an earlier time, the image of the woman was also split in two – the good, pure woman on the pedestal, and the whore of the desires of the flesh. The split in the new image opens up a different fissure – the feminine woman, whose goodness includes the desires of the flesh, and the career woman, whose evil includes every desire of the separate self’. Lessing’s women find themselves oscillating between these poles. While they attempt to forge an alternative identity, that of the ‘free woman’ who has both a career and a sexual self, they find themselves continually caught between those oppressive discourses of femininity and misogyny that seek to define them within existing binary frameworks and socially prescribed roles. The inevitable consequence, it seems, of either adhering to the traditional roles (for example, the ‘lonely women’ that Anna meets while canvassing) or struggling against these roles (represented by Anna and her fictional alter ego, Ella) is the same: breakdown. Anna, as a ‘free woman’, is raising a child, active in the British Communist Party, taking lovers, and maintaining close relationships with other women – but she is also a woman in therapy who begins the novel with the observation that ‘the point is, that as far as I can see, everything’s cracking up’ (25).

In the first pages of *The Golden Notebook* Lessing has her characters interrogate the legitimacy of the term ‘free women’ while punctuating their discussion with references to ‘cracking up’ and psychoanalysis. The novel begins with the paradoxical statement: ‘The two women were alone in the London flat’ (25). Two women can not be ‘together’ in the London flat because, as Molly points out, women are not defined by one another but only by men – even women together are alone. Virginia Woolf famously discusses this in ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (1929) in which she confronts a literary history that fails to represent positive relationships between women: Chloe cannot like Olivia because Chloe and Olivia have, historically, only been represented in terms of their relationships to men. Luce Irigaray, in ‘This Sex Which is Not One’ (1977), writes that ‘woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men’. Irigaray calls
for women to undertake tactical strikes, to keep themselves apart from men long enough to learn to defend their desire, especially through speech, to discover the love of other women while sheltered from men’s imperious choices that put them in the position of rival commodities, to forge themselves a social status that compels recognition, to earn their living in order to escape from the condition of prostitute … these are certainly indispensable stages in the escape from their proletarization on the exchange market. (355-356)

Irigaray’s preliminary solution to this ‘exchange market’ power dynamic is remarkably similar to that adopted by (the socialist) Anna and Molly who choose a lifestyle in which they attempt, however unsuccessfully, to replace long-term relationships with men with long-term friendships with women. But Anna and Molly find that despite living and raising children outside of the confines of marriage, earning their own living (Anna is a writer and Molly an actress), engaging in politics and issues of contemporary living, and privileging relationships between women over those with men, they still cannot escape the confines of a gendered (and heterosexual) identity. Indeed, when Ella considers discussing with Julia a sexual encounter with a married man she ‘decides not to indulge in these conversations with Julia, thinking that two women, friends on a basis of criticism of men are Lesbian, psychologically if not physically’ (401). Anna represents her heroine as acutely aware of – and influenced by – the ‘laws’ that govern relationships with other women. Ella’s distaste at the prospect of founding a ‘Lesbian’ relationship with Julia, even if that lesbianism is ‘psychological’ rather than emotional or physical, emphasises the difficulty of escaping both those discourses that situate women as mere commodities between men and those normative discourses of gender and sexuality that institute ‘compulsory heterosexuality’.19

In Gender Trouble Judith Butler asks ‘to what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person?’ (23). She goes on to argue that

the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as ‘identity’ is assured
through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. ‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. (23)

Lessing’s women exist within Butler’s heterosexual matrix, that ‘heterosexualization of desire’ (23) produced through regulatory practices, so even as they try to create a space outside of those laws and discourses that prescribe and fix gender norms they find themselves reconsolidating those laws. Caught within this web of codes of normality and legitimate subjectivities, Lessing’s ‘free women’ risk turning into ‘mad creatures’ that, according to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, female authors use in order to ‘come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be’.20 But just as Lessing is not to be found somewhere between Martha Hesse and Lynda Coldridge, so she is not to be found between Anna and Molly, or Anna (the author) between her characters Ella and Julia. These pairings do not embody a good/sane and bad/mad binary – all the characters are always already fragmented. Anna acknowledges her own sense of division and rather than make opposing ‘wholes’ out of that division (a mad Ella and a sane Julia, for instance) she replicates her sense of division in Ella. This doubling of psychic division means that the characters messily proliferate (Anna into Ella but also Anna into Molly and Molly into Julia and Julia into Ella) rather than split neatly into two opposing ‘versions’ of womanhood. Here is a mad-heroine who, from the centre of the text, is attempting to negotiate between and reconcile these multiple and conflicting definitions of self. It is hardly surprising then that as Lessing establishes this uneasy relationship between women’s liberation and those normative discourses of gendered heterosexual identity and desire, as constructed through pervasive systems of power, she situates it within a culture and a discourse of psychoanalysis.

During Anna and Molly’s discussion about the validity of life as ‘free women’, Molly impersonates their former psychoanalyst: ‘for a moment Molly
had even looked like Mother Sugar, otherwise Mrs Marks, to whom both had
gone for psycho-analysis. [...] [T]he pet name, “Mother Sugar” [...] indicated a
whole way of looking at life – traditional, rooted, conservative’ (26). Mrs Marks’s
‘traditional’ psychoanalysis does not seem appropriate for these ‘free women’
when considering the struggles with which they are faced. When Molly attempts
to defend Mrs Marks’s methods Anna reminds her that ‘Mother Sugar used to say,
“You’re Electra”, or “You’re Antigone”, and that was the end, as far as she was
concerned’ (27). Mrs Marks/Mother Sugar’s analysis, rooted in Freudian and
Jungian psychoanalytic theory, functions as a limited discourse that simply
returns, repeats and reduces individual experience into one example from a
collection of ‘original’ stories, such as fairy tales, myths, and parables. All women
can be reduced to one of a handful of mythic creatures – Electra, Antigone,
Cassandra – whose tragic stories they unconsciously repeat. Simply to ‘name’ is
not to ‘cure’. Mrs Marks’s ‘diagnosis’ is not ‘the end’ and, while both Anna and
Molly credit her with helping them to ‘cope’ (27), her analysis does not quite
deliver. In fact, Anna, as an intelligent and literary woman, can for the most part
‘name’ herself and recognise the correlations between her own dreams and those
Jungian archetypes and Freudian myths Mrs Marks will seize upon. Later in the
novel Anna will voice her dissatisfaction to Mrs Marks:

It seems to me that being psycho-analysed is essentially a process where
one is forced back into infantilism [...] – one is forced back into myth,
and folklore and everything that belongs to the savage or undeveloped
stages of society. For if I say to you: I recognise in that dream such and
such a myth; or in that emotion about my father, that folk-tale; or the
atmosphere of that memory is the same as an English ballad – then you
smile, you are satisfied. [...] But when I try to use an experience, a
memory, a dream, in modern terms, try to speak of it critically or drily or
with complexity, you almost seem bored or impatient. (412-413)

This is a Freudian/Jungian analysis that is dissociated from the modern world; it
does not situate the patient’s conflicts in terms of, or understand those conflicts as
a response to, the world in which the patient must function. Demaris S. Wehr, in
Jung and Feminism: Liberating Archetypes (1988), writes that ‘analytical
psychology, in which the archetypes are the foundation of the psyche and of life,
looks for, and finds, universals – and, according to its critics, excludes the
particular, as well as the social context’. From a Freudian and feminist perspective, Rachel Bowlby, in *Freudian Mythologies: Greek Tragedy and Modern Identities* (2007), also critiques psychoanalysis’s tendency to overlook the importance of social contexts and retain an antiquated idea of women’s social circumstances and roles:

Since Freud’s lifetime, paths of development that were previously closed have been opened up to women in social life, in principle and in practice. […] Given the obsolescence of the social correlates of the Freudian complex […] it seems anachronistic and needlessly hopeless now to cling to a myth in which women’s most fundamental conflicts are determined by the realization that they are women, not men.

The women in *The Golden Notebook*, situated as they are on the cusp of the second wave of feminist politics, are conflicted, but that conflict is not born out of castration complexes, Electra complexes or a fundamental dissatisfaction with being a woman rather than a man; rather their dissatisfaction is born out of the limited number of legitimate identities available to women, a problem that Freudian/Jungian psychoanalysis only serves to reinforce. Joannou writes that ‘Mother Sugar’s determination to situate a personal self within the Jungian framework of mythological archetypes […] is at odds with what Anna considers to be the social and historical context in which her illness must be understood’ (30-31). In the end, the stories psychoanalysis offers to Lessing’s women do not seem to ‘fit’ or to sufficiently explain their modern dis-ease. Butler writes that ‘gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts […] because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained’ (6). Just as Lessing’s ‘humanist’ concerns cannot easily be unravelled from her ‘feminist’ concerns in *The Golden Notebook*, so gender is constituted alongside and intertwined with those other cultural and historical discourses that found and regulate legitimate subjectivities, including those which police the boundary between madness and sanity.

The novel’s rejection of psychoanalysis creates an opening through which to begin exploring the possibilities of a new kind of understanding of madness,
woman’s position in the modern world, and the ways in which these intersect. Lessing finds inspiration for the former in Laing’s understanding of mental illness and the modern human condition. Laing writes in the opening to The Divided Self that ‘dissatisfaction with psychiatric and psycho-analytic words is fairly widespread […] It is widely felt that these words of psychiatry and psycho-analysis somehow fail to express what one “really means”’. 23 Juliet Mitchell, in Psychoanalysis and Feminism (1974), writes that ‘Laing’s wish for a new science seems to have sprung from his dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis and the inspiration he received from certain philosophies’. 24 Mitchell draws the reader’s attention to Laing’s nod to Freud in which he declares that ‘we must see if we now can survive without using a theory that is in some measure an instrument of defence’. 25 It is this non-defensive approach to madness – this confrontation of one’s madness – that Laing begins to theorise in The Divided Self and which Lessing examines and attempts to adapt for her heroine in The Golden Notebook. Laing begins, then, by trying to uncover the ‘reality which the words [of psychoanalysis] disclose or conceal’ (19). Traditional discourses of psychoanalysis have closed off the ‘reality’ of the experience of mental illness and in doing so have replaced that reality with the myths of an a-historical and gendered madness; hence, Anna is ‘Electra’ or Anna is ‘Antigone’. Naming is not enough; it conceals the reality of the social contexts that create, and inner conflicts that emerge from, the modern disjuncture between the ‘free woman’ Anna desires to be and those discourses that constitute what woman ought to be.

The opening of the novel presents the reader with the problem of being a ‘free woman’ while being simultaneously caught up in gendered discourses that invalidate that ‘kind of life’. 26 As the text progresses and Anna eventually does ‘crack up’ she does not turn back to psychoanalysis; instead Lessing has Anna experience madness from outside of those (Freudian and Jungian) psychoanalytical discourses (which are also gendered discourses) and from outside of conventional psychiatric treatments. The text is, of course, informed by these discourses but not uncritically so; they are interrogated throughout the novel and are shown, as in Laing, to perpetuate the kinds of madness they are purported to ‘cure’. Anti-psychiatric thinking stands in contrast to these discourses that seek
to ‘normalise’ and ‘cure’ as they ‘conceal’ and so, in *The Divided Self*, Laing’s approach is not to ‘diagnose’ the ‘signs and symptoms’ (28) of a ‘disease’ but rather to understand the patient’s sense of ‘being-in-the-world’ (19). Just as *The Divided Self* concentrates upon the *experience* of madness rather than the diagnosing or treatment of schizophrenia, so too does *The Golden Notebook*. Anna’s experience of madness and her methods of managing her madness (the notebooks as a strategy of survival, her experiences of division and disembodiment, and later her descent into madness as a way to confront and heal the divides she has created) are all ‘anti-psychiatric’. However, it is the ways in which Lessing attempts to marry these ideas to the source of Anna/Ella’s conflict – that is, her struggle for a gendered identity while caught between two opposing concepts of womanhood – which becomes the real conflict within *The Golden Notebook* and forms the basis of Anna Wulf’s ‘divided self’.

**The Divided Woman**

Though Lessing’s heroine does not ‘crack up’ until the end of *The Golden Notebook*, the text is nevertheless permeated by the theme of breakdown. There are breakdowns of various magnitudes, attempted suicides, hysterical women, alcoholism, sessions with psychoanalysts, and letters from depressed women from all over the country. Those women, ‘going mad all by themselves’,27 populate the novel alongside psychoanalysts, (anti-)psychiatrists, even lobotomists. Ella, Anna’s fictional character and her double in the novel, works in a doctor’s office writing to mentally distressed women (like those Anna meets) whom her boss, Dr. West, has no time or inclination to help. Lessing is writing about Anna’s descent into madness; Anna is writing about Ella’s descent into madness; Ella is writing to other distressed women as well as writing a novel about a suicidal man. The themes of madness and gender are, therefore, also caught up with the theme of writing and the difficulty of finding suitable discourses in which to represent the experiences of a gendered madness. The text of *The Golden Notebook* is suffused by the subject of mental illness but it does not simply ‘contain’ it – the
connections drawn between madness and the writing of that madness can be seen in the very way in which the novel is structured.

The complex structure of *The Golden Notebook* replicates and exemplifies a particularly Laingian imagining of the experience of madness. The structure mirrors the text’s preoccupation with divisions, compartmentalising, chaos, and breakdown: it is a text that is made up of parts that are then split into further parts. There is a ‘conventional short novel’, narrated in the third person and entitled ‘Free Women’, which is periodically interrupted by four separate sections of personal narrative. Each of these sections is from a coloured notebook representing a different aspect of Anna’s life and/or work. ‘The Black Notebook’, in which Anna writes about her novel *Frontiers of War* and her management of the text after its publication and subsequent success, is further divided into two columns: ‘source’ and ‘money’. Some sections of ‘The Red Notebook’ (in which Anna recounts her political alliances and experiences) are made up of newspaper clippings, and, similarly, parts of ‘The Yellow Notebook’ (in which Anna’s novel about her alter ego ‘Ella’ is written) contain simply a series of numbered synopses of potential short stories and/or novels. ‘The Blue Notebook’, Anna’s diary, is perhaps the most structurally (and literarily) conventional of the notebooks but it is in this section of the text that the reader gains the greatest insight into Anna’s mental processes, her ‘inner life’, and her experience of the descent into madness. The penultimate section, which extends from ‘The Blue Notebook’ and continues the story of Anna and her lover’s breakdown, is entitled ‘The Golden Notebook’ and reveals Anna as the author of the ‘Free Women’ sections as well as the various notebooks thereby reconnecting all of the preceding sections and (supposedly) recreating a sense of unity from the divided text.

When Molly’s son Tommy asks Anna ‘Why the four notebooks? What would happen if you had one big book without all those divisions and brackets and special writing?’, Anna answers, ‘I’ve told you, chaos’ (247). Anna’s ‘divided self’ is manifested in the rigid structuring of her life into neat, compartmentalised sections. The notebooks act as a strategy for survival in what is a complex, but never illogical or random, struggle to maintain and protect her existence. Where there is chaos it is experienced from within the confines of the strategies and
rationales set in place to manage that chaos. The four notebooks function as barriers set up between conflicting aspects of herself and stave off the chaos that would ensue should she allow these ‘selves’ to merge. In the process of writing the notebooks Anna is able to divide up and compartmentalise her life so that any contradictory aspects of her self or her relation to the world are safely contained and separated from one another.

*The Golden Notebook* then is not simply about madness; the text, in effect, performs the madness with which it is concerned. This is not, however, a nonsensical madness. The text exemplifies a particular understanding of the experience of madness that does not view madness as incomprehensible. This is a madness that is represented in such a way as to appear intelligible – hence the ‘realism’ of Lessing’s ‘mad’ narrative. As Laing explains in *The Divided Self*, ‘the art of understanding those aspects of an individual’s being which we can observe, as expressive of his mode of being-in-the-world, requires us to relate his actions to his way of experiencing the situation he is in with us’ (32). The entwined impersonal and personal narratives of *The Golden Notebook* construct a dialogue through which the reader is guided by the heroine’s particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’. In this sense the text already performs an anti-psychiatric analysis of Anna’s madness. The narrative reflects Anna’s divided self in its structure and the writing – in its coherence and insight – and helps to make Anna’s madness comprehensible. Anna is ‘schizoid’ and the narrative structure works to both reflect and make sense of that experience; the text, then, is ‘anti-psychiatric’ in that it renders intelligible the schizoid’s particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’.

Laing writes that ‘the term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself’ (17). The schizoid condition is characterised by both the patient’s dissociation from the world but also a dividing up of the various manifestations of the self that must exist within that world. Like the ‘central theme’ of Anna’s novel, *Frontiers of War*, Anna and her notebooks reflect ‘the fragmented society, the fragmented consciousness. Human beings are so divided, are becoming more and more divided, and more subdivided in themselves, reflecting the world’ (75,
Lessing’s italics). It is these divisions – the divisions that appear within the self as that self fails to reconcile itself with a contradictory and chaotic world – that Anna’s notebooks reflect, particularly in the various manifestations of her self, her ‘characters’, that appear within them.

The most obvious example of Anna’s divided self in the novel can be found in the character of Ella whose story is told in ‘The Yellow Notebook’. Ella is Anna’s creation and her double; her story, with minor adjustments, retells Anna’s own. Although one always has to be careful when aligning an author with a character, even when the author is also a character, the nature of the notebooks – as books that narrate (and separate) various aspects of herself – encourage the reader to make connections between different characters and their stories (this is most explicit in the final entry from ‘The Yellow Notebook’ where a series of short stories link to asterisked sections of ‘The Blue Notebook’). So, characters from the ‘The Yellow Notebook’ readily link to characters from the rest of the novel: Anna is Ella; Molly, Anna’s friend, is Julia, Ella’s friend; likewise, Michael, Anna’s lover, is Paul, Ella’s lover. The doubles proliferate between the various narrative strands so that a chain of associations build up as the novel progresses: Anna-Ella, Anna-Molly, Ella-Julia, Molly-Julia, Michael-Paul, Anna-Saul, Anna-Milt, Saul-Milt, and so on. We might even extend this line of association, in the spirit of Lessing’s own character links, to the autobiographical, so that Anna/Ella is also Lessing, Mrs Marks is also Mrs Sussman, Saul Green is also Clancy Sigal. Like the notebooks that these pairings straddle, the multiple versions of characters are linked but the stories remain quite separate and, significantly, all of the various Anna-selves are fragmented. Lorna Sage writes that The Golden Notebook is a ‘hall-of-mirrors book that multiplies images of women’ and explains that in ‘looking for a new way of writing about wholeness, Lessing lets go of the old ways, and as a consequence leaves room for her readers to seize [sic] on fragmentary and splintered representations, and find their own meanings there. The parts, the partial, partisan voices overwhelm the whole’. Indeed, the multiple images of women remain separated and each doubled self only reflects back the same division of the ‘original’. This doubling is not a splitting but a mirroring back of the same fragmentation of self. In writing Ella,
Anna is not re-imagining herself as a ‘whole’, united person, nor is she splitting herself between two opposing versions of womanhood (as Gilbert and Gubar might argue); Ella simply reflects a similarly divided self back to Anna.

However, this is not to say that Ella does not function as a strategy to manage Anna’s ‘chaos’. Although Ella reflects back a similarly divided self it is a self that is, dispassionately and objectively, removed from Anna. In ‘The Yellow Notebook’, Anna interrupts Ella’s personal narrative: ‘I see Ella, walking slowly about a big empty room, thinking, waiting. I, Anna, see Ella. Who is of course, Anna. But that is the point, for she is not. The moment I, Anna, write: Ella rings up Julia to announce, etc., then Ella floats away from me and becomes someone else’ (404-405). In writing Ella, Anna reproduces herself, divisions and all, but she also separates that self from ‘Anna’. To write Ella is to duplicate her own divided self and to then dissociate that (Ella-)self from the (Anna-)self. Ella, who is Anna but is not Anna, is a character in a novel. As such, Anna can create and distance herself from a version of ‘Anna’ that does not exist. In this way Anna is able to continually disconnect and divide herself from the ‘realities’ of her life and place other versions of her ‘self’ – ‘someone else’ – into the fictional space of her novel.

The multiple versions of the novel’s characters reflect the ways in which Lessing believes that living in the modern world, with all its contradictions and partitions, demands that the self become divided. By splitting herself between the notebooks and by further duplicating and separating off those selves through Ella, Anna is able to manage the daily contradictions of her life. Anna’s writing, her ‘neurosis’, is not an illogical or random symptom of the schizoid condition, but a conscious and strategic response to the ways in which the modern world fosters a contradictory, conflicted and ambivalent sense of one’s self. Anna puts forward this suggestion to her psychoanalyst, Mrs Marks:

I’m going to make the obvious point that perhaps the word neurotic means the condition of being highly conscious and developed. The essence of neurosis is conflict. But the essence of living now, fully, not blocking off to what goes on, is conflict. In fact, I’ve reached the stage where I look at people and say – he or she, they are whole at all because
they’ve chosen to block off at this stage or that. People stay sane by blocking off, by limiting themselves. (413)

By ‘blocking off’, or dividing up, one’s self that self can better cope with a world which is characterised by the very conflict that breeds neurosis. Through division the self is protected and an illusion of sanity (both in terms of one’s self and the world in which that self must function) is maintained. Anna succinctly states the paradox of anti-psychiatric thinking: that what seems like sanity is actually madness and that what seems like madness is actually a sane response to what has become an insane world – a world which requires one to accept that insanity as ‘normal’ in order to survive and stay ‘sane’. In The Divided Self Laing only hints at the possibility of madness as a state of enlightenment, something he will develop in his subsequent writing; Lessing, however, is already moving toward this re-imagining of madness in The Golden Notebook in which she is extensively and explicitly articulating these kinds of ideas through the character of Anna and her experience of madness. In Laing’s revised preface to The Divided Self, written in 1964, he emphasizes ‘that our “normal” “adjusted” state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of our true potentialities, that many of us are only too successful in acquiring a false self to adapt to false realities’ (12). In this new way of thinking, madness is not nonsensical but rather a state of acute sensibility in which ‘false selves’ are discarded and an advanced awareness and understanding of the real conditions of the world and of one’s alleged sanity is gained. Lessing is situating Anna within a discourse of madness that rethinks the conventional ‘medical’ model and psychoanalytical myths of mental illness. She is offering Anna an alternative discourse – an ‘anti-psychiatric’ discourse.

Anti-Psychiatry and Gender

Anna’s radical ideas about the potential of neurosis are also expressed in ‘The Yellow Notebook’ through the character of Paul, Ella’s lover. Paul is a psychiatrist who expresses ‘anti-psychiatric’ sentiments. Like Laing, Paul does not believe that traditional methods of treatment help the mad nor that the cause of madness can be found in the organism. Instead Paul focuses upon the patient’s relationship to, and position within, the society within which she must strive to
exist and function. While Paul fights against the psychiatric establishment, Ella spends her days writing letters of sympathy and support to the same kinds of ‘lonely women going mad all by themselves’ (161) that Anna meets while canvassing for the Party. In the very first section of ‘The Yellow Notebook’, Anna has Paul express his frustration with current psychiatric methods to Ella: ‘How do I spend my time? Telling Dr Shackerly […] that he must open the doors of his hospital, that he must not keep poor sick people shut in a cell lined with buttoned white leather in the dark, and that straightjackets are stupid. That is how I spend my days. And treating illness that is caused by a society so stupid that…’ (196). Paul’s sentence trails off and he turns his attention back to Ella: ‘And you, Ella. […] you tell poor women who are slaves of everyone’s stupidity to go out and join a social club or take up a healthful hobby of some kind, to take their minds off the fact they are unloved. And if the healthful hobby doesn’t work, and why should it, they end up in my Outpatients…’ (196). Unlike Laing, Paul acknowledges a connection between the unhappy women writing to Ella and the patients he cares for. The text brings together Paul’s frustrations at current psychiatric practices and the frustrations of women all over the country and thereby draws links between the restrictive and unfulfilling lives of women and the onset of mental health problems.

Anna has Paul and Ella actively involved with the mentally distressed. Both feel their efforts are making little headway and that they are struggling against not only the establishment but also the masses who are less enlightened. Paul expresses his own sense of failure and frustration by way of the Sisyphus myth. Paul tells Ella that they are both ‘boulder-pushers’ and explains that ‘the boulder is the truth that the great men know by instinct, and the mountain is the stupidity of mankind. We push the boulder’ (196). Paul believes himself to be at the frontline of (anti-) psychiatric care and part of a revolution against the establishment. Meanwhile the ‘great men’ who have ‘known for thousands of years that to lock a sick person into solitary confinement makes him worse’ (196) look on as the boulder is slowly pushed up the mountain. While Paul initially describes Ella as a fellow ‘boulder-pusher’ it becomes clear that her gender complicates her usefulness. Indeed, he regards Ella’s ‘work’ as insignificant at best and, at worst,
harmful. While Paul strives to reform the establishment, working ‘like a madman’ (196), Ella can only sympathise with the women it fails to save. Paul clearly deems his work, despite his frustrated efforts, as more worthy and worthwhile than the letters Ella writes to her ‘poor women’. By writing letters of support, sympathising with these women, and suggesting hobbies and home décor solutions Ella achieves and changes very little: the boulder is not pushed very far. These ‘slaves of everyone’s stupidity’ will remain unheard, unrepresented and unsaved. Her women will end up as Paul’s patients. Ella’s futile attempts to help these wives seemingly pales in comparison to Paul’s heroic defiance of Dr Shackerly and the psychiatric establishment as a whole.

Paul’s condescension, however, is nothing compared to his reaction to Ella’s novel. Soon after this conversation, Anna has Ella complete her novel about the suicidal man and it is accepted for publication. To publish a novel about mental illness is to do significantly more than write letters of sympathy to individual women. Through the publication of her novel Ella will potentially speak to a much wider audience about the experience of madness. When Ella gives the book to Paul to read, he, with ‘elaborate sarcasm’, responds: ‘Well, we men might just as well resign from life’ (198). Paul’s first reaction to the text is to comment upon the gender politics it contains, not what it might be saying about mental illness (much like the critics of The Golden Notebook, according to Lessing). In finishing her novel and having it accepted for publication Ella has achieved something that threatens Paul’s sense of superiority and, indeed, his masculinity. In a now all too common criticism of feminist movements (one which Lessing will later voice herself) Paul goes so far as to declare that the ‘real revolution is, women against men’ (198). Paul’s first response to the novel, his offended and defensive attitude toward its supposed feminist agenda, is then followed by a turn in the conversation – he begins to discuss the female body and woman’s reproductive ‘function’. Paul informs Ella that, due to new reproductive technologies, women can conceive a child without a man: ‘You can apply ice to a woman’s ovaries, for instance. She can have a child. Men are no longer necessary to humanity’ (198). Paul’s bizarre (and deliberate?) misunderstanding of current advances in reproductive technologies, and the peculiar progression of his
argument generally, succeeds in taking Ella’s literary achievement and turning it into something to do with the female body, specifically its reproductive ‘function’. While seemingly arguing that men have become unnecessary by reducing himself to a now-redundant sperm machine, the absurdity of Paul’s argument actually works to elevate ‘man’s’ contribution to humanity to beyond that of mere procreation – men, it seems, are finally absolved from the process of procreation and the messes and passions of the embodied self and are free to fully claim that transcendent realm of logic, reason and the rational. As such he would no longer be an ‘absurd hero’ – instead he would be one of the ‘great men’. Ella meanwhile is, by implication, reduced to the reproductive body and relegated back to the ‘mountain [that] is the stupidity of mankind’ (198). In an effort to reassert his superiority and denigrate her literary achievement, Paul swiftly and callously reinstates the male/female-mind/body binary in which he lays claim to the superior position of the mind and reduces Ella to the confines of the female body.

In *The Golden Notebook* the male/female and mind/body binaries and the associations between them are always further complicated by the mad/sane binary, which is in turn further complicated by the inversion of this binary in anti-psychiatric thinking. Thus, when Paul attempts to reduce Ella to the body that breeds, Ella’s response is to laugh and declare: “You’re mad. I always said you were.” At which he says, soberly: “Well, maybe you’re right. You are very sane, Ella. You always were. You say I’m mad. I know it. I get madder and madder. Sometimes I wonder why they don’t lock me up instead of my patients. And you get saner and saner. It’s your strength. You’ll have ice applied to your ovaries yet”’ (198). Paul’s eagerness to accept being ‘mad’ connects him, again, to a Laingian re-imagining of madness in which the madman is a potential visionary while the ‘sane’, Ella among them, are simply conforming to a mass madness. Ella is subsumed with an unthinking and unenlightened collective that blindly submits to the normative discourses of those laws that govern, manage and police the masses. This ‘sane’ Ella will have to conform to her reproductive function and ‘have ice applied to [her] ovaries yet’. Even as Paul rejects the notion of madness as a disease of the body, and even as he rallies against the madness of society, including women’s position within it, he firmly re-situates Ella within those
discourses that tie women to the body and make them ‘slaves of everyone’s stupidity’ (196).

This section presents Paul as the token anti-psychiatrist of the novel – he is the dissenting voice, the voice that opposes the establishment by way of a particularly anti-psychiatric view of mental illness. This voice of anti-psychiatry is, however, also a misogynistic voice. While he rallies against the injustices of the mental health system by way of interrogating the sanity/madness binary, he simultaneously reinforces the male/female binary and perpetuates the links between madness and gender. Paul’s anti-psychiatric ideas might seek freedom from the prejudices and dangers of conventional discourses of madness but it retains those conventional discourses of gender that tie madness to the female body. Although anti-psychiatry, as a new discourse of madness, appears to have the potential to rethink other binary systems, including those of sex/gender and sexuality, Paul’s tirade against Ella only serves to reaffirm those structures. Ella’s ‘sanity’ is a blinkered and unenlightened view of the state of humanity – it is a mass madness. There is a further divide opening up between the ‘mad’ but ‘great men’ that seek to deconstruct the madness/sanity binary and the ‘poor women’ who remain oppressed by a pervasive male/female binary and are currently going mad in their ‘completely functional marriages’. These binaries are inextricably linked with one another, as well as another binary, a binary that Laing situates at the core of his re-imagining of the schizophrenic experience: mind and body. This is not a divide that Laing cares to gender, but the mind/body split, as we see in Anna’s writing of Paul and Ella’s relationship, is part of a larger discursive structure that creates and regulates gendered identities as part of the heterosexual matrix. A divide is beginning to appear between Laing’s and Lessing’s re-imagining of the experience of madness and the nature of divided selves. A conflict is arising between anti-psychiatry’s non-gendered experience of madness, Lessing’s preoccupation with women’s gendered embodiment, and the text’s efforts to integrate those two themes without simply reducing madness to a consequence of women’s ‘nature’. This conflict is fought out upon the site at which they meet: the female body.


3 Maroula Joannou, in Contemporary Women’s Writing: The Golden Notebook to The Color Purple (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), begins with Lessing’s text because The Golden Notebook ‘prefigured the second wave of the organised feminist movement [and] expressed the discontents about sex and men that the movement would explore’ (1). Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses. Likewise, Annis Pratt, in her introduction to Doris Lessing: Critical Studies, ed. by Annis Pratt and L. S. Denbo (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), writes that The Golden Notebook appeared ‘at a time when the new feminist movement was in its embryonic stages’ (vii). Giancarlo Lombardi, in Rooms with a View (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), describes the novel as ‘a landmark in feminist writing’ (19) and Marcel Cornis-Pope calls it a ‘pioneering feminist novel’ (91) in Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War Era and After (New York: Palgrave, 2001). Most recently, Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins, in their introduction to Doris Lessing: Border Crossings (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 1-14, write that the Nobel Foundation, on awarding Lessing the Nobel Prize for Literature, ‘located her contribution to gender politics as central to her literary achievement, stating that “The Golden Notebook” was an important work’ (vii). The burgeoning feminist movement saw it as a pioneering work and it belongs to a handful of books that informed the twentieth-century view of the male-female relationship”’ (1).


5 This term is used several times in Lessing’s The Four-Gated City [1969] (Herts Granada, 1981) to encompass the entirety of the psychiatric establishment, its treatments and institutions: ‘this great machinery of psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, psychologists, social workers, clinics, mental hospitals, which dealt with what they referred to as the mental health of the country’ (333).


7 The preface is dated June 1971 and Briefing for a Descent into Hell was first published by Jonathan Cape on 15th April 1971 (as confirmed by Random House Group Archive & Library on 17th August 2009).


13 Susan Watkins, in “Grande Dame” or “New Woman”: Doris Lessing and the Palimpsest, in Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory, 17.3 (2006), 243-262, argues that ‘Lessing is actually a “New Woman writer,” whose work is troubling and thought-provoking because it is not merely asking questions about the “fin de siècle,” but also suggesting new directions in which contemporary British culture and fiction could go in the twenty-first century’ (248). Watkins cites Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham’s definition of the New Woman as that which poses a ‘challenge[ ] to existing structures of gendered identity’ (248).


15 All these terms for women were in popular usage in the nineteenth century and originate from the bible.
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‘This Sex Which is Not One’, trans. by Claudia Reeder, in Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 350-356 (p. 355). Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. xxix. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


Laing, p. 25.


See Claire Sprague’s Rereading Doris Lessing: Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), particularly pp. 65-84, in which the author traces the patterns of names in The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City paying attention to the doubling/dividing of characters across gender lines. Sprague suggests that we might ‘even say that the nineteenth-century madwoman in the attic has in The Golden Notebook become the madman in the attic’ (68). My reading of the text argues that this is not the case and that Saul’s madness is figured in quite different terms to Anna’s. See ‘The Golden Notebook’ section in Part Two of this thesis.


It is not clear exactly what ‘advances’ Paul might be referring to here. The first mouse embryo was not frozen until 1972 by Whittingham et al. (see Larry E. Mobraaten, ‘Mouse Embryo Cyrobanking’, Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics, 3.1 (1986), 28-32 (p. 28)) and the first child brought to term through IVF was not born until 1978 (see Clare Hanson, A Cultural History of Pregnancy: Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture, 1750-2000 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), p. 163).

Camus, p. 108.

Duras, p. 432.
Minds and Bodies

Anna Wulf’s madness, like that of the Berthas and Ophelias before her, is explicitly linked to women’s historic struggle for intelligibility outside of the prescribed roles available to them. However, Lessing’s madwoman breaks from this literary canon of voiceless and powerless hysterics by becoming the author of her own narrative, by engaging with contemporary (including an emerging feminist) politics, and by situating her experience of mental breakdown in terms of contemporary psychiatric practices and the debates surrounding them. Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis writes that ‘for many women, this novel provided their first encounter with an uncompromising honest portrayal of a woman’s view of sexual relationships with men, disillusionment with Marxism, and mental breakdown’.¹ By uniting these themes in a sustained and explicit manner, Lessing broke new ground with The Golden Notebook. Indeed, Lessing’s novel appeared a full decade before the publication of Phyllis Chesler’s seminal work Women and Madness (1972) in which the intersections between clinical psychiatry (including anti-psychiatry), mental illness and gender were established as a field of critical and theoretical enquiry, and which, incidentally, acknowledges its debt to Lessing by taking its opening epigraph from The Four-Gated City (1969). By re-writing the madwoman both in terms of a feminist agenda and an anti-psychiatric model of madness, in which schizophrenia is no longer understood as a disease of the organism but rather as a disjuncture between the self and the world, Lessing’s novel attempts to rethink and move beyond those discourses that constitute certain subjects as unintelligible.

In The Golden Notebook, Lessing interrogates many contemporary discourses of gender and madness, including the psychoanalytical and the medical, but she also turns toward new imaginings of the ‘themes’ of gender and madness by way of emerging feminist and anti-psychiatric thinking. In bringing together critiques of both old and new discourses, the female body becomes a conflicted site in the novel. We might then also expect Lessing to also rethink that infamous association between madness and women’s bodies – an association that has a long, sordid and decidedly un-feminist history.² Jane Ussher, in The
Psychology of the Female Body, writes that ‘all women’s madness, illness and deviant behaviour was traditionally located in the womb; malfunctions or diseases of the reproductive organs were seen as being at the root of women’s “deviances”.’ Joan Busfield explains that these ‘claims […] that women are biologically predisposed to higher levels of mental disorder help to construct images of women as weak and vulnerable and have been used to legitimate their exclusion from paid employment and public life’. How is the mad body to be represented without becoming the origin for that madness and thereby consolidating the links between mental illness and the female body? Indeed, in whatever form the madwoman has appeared throughout literary history she has always been, implicitly or explicitly, ‘embodied’. But Anna, as a ‘free woman’, earns her own living and is an active member of public/political life; as such her madness, and her body, is represented differently from the madness suffered by her literary foremothers. This is not the same mad body that Jane Eyre describes as ‘some strange wild animal’, nor is it the ‘mermaid-like’ figure of the drowned Ophelia. Anna’s body is represented as neither beastly nor mythic. The mad body is no longer simply understood within the same virgin/whore dichotomy (or Julia’s good woman/bad woman or Gilbert and Gubar’s angel/monster categories) that have historically defined women and the madwoman in particular. However, though twentieth-century advances in the fields of medicine, neuroscience, clinical psychiatry and psychoanalysis have all but eclipsed the crude image of the ‘wandering womb […] acting as an enormous sponge which sucked the life-energy of intellect from vulnerable women’, the body continues to be central to the various discourses that have since emerged.

As the novel progresses it becomes clear that Anna’s ‘modern’ madness will be no exception. However, Lessing does not try to ignore or erase the ‘matter’ of the female body in order to side step the problematic association between women and madness: she confronts it head on. Minds and bodies trouble Lessing’s heroines, just as they have troubled heroines throughout literary history, but here madness is not simply represented in terms of the female body; rather madness is experienced in terms of the female body. The Golden Notebook is not simply relocating the origins of madness from within the body to a place outside of that
body, for instance, as Laing does, the social and familial structures within which one must function; rather the text is negotiating and critiquing the discourses of madness and the way in which the female body figures within those discourses. We might begin then with two of the most seemingly fundamental and elemental discursive structures and the ways in which they have helped to create the West’s conceptualization of madness: the divisions between mind and body and between male and female.

**Minds, Bodies and Gender**

Elizabeth Grosz writes that traditionally ‘feminists and philosophers seem to share a common view of the human subject as being made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics: mind and body, thought and extension, reason and passion, psychology and biology’. Because dualities are by definition oppositional, and one half of the binary is invariably considered superior to the other, the terms ‘mind’ and ’body’ find themselves in an uneasy and unequal relationship where the mind (thought, reason and psychology) has been favoured over the body (extension, passion and biology). As Grosz demonstrates, binary pairs are often associated with other binary pairs and parallels drawn between them. As such, the mind/body binary is caught up within a series of other hierarchized oppositions, not least of which is the distinction between male and female. Grosz writes that ‘the correlation and association of the mind/body opposition with the opposition between male and female, where man and mind, woman and body, become representationally aligned […] is central to the ways in which philosophy has historically developed’ (4). As such, the mind/body binary is a powerful political structure that exceeds the discipline of philosophy and is embedded in the regulatory laws that govern intelligible subjectivities, including gender identities and mental health.

Madness has long been understood by way of a series of oppositional structures all of which can be laterally associated with, and seen to be predicated upon, the mind/body binary. These include: sanity and madness; the psychoanalytical and the medical; psychology and biology; anti-psychiatry and psychiatry; embodiment and disembodiment; and, as above, male and female.
These oppositional pairs map onto one another so that the ‘mind’ is the sanctum of sanity, logic and reason. A long history of patriarchy in the West, along with a pervasive philosophical and cultural tradition that values reason above passion and logic above creativity, has meant that such sound and rational attributes have historically been associated with the men who expound them. The mind has therefore long been allied with man and the masculine. The body, on the other hand, is the irrational ‘matter’ from which madness originates; it is the inferior, unruly, disruptive and disorderly, if necessary, material instrument that houses, and must be controlled and regulated by, the superior mind. As such, the body, as much feminist theory, from Beauvoir onwards, argues, has long been associated with woman and the feminine. The (feminine) body has been subordinated to the (masculine) mind in a mirroring of woman’s social and political subordination to man. The pervasiveness and ‘naturalising’ of the mind/body binary has thus proven problematic for modern feminist thinkers who have attempted to rethink and/or re-appropriate the ‘negative’ terms that connect women to the body. Those feminists attempting to study the link between women and madness, then, must consider not only the matter of the body and the way in which it is figured in terms of the feminine, but also how the mind/body and male/female binaries map onto the sanity/madness binary.

Although one might instinctively associate madness with the mind (and therefore the masculine), madness is, of course, about losing one’s mind. Madness is about the loss of reason and logic, the ‘faulty’ mind, a mind that might even be said to have become overpowered by the undisciplined body it is required to govern. Indeed, the medical model of madness appears to be based on this assumption. The medical model searches for the origins of madness in the body and has historically treated madness by treating/‘punishing’ the body and thereby forcing it back into submission. Though madness is generally assumed to be about the mind and its workings, it is only so in terms of the conceptualization of that mind as absent, lacking or defective. It is through this process that madness comes to be associated not with the masculine mind but with the feminine body. The madman is an emasculated man, he is a man who has ‘lost his mind’ to his body, and the madwoman is the epitome of the disruptive female body: she is victim to
the unruly body within which she has been bound. The mind/body binary is laterally associated then with not only the male/female binary but also the sanity/madness binary and, as such, links are formed between madness, gender and the body.

If madness is understood to be of the body rather than the mind, we can better understand how madness, and the way in which it has been traditionally studied and treated, has come to be caught up with the mind/body binary and the gendering of that binary. The two dominant models of madness in the twentieth century, the psychoanalytical and the medical (or Grosz’s ‘psychological’ and ‘biological’), might seem to have each taken up one half of the mind/body binary as the focus for their exploration into the phenomenon of mental disorders: the psychoanalytical model analyses and interprets the mind while the medical model diagnoses and treats the body. The field of psychiatry has encompassed both of these models and therefore both the natural sciences (that is, the medical model of madness that locates and treats mental illness in terms of the biological ‘organism’, including genetics, the neurological, hormone imbalances and brain abnormalities), and the social sciences (that is, a psychoanalytical model of madness that takes as its focus the metaphysical ‘person’ or mind). However, despite the integration of psychoanalysis within the field of psychiatry during the twentieth century, the discipline has, for the most part, remained contentedly within the medical establishment. In Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness? (1991), Ussher writes that ‘the dominant model in the health care system [is] still governed by the medical professionals: the biologically reductionist model, where madness is deemed to be in our genes, our biology, our hormones, in the brain’ (104). Although psychoanalysis has established itself as an integral part of the treatment of mental illness, the field of psychiatry remains subsumed within the medical establishment and the discipline of the natural sciences. Likewise, Busfield, in Men, Women and Madness (1996), writes:

The primacy given to biological explanations of mental disorder within psychiatry does not stem from the fact that they can be shown to be more important than other aetiological factors across the spectrum of mental disorders. Rather it stems from the emphasis psychiatrists, as members of the medical profession, have typically given to physical processes (and
physical treatments) – an emphasis that links to the professionalisation of medicine and the development of its own fields of expertise and competence. Psychiatrists have frequently chosen to treat any physical factor as the cause of a particular mental disorder, ignoring or giving little weight to any psychological or social factors that might be involved. (164-165)

As a field within the natural sciences, psychiatry is established and maintained as a legitimate and reputable profession. Under the umbrella of the medical profession, the field of psychiatry can lay claim to a legitimate disciplinary power which enables it to police and treat (or, in Foucauldian terms, ‘discipline’) such persons it so deems as ‘disordered’ or ‘disorderly’. In order to remain within this field and thereby retain that disciplinary power, psychiatry must continue to position madness ‘within’ the body and privilege biological explanations and treatments for mental illness.

From within the field of psychiatry, the psychoanalytical model also finds itself regulated by the scientific and medical frameworks that return us to the body. In fact, as I will argue more fully in the following section, the psychoanalytical model is as focused on the body as the medical model: Freud’s understanding of subjectivity is based upon the ways in which one comes to recognise oneself as a subject through her relationship to her body and the bodies of others. Even Lacan’s revision of Freidian psychoanalysis retains the body as a definitive (if imagined) site of ‘becoming’ and being. Grosz writes that ‘for Lacan as for Freud, the ego is a kind of mapping or tracing of the subject’s perceived and perceiving corporeality’ (39). This is the ‘lived body’ – a body constituted out of an ‘imaginary anatomy’: ‘The imaginary anatomy is an internalized image or map of the meaning the body has for the subject, for others in its social world, and for the symbolic order conceived in its generality (that is, for culture as a whole). It is an individual and collective fantasy of the body’s forms and modes of action.’

Psychoanalysis and its psychiatric incarnations is concerned, then, with the ways in which bodies figure as sites of (imaginary) inscription which thus project a (psychic) sense of ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’, ‘health’ and ‘illness’. As such, despite the intervention of psychoanalysis, mental illness continues to be understood in terms of the body and – by association – the feminine. Such
associations create and consolidate links between, for instance, psychic disorders and the reproductive processes of the female body: menstruation (pre-menstrual syndrome), childbirth (post-natal depression) and the menopause (depression).12

In opposition to the two dominant models of madness, Laing dismisses the notion of the body (or the mind) as the point of ‘origin’, and instead purports to focus upon the relationship between mind and body. Laing does not look to the past and the way in which the body is constituted by that past, nor does he look to the body as a myriad of genes and processes and chemicals; rather, Laing takes as his focus the ‘experience’ of mind-body relations in the present and within particular social and familial circumstances. Laing maintains that the extent to which one feels oneself to be embodied, that the mind is ‘in’ the body, is directly connected to the extent to which one feels oneself to be ‘sane’. Those persons who do not feel themselves to be intimately bound up with their bodies, who often find themselves ‘outside’ of the body, are experiencing a ‘schizoid’ state of being.

Laing’s approach to the relationship between madness and the body is very different to that practised by other psychiatric models of the twentieth century and therefore might offer an opportunity to rethink the ways in which madness has been associated with the female body.

By utilising an anti-psychiatric approach to mind-body relations, The Golden Notebook repeatedly confronts the ‘problem’ of the female body and the discourses that are available to describe and write that body and its processes. Lessing’s novel examines the ways in which traditional models of madness have divided the mind from the body and explores how and why women have found themselves implicated within oppositional systems such as the mind/body and sane/mad binaries. By attending to the ‘matter’ of the female body, the text demonstrates the ways in which madness and gender are entwined without simply reducing the body to a supposed ‘biological’ origin of madness. Anna’s breakdown in The Golden Notebook provides Lessing with an opportunity to construct a feminist and anti-psychiatric ‘revision’ of the connections between madness and the female body.
Models of Madness

One of the most obvious examples of an interaction between mind, body and madness in *The Golden Notebook* is the onset of Anna’s ‘anxiety state’ toward the end of the novel. This ‘anxiety state’, which is both of the mind and of the body, reveals the ways in which the mind/body binary has figured in various discourses of madness including the medical, psychoanalytical, and the anti-psychiatric, as well as how the gendering of that binary has shaped those discourses. In the final section of ‘The Blue Notebook’ Anna awakes ‘feeling as I never have before’:

> My neck was tense and stiff. I was conscious of my breathing – had to force myself to breathe deeply. Above all, my stomach pained me, or rather, the region under my diaphragm. It was as if my muscles there were clenched into a knot. And I was filled with a kind of undirected apprehension. It was this feeling that finally made me dismiss self-diagnosis of indigestion, having caught cold in my neck, etc. I rang Molly and asked her if she had any sort of book with medical symptoms in it, and if so, would she read me a description of an anxiety state. It was in this way I discovered I am suffering from an anxiety state.\(^{13}\)

It is the feeling of ‘undirected apprehension’ that causes Anna to ‘read’ her pain in terms of her state of mind as opposed to a bodily process of, for instance, digestion. David Stafford-Clark, in the 1963 edition of *Psychiatry To-day*, a far more conventional text on psychiatry than Laing’s works but also widely read and reprinted during the same period, explains that ‘the anxiety state is characterized by a persistent feeling of tension and anxiety for which the patient can recognize no fundamental cause. He is apt to say that he feels worried about everything, but he is often not at all sure why he finds everything so worrying’.\(^{14}\) Indeed, Anna can see no reason why she should be suffering an ‘anxiety state’: ‘Then I sat down to find out why I have an anxiety state – I am not worried about money. […] I’m not worried about Janet. I can see no reason at all why I should be anxious. “Naming” the state I am in as an anxiety state, lessened it for a while, but tonight (*4) it is very bad. Extraordinary’ (486). Anna, unable to discover a reason for her anxiety within her particular social circumstances can rely only upon the way in which her anxiety produces, or is produced by, pains in her body. Anna’s anxiety
not only manifests itself as an ‘undirected apprehension’ but also as a painful ‘knot’ in her stomach and in her neck. Self-‘analysis’ gives way to self-‘diagnosis’. Anna uses these physical symptoms in order to diagnose her ‘illness’ by examining how her own bodily pains correspond with the definition of an ‘anxiety state’ in a medical textbook. Anna reads her bodily pain as symptomatic of her ‘anxiety state’: the ‘knot’ in her stomach is psychosomatic. Her pain is the manifestation of her disordered mind within the body.

Psychosomatic occurrences suggest a link between the mind (psyche) and the body (soma), between thought and feeling. Indeed, Stafford-Clark writes that the term ‘psychosomatic’ refers to ‘a method of approach based upon an acceptance of the body-mind relationship and all it implies’ but reminds his reader that in order to reach this acceptance ‘a great deal of work had to be done’ (242). Actually, even in Stafford-Clark’s description of those psychiatric practices that consider the ‘body-mind relationship’ as fundamental to the study of psychosomastics, he must concede that ‘opinions are divided’:

One school, in which a number of psycho-analysts and some general physicians with an analytic background or training are to be found, believes that the psychodynamic processes underlying all illnesses […] are essentially the same. This means for example that conflict, repression, and the operation of unconscious complexes are believed to play as large a part in the emotional contribution to a particular physical illness as they undoubtedly play in the production of hysterical illness or an obsessive compulsive state. […] The other school of thought is less dogmatic. While accepting as highly probable that the psychopathology to be discovered in many patients with physical illness is vitally important to their condition and essentially a target for treatment, this school of thought is also prepared to acknowledge that […] its basis does not seem to involve any psychopathological process at all. (246-247)

Physical ‘symptoms’ are either explained away by the psychoanalytical model (it is ‘all in the mind’) or, in the medical model, eclipse any emotional or psychological factors in favour of the biological so that they become merely hormonal or ‘nervous’ bodily effects that stem from the central nervous system. The medical model’s focus upon the ways in which the physical manifestations of anxiety present themselves also serves to strengthen the argument that mental illness is a wholly biological disease and continues to justify psychiatry’s
allegiance to the medical establishment and the physical treatments it prescribes. Indeed, by self-diagnosing her condition by way of Molly’s medical textbook, Anna initially positions, or ‘reads’, her madness as ‘within’ the body.

Despite Stafford-Clark’s claims and subsequent qualifiers, it is clear that psychosomatic occurrences are considered less in terms of mind-body relations and far more in terms of the side of the binary each model of madness takes as its ‘professional’ area of expertise. The field of psychiatry as a whole encompasses both models – medical and psychoanalytical. During the period that Stafford-Clark and Laing are writing, psychoanalysis is routinely being used in conjunction with medically prescribed ‘physical’ treatments. We might therefore suppose that psychiatry, by combining two different oppositional approaches, succeeds in treating the ‘whole’ person: the mind by psychoanalysis and the body by pharmaceuticals. Stafford-Clark suggests that ‘increasing co-operation between the psychiatrist and his brothers in the profession of medicine is already leading to [...] very desirable results’ (248-249). It might be argued then that Laing’s vision of treating the ‘person’ in their entirety, mind and body, is achieved simply by combining the two existing dominant models. However, for Laing it is not enough to ‘treat’ each half of the binary in isolation and such a system of treatment fails to recognise and understand the ways in which the relationship between mind and body constitutes one’s sense of ‘being-in-the-world’. Psychiatry, even as a combined discipline that targets both mind and body, remains a divided discipline that only reinforces the same sense of division between mind and body experienced by the patients it purports to cure.

The two dominant models not only fail to take into account the interaction between mind and body but also the ways in which the mind/body binary is gendered. Feminist thinking has also struggled with the concept of psychosomatic occurrences and the way in which physical symptoms of mental illness seem to bring us back to the body as the origin of madness and thereby eclipse socio-political contexts. In *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997), Elaine Showalter considers this very problem: ‘A century after Freud, many people still reject psychological explanations for symptoms; they believe psychosomatic disorders are illegitimate and search for physical evidence that
firmly places cause and cure outside the self’.15 Roger Bates, in *Life’s Adventure*, explains this as an impulse, or need, to ‘express[] their pain and conflict in the form of the culturally-acceptable language of body illness’.16 Showalter is arguing that psychosomatic symptoms continue to be reduced to the biological as opposed to the psychological – ‘cause and cure’ are therefore sought in the body as opposed to in the mind or, indeed, the relationship between the two.

On the other side of the current debate, Elizabeth A. Wilson, in her introduction to *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (2004), charts the history of physical symptomology in mental illnesses and what she calls the ‘fierce antibiologism’ of feminist accounts of madness.17 Wilson argues that such accounts have too quickly disregarded instances of biological symptoms of pain and paralysis in hysteria and other forms of madness and that attention to these processes might ‘provide us with new avenues into the body’ (14). Wilson examines the ways in which the ‘neurological body’ can be seen to affect one’s emotional life and by doing so attempts to establish scientific connections between bodily processes and mental health. Wilson would therefore read Anna’s ‘anxiety state’, that ‘knot’ beneath her stomach that so pains her, as a case of ‘the brain in the gut’ (31). In the chapter that addresses the particular psychosomatic occurrence of ‘gastric pains’, Wilson brings her knowledge of the workings of the enteric nervous system (the ‘complex network of nerves that encases and innervates the digestive tract from the esophagus [*sic*] to the anus’ (34)) to Freud’s treatment of Frau Emmy von N (Freud placed her in a nursing home and twice a day he massaged her entire body before hypnotising her). Wilson concludes that ‘both neurogastroenterology and psychoanalysis have become too interested in the CNS [*the central nervous system*] and the head as the focus of their treatment regimes. The nervous system extends well beyond the skull, and as it so travels through the body it takes the psyche with it’ (47). Wilson’s image of the travelling psyche is interesting in that it refuses to locate and fix mental disorders in either the brain (the biological organ) or the (metaphysical) mind. The pain in the gut is neither explained away as brain synapses nor as a purely psychological phenomenon. Anna’s pain, in this sense, is neither ‘all in her mind’ nor all in her body.
However, Wilson’s attention to the neurological and biological aspects of mental illness continues to locate madness within the body as she deliberately turns away from feminist accounts, such as Showalter’s, that consider how ‘cultural, social, or linguistic constraints shape the kinds of bodies we have’ (13). Though Wilson attempts to explore a new way of reading the body in madness, she is nevertheless maintaining a medical ‘map’ of that body and therefore reinforcing a medical discourse of madness that conceals its own discursive practices as well as risking the resuscitation of wandering wombs: ‘Perhaps all biology wanders’ (13) Wilson muses. In order to construct her reading, Wilson must contend with the culturally loaded language of the medical fields and the scientific body. Without acknowledging or scrutinizing the assumptions and values that such language carries, Wilson perpetuates the idea that madness, whether its causes be biological, neurological or social, is best understood and studied within the fields of medicine and science, and, therefore, within the body. This attention to the biological workings of the body from within the medical model constitutes a particular kind of conceptualization of the body – a body of ‘systems’ and ‘processes’ – quite different from one’s experience of the body. By reading psychosomatic occurrences in terms of the biological body both the gendered experience of the body and the socio-cultural impetus and discursive structures that constitute our understanding of gender – as well as mental disorders – and those models and establishments designed to explain and treat those disorders, are obscured. So, when Anna self-diagnoses her ‘anxiety state’ by using a medical textbook, this ‘diagnosis’ and the physical manifestations of her anxiety divert her attention away from the particular social circumstances that have contributed to her anxiety. Her anxiety state is pathologised through the medical diagnosis and thus absorbed into a medical model that once more separates mind from body and mental illness from socio-political circumstances.

While Anna experiences her anxiety ‘internally’ and diagnoses her condition by way of the medical model, the text also alerts the reader to the external circumstances that have contributed to her current state. Not only is this passage embedded within a section about her turbulent relationship with her new lover, Saul, but it also contains within it a reference to an earlier section of the
text. The ‘(*4)’ that interrupts Anna’s attempt at ‘self-analysis’ in the quotation above refers the reader back to an idea for a short story in an earlier entry from ‘The Yellow Notebook’:

A healthy woman, in love with a man. She finds herself becoming ill, with symptoms she has never had in her life. She slowly understands that this illness is not hers, she understands the man is ill. She understands the nature of the illness, not from him, how he acts or what he says, but from how his illness is reflected in herself. (468)

By reading Anna’s anxiety state in conjunction with this section of ‘The Yellow Notebook’ it is made clear that Anna’s anxiety is directly connected to her particular social circumstances and emotional state – as well as the emotional states of others. It is from within a network of relationships that Anna’s anxiety arises and, in opposition to the medical ‘diagnosis’, the origin for that anxiety is here located outside of the body and, at least partially, even outside of Anna’s self – her illness is really Saul’s illness according to this story synopsis. This third reading of psychosomatic occurrences neither adheres to the medical model (madness might be ‘in’ the body but it is certainly not considered contagious) or to the psychoanalytical (this reading is in terms of Anna’s present not her past and does not read Anna in isolation from others). It could then be seen as a particularly ‘anti-psychiatric’ understanding of madness. This third reading not only attempts to understand madness by way of the relationship between the individual’s mind and body but also through the relationship between the self and other, and, more specifically in Anna’s case, man and woman.

Laing is dissatisfied by the ways in which madness has so far been understood, both in terms of its medicalisation within the scientific fields and its mythologisation in the psychoanalytic fields. His desire for a new conception of madness – one that attends to the patient’s current social circumstances – is seemingly shared by Lessing. So, although Lessing locates Anna’s anxiety state ‘within’ the body and within the medical model in order to examine how that discourse would frame her madness, she simultaneously links (by way of the reference to the earlier short story) her anxiety to her particular social circumstances and her relationships with others. In fact, one might say that in
supposedly becoming the embodiment of Saul’s ‘illness’ Anna is performing the role of Laing’s ideal therapist:

The therapist must have the plasticity to transpose himself into another strange and even alien view of the world. In this act, he draws on his own psychotic possibilities, without forgoing his sanity. […] What is necessary, though not enough, is a capacity to know how the patient is experiencing himself and the world, including oneself. If one cannot understand him, one is hardly in a position to begin to ‘love’ him in any effective way.¹⁸

But Anna does forgo her sanity and must contend with her own process of breakdown: her illness might be linked to Saul’s but it is hers too and it began long before his arrival. However, in connecting Anna’s anxiety to Saul’s madness Lessing is introducing a new anti-psychiatric approach to understanding Anna’s anxiety. The relationship between self and other is central to Laing’s theories, particularly when that Other is not another person but one’s very own body.

By using Laing’s theory of the schizophrenic condition as a counter to the conventional reading of the body in madness, Lessing attempts to escape the gendered mind/body dualism of the medical and psychoanalytical models of madness. Anti-psychiatric thinking helps Lessing to rethink those discourses that arouse a feminist dissatisfaction with woman’s representation as body and how this has been linked to conceptions of madness. This seemingly ‘gender neutral’ theory of the experience of madness exposes the damaging consequences of the mind/body divide and has the potential to escape, if not quite critique, the gender bias it perpetuates within the field. However, Lessing’s text, by coupling Anna’s anti-psychiatric experience of madness with her desire to be a ‘free woman’, does critique, and not simply try to escape, the way in which discourses of madness have been founded upon a mind/body dualism that favours the (feminine) body as the ‘faulty’ part. In doing so the text demonstrates how that reading of madness has been mapped onto the female body in order to consolidate existing gendered discourses in which the unruly female body overwhelms the fragile female mind. In The Golden Notebook conventional discourses of madness are being critiqued and then re-imagined from within an anti-psychiatric understanding of the relationship between the mind, the body and others. Moreover, the text also
extends and complicates Laing’s work through its representations of female embodiment and how, despite Laing’s and Lessing’s best efforts, discourses of madness remain caught up with gendered bodies.

The validity, stability and dangers of discourses of both madness and gendered identities are being linked and challenged through Lessing’s engagement with feminist politics alongside her interest in Laingian anti-psychiatry. While Lessing’s heroines do continue to struggle with and against those mythic and literary discourses of femininity, madness and the female body, they are also striving to find new and more positive discourses of madness and ways of resolving gender ambivalence through an engagement with what is a particularly Laingian idea of the nature of modern selfhood and the experience of mental illness. But while the mad female bodies in *The Golden Notebook* are shaped by anti-psychiatric thinking they are also limited by it.

Laing theorises that the schizoid ‘divided self’ is in fact founded on the very same split that divides the two dominant models of madness: that is, the dividing of the mind from the body. Laing writes that ‘in the schizoid condition here described there is a persistent scission between the self and the body. What the individual regards as his true self is experienced as more or less disembodied, and bodily experience and actions are in turn felt to be part of the false-self system’ (78). In Laing’s early work the body and one’s relationship towards the body is crucial to Laing’s understanding of madness, as is one’s position within social (chiefly familial) structures – neither the bodies nor these social structures are, however, ever (explicitly) gendered. The patients in Laing’s early works have no gender as well as ‘no body’; the bodies that (dis)appear (through the process of schizoid disembodiment) in *The Divided Self* are apparently ‘universal’ bodies. Even in ‘The Case of Peter’, in which a young man imagines a horrid smell emitting from his groin and has fantasies of raping his co-workers, Laing’s ‘analysis’, or rather his understanding of Peter’s particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’, attends to no issues of sex/gender or sexuality. In the following chapter Laing uses the case of Joan to further explain the way in which the self and the false self function in the schizophrenic. Laing quotes long passages of Joan’s story, including tales of ‘posturing’ seductively in order to ‘distract the doctor
away from all her pelvic functions’ (165), but, again, his analysis does not consider that Joan’s sex/gender could be in any way significant. This is especially interesting considering the way in which Joan refers to herself in the case study with the ‘universal’, generic ‘he’. But Joan’s body is not a ‘universal’ body and neither is Anna’s. For example, in supposedly ‘embodying’ Saul’s illness, Anna’s body becomes the familiar scapegoat for the transcendent male mind – the reproductive female body remains the site upon which man redirects his ‘disorder’ in order to transcend both his own corporeality and the madness with which it is caught up. Ultimately, the ‘region under [the] diaphragm’ (486) that so pains Anna is, of course, also the womb that defines her.

*The Golden Notebook* challenges traditional discourses of madness – medical, psychological, mythic and literary – that have forged links between mental illness and the female body by using this new discourse of madness, anti-psychiatry. However, although Laing’s theories inform Lessing’s understanding of the modern human condition and of mental breakdown, his lack of regard for the particularities of female experience (in terms of madness, the body and society) mean that she cannot simply appropriate ‘pure’ Laingian anti-psychiatry in her texts. Though anti-psychiatry moves away from the biological and the mythical in order to ‘make madness, and the process of going mad, comprehensible’, it does not go so far as to consider that one’s particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’ might be gendered. Lessing’s appropriation of Laingian theory encounters a fundamental difficulty: how can one write the schizophrenic female body in terms of an anti-psychiatric theory that refuses to acknowledge gender as a significant factor in one’s sense of ‘being-in-the-world’? Anna’s ‘Laingian’ descent into madness must therefore struggle with a definition of schizophrenic bodily experience that does not consider how the experience of madness might be affected by one’s sex/gender.

Judith Butler writes that ‘any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized’. By rethinking Laing’s ‘universal’ bodies and by explicitly gendering the mind/body binary which he both critiques and maintains, Lessing must go beyond his
understanding of madness (and particularly his theory of schizoid disembodiment) and expose the limitations of his anti-psychiatric theories for women. To what extent then can this new discourse of madness help Lessing’s heroines become ‘free women’ who can possess or inhabit ‘free bodies’? Can the Laingian patient be ‘re’-gendered, or are the two ‘themes’ of madness and gender (as Lessing’s preface might suggest) incompatible in anti-psychiatric thinking? In *The Golden Notebook* Lessing is endeavouring to reconcile anti-psychiatric thinking with a particular awareness of how the experience of madness is bound up with the experience of gender, identity and the body. Lessing’s novel thus encounters and confronts the ‘problem’ of the female body in anti-psychiatric thinking by way of addressing not only the ways in which that body is constituted and regulated by discursive structures, including the mind/body binary on which Western conceptions of madness are based, but by also addressing the *materiality* of the gendered body.

**Madness and Sex/Gender Discourses**

Despite Laing’s inattention to matters of sex/gender and sexuality, his understanding of the experience of madness is centred on the body and one’s relationship to that body. This begins with a critique of current psychiatric care and its adherence to the medical model of madness in which, Laing argues, the patient is viewed as an ‘organism’ as opposed to a person. In *The Divided Self* Laing writes that ‘one’s *relationship* to an organism is different from one’s relation to a person. […] In man seen as an organism […] there is no place for his desires, fears, hope or despair as such. […] Seen as an organism, man cannot be anything else but a complex of things, of *its*, and the processes that ultimately comprise an organism are *it*-processes’ (21-22). By seeking answers in the patient’s body, through their biological (or ‘*it*’) processes, the medical model disregards the ‘person’ and ‘depersonalises’ the patient. Laing writes: ‘We do this in some measure whether we use a machine analogy or a biological analogy in our “explanation”’ (22). In fact, because dominant medical discourses stem from a basic Cartesian division of mind from body, the biological is often translated into
and understood in terms of mechanical (if ‘natural’) systems, processes and functions. Hans W. Cohn writes that Descartes ‘saw the material world – and that included the body […] – as a “machine” obeying the laws of Newtonian physics, and this led to an explanatory framework which was essentially mechanistic’.24 The body, as discursively constructed in terms of a machine-like system of processes, is thereby separated from a notion of the person – or self, or mind. Minds and bodies, or persons and organisms, are separate entities that can be conceived of and understood in isolation from one another. Elizabeth Grosz writes that the Cartesian ‘body is a self-moving machine, a mechanical device, functioning according to causal laws and the laws of nature. The mind, the thinking substance, the soul, or consciousness, has no place in the natural world’ (6). The ‘mind-self’ half of this binary has invariably been at the core of spiritual, philosophical, and sociological studies of the nature of humanity. Chris Shilling, in The Body and Social Theory, writes that ‘having been influenced profoundly by Cartesian thought, sociology has followed a longstanding tradition in philosophy by accepting a mind/body dichotomy and focusing on the mind as that which defines humans as social beings’.25 In opposition to the concerns of the humanities, the fields of medicine and science have taken as their focus the other half of the binary: the body. By regarding the body as separate from the ‘metaphysical’ self, as a mere organic machine, the medical establishment has historically justified its disregard for the patient’s ‘desires, fears, hope or despair’.

The field of conventional psychiatry is a discipline born out of, and still ensnared within, the natural sciences and medical establishment and therefore finds itself founded on the same Cartesian split between mind and body. By locating madness within the body the body is constructed as a ‘treatable’ site. In examining the mechanistic ‘organism’ for the physical or behavioural ‘signs and symptoms’26 of the ‘disease’, the medical model legitimates treatments that work on and through the body as an entity separate from the ‘person’ and that person’s particular circumstances or the social context in which they must function. But by mechanising the organism, the medical model does not simply fail to attend to the patient as ‘person’ but also eclipses the ‘matter’ of the body. This process of automatism means that flesh and fluids simply become inert components of an
organic machine. As a mechanical organism, the mad body is a malfunctioning machine that needs to be ‘jump started’ by courses of electro-shock treatment, re-adjusted by pharmaceuticals, repaired by surgery, or discarded as scrap in the depths of the psychiatric hospital. If one has ‘lost their mind’ then the body that remains is empty, de-activated, worthless.

It comes as little surprise then that the mentally ill patient, who is discursively constructed as a mere organic machine within the medical model, might begin to experience herself as nothing more than mechanical autonoma. At the end of the ‘Free Women 3’ section a series of incidents occur that make Anna feel that it has become ‘all too much’ and, ‘frightened and sick’, she imagines her brain in mechanistic terms: ‘The fact is, said Anna, trying to be calm about it, to herself: that I’m not fit to cope with anything. I stay above all this – chaos, because of this increasingly cold, critical, balancing brain of mine. (Anna again saw her brain, like a cold little machine, ticking away in her head)’ (359). The machine metaphor serves to demonstrate the way in which the dominant medical model of madness mechanises the body and, in this case, specifically the brain. Laing drolly points out that while we might label a person who experiences themselves as a machine as crazy, a model/theory of madness that treats that same person like a machine is perfectly acceptable: ‘In the following pages, we shall be concerned specifically with people who experience themselves as autonoma, as robots, as bits of machinery, or even as animals. Such persons are rightly regarded as crazy. Yet why do we not regard a theory that seeks to transmute persons into automata or animals as equally crazy?’ (23). Laing’s reversal of the sane/mad binary here serves to illustrate the absurdity (the ‘craziness’) of the medical discourses of madness available to understand, interpret and treat mental illnesses. When Anna experiences her brain as a machine ‘ticking away in her head’, this metaphor not only connotes a kind of accounting machine that is coldly balancing and compartmentalising the various aspects of her divided self, but also a time-bomb counting down to a moment of explosion when all Anna’s carefully composed selves will finally ‘crack up’.

Psychoanalysing Anna
When Anna experiences her mind as a ticking machine she panics and mentally reaches out to her ex-psychoanalyst: ‘Laying about her for something to hold onto, she clutched to the memory of Mother Sugar. [...] For what was the use of that long “experience” with Mother Sugar if now, in time of drought, she could not reach out for help’ (359). In turning back to her ‘soul-doctor’ (215) and the practice of psychoanalysis, Anna is rejecting the medical model of madness that automatises her body and disregards her as a ‘person’. By reinterpreting her experience of madness in terms of a psychoanalytical model of madness as opposed to a medical model, Anna attempts to re-animate and re-anthropomorphise her brain-mind. However, psychoanalysis, as I have argued above, while ostensibly treating the patient as a ‘person’ as opposed to an ‘organism’, also fails to suitably account for Anna’s modern madness. Where the medical model reduces the patient to the body, the psychoanalytical model seemingly takes as its sole focus the other half of the binary: the mind. Laing writes that

the very existence of psychopathology perpetuates the very dualism that most psychopathologists wish to avoid and is clearly false. Yet this dualism cannot be avoided within the psychopathological frame of reference except by falling into a monism that reduces one term to another, and is simply another twist to a spiral of falsity. (24)

Psychopathology (psychoanalysis), as a ‘science’ of the mind, presupposes a ‘conceptual model’ of selfhood that, like the medical model, divides part of that self off as a field for study, in this case the ‘psyche (mental apparatus or endopsychic structure)’. Psychoanalysis continues to rely upon the same binary structures that divide and isolate the self (person) from the body (organism) as well as further dividing the mind into another binary opposition: conscious and unconscious. Cohn writes that ‘when psychoanalysis presented itself as a science, it seems to have aspired to the Cartesian model. [...] This is demonstrated in its preference for mechanistic explanations and spatial metaphors’ (60, my italics). Likewise, Monique David-Ménard, in Women Analyze Women, writes of Freud’s image of the mind as a ‘physical apparatus’: ‘Freud acted as if what he called the physical apparatus were either an electronic machine or an organism. And I ask
myself, “Why this language?” Psychoanalysis adopts the same binary frameworks and analogies for the body that characterize the medical model. Laing writes: ‘Moreover, it must presuppose that its conceptual model has a way of functioning analogous to the way that an organism functions in health and a way of functioning analogous to an organism’s way of functioning when physically diseased’ (24). Psychoanalysis, then, models itself upon the medical model. Therefore, although the psychoanalytical model might seem to take as its focus for study the ‘mind’ over the body, it conceptualizes the mind and madness within the very same terms and discursive structures as the medical model conceptualizes the body and illness.

Jana Sawicki, in *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body*, writes that

> [d]iscourses such as psychoanalysis view sexuality as the key to self-understanding and lead us to believe that in order to liberate ourselves from personality ‘disorders,’ we must uncover the truth of our sexuality. In this way dimensions of personal life are psychologised, and thus become a target for the intervention of experts.

As understood through this discourse, Anna’s present ‘disorder’ is read in terms of the history of her sexual development, her sexual practices, her sexual orientation. Indeed, Anna’s frigidity is a frequent topic of discussion in her sessions with Mrs Marks. It is not surprising then that when Anna reaches out for Mrs Marks she replaces the ‘ticking’ brain metaphor with a metaphor of the sexual body: this time Anna sees herself as a spring that ‘has gone dry’ (359). Anna imagines her body in terms of another familiar metaphor – that which connects sex and the female body to ‘nature’ and the earth: ‘with the words, came the image: she saw the dry well, a cracked opening into the earth that was all dust’ (359). The image of herself as a ‘dry well’ is preceded by Anna’s realisation that the birth of this ‘new frightened, vulnerable Anna’ (358) corresponds with the moment when she was abandoned by her lover, Michael. The desert that Anna imagines and then dreams about (in order then to psychoanalyse that dream) is a spatial landscape of her ‘psyche’ but it is also a landscape that maps onto her body. Anna’s ‘psychoanalysed’ dream equates with her sexually inactive body
which is but a barren landscape, a ‘crack’ in the dusty ground. Ultimately, Anna’s psychoanalytic association of her single status with the ‘landscape’ of her body equates with that familiar axiom ‘woman is womb’.  

Psychoanalysis returns Anna, once more, to the body and her sex/gender. Laing writes that ‘however pregnant with partial analogies such comparisons are, psychopathology by the very nature of its basic approach precludes the possibility of understanding a patient’s disorganization as a failure to achieve a specifically personal form of unity’ (24). Psychoanalysis, like the medical model, fails to encompass the complexity of Anna’s sense of discontinuity, her fragmentation into a myriad assortment of different, separately functioning selves, her inability to cope with a world that cannot recognise its own madness as it divides, persecutes, and destroys, and her struggle between those discourses of womanhood that constitute a legitimate gendered identity and a desire for freedom and intelligibility outside of those discursive constructions. Laing writes that

the words of the current technical vocabulary [of psychiatry] either refer to man in isolation from the other and the world, that is, as an entity not essentially ‘in relation to’ the other and in a world, or they refer to falsely substantialized aspects of this isolated entity. Such words are: mind and body, psyche and soma, psychological and physical, personality, the self, the organism. All these terms are abstracta. Instead of the original bond of I and You, we take a single man in isolation and conceptualize his various aspects into ‘the ego’, ‘the superego’, and ‘the id’. (19)

Laing’s primary criticism of psychoanalysis is that it considers and therefore determines the patient in terms of her ‘being-in-the-past’, as opposed to her present circumstances and her relations to others in the world, as well as further dividing up the self into isolated sections. Psychoanalysis neglects to consider one’s ‘being-in-the-world’ as constituted in the present, through a relationship between mind and body, the psychological and the physical, the conscious and unconscious, the self and the other. Laing writes that

it is in terms of his present that we have to understand his past, and not exclusively the other way round. […] It is not a question here of affixing predetermined meanings to his behaviour in a rigid way. If we look at his actions as ‘signs’ of a ‘disease’, we are already imposing our categories of thought onto the patient […] and we shall be doing the same if we
imagine that we can ‘explain’ his present as a mechanical resultant of an immutable ‘past’. (32-33)

By interpreting her moment of crisis in terms of a psychoanalytical model of madness Anna might be ‘liberated’ from the medical model of madness that mechanises her body, but she finds herself instead subjected to a discourse that constitutes her selfhood as a ‘mechanical resultant of an immutable past’ and a process of becoming that relies upon the sexing of her body and a process of ‘normalization’. Sawicki writes that ‘Foucault attempts to show how these discourses, and the practices based on them, have played more of a role in the normalization of the modern individual than they have in any liberatory processes’ (23). Indeed, although Anna believes that her dream of crossing the desert has ‘marked a change […] in her knowledge of herself’ and she learns that she ‘must shed burdens’ (359), actually her ‘psychoanalysed’ dream serves only to prompt Anna to ‘normalize’ herself and her environment. Realising that in the desert (that is, the barren landscape of her body when outside of a heterosexual relationship), she is ‘alone’ and ‘a long way from the springs’, Anna begins to prepare herself to ‘walk across the desert, so that she might reach the mountains’ (359). If Anna’s body is the dry, barren desert then ‘his’ body is the elevated mountainous range – a phallic symbol of masculine solidity, permanence and stature. In order to achieve this the chapter ends with Anna asking her homosexual lodgers to move out of the ‘family’ home in order to make way for the ‘real’ man needed to cure Anna of her ‘dryness’ and complete the nuclear family unit.

Anna finds herself caught between two discourses of madness: one that reads her as a biological organism, a process of its, and another that reads her as a mind-self that is nevertheless constituted from a process of the sexualisation of the body and requires her to return to a normalised gendered identity and succumb to the law of the father. The medical and psychological models of madness, as I have argued, rely heavily upon the conceptual distinction between mind and body and both models reduce the ‘patient’ to a mechanised, universalised (although sexed) body which they seek to cure, or ‘normalise’. Both discourses ultimately reduce Anna to the body half of the mind/body binary and are therefore inevitably entangled within a system of gendering discourses that constitute and fix one’s
sexed subjectivity on and through the body. In ‘Women’s bodies, women’s lives and depression: towards a reconciliation of material and discursive accounts’, Janet M. Stoppard writes that ‘the medicalisation and pathologisation of female reproductive biological processes [], while normal in women, are perceived as abnormal and dysfunctional when compared to the implicit standard of biological normality signified by the male body’. The solidity and permanence of the ‘mountainous’ male body stands erect, domineering and imperious above the vast, dry desert landscape whose contours shift and change in the wind. Anna’s reproductive (changing, shifting) female body is ‘abnormal’ (and by extension she is abnormal) when compared to the masculine body that stands tall and strong, a firm and solid base upon which to elevate man’s mind to the lofty heights of knowledge and power. The medical and psychoanalytical models of madness are not ‘gender neutral’ discourses just as the mind/body binary upon which they are predicated is not a ‘gender neutral’ structure. Both – together – form part of a system of regulatory and disciplinary laws that constitute and perpetuate normative gendered identities within the heterosexual matrix.

**Constructing Anna**

This system of discursive laws and practices is evident in ‘Free Women 3’ not only by way of the two dominant discourses of madness but also through a series of incidents and situations that attempt to return Anna to her sexed body and the gendered identity that supposedly corresponds with that body. Throughout the ‘Free Women 3’ section, which culminates with Anna’s ‘ticking brain’ and her dream of the desert landscape, Anna is subjected to a series of incidents that reinforce these normalising discourses and seemingly lead her to the point of breakdown. Anna is made to confront the way in which she is repeatedly and relentlessly constituted in terms of discursive practices that seek to normalise and fix her gendered subjectivity within the heterosexual matrix. If, as Laing might argue, Anna’s madness cannot be understood by way of her mechanised organism nor as a ‘mechanical resultant’ of her childhood past (indeed, there is very little childhood past to speak of in the text), but instead by her particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’, then Anna’s present circumstances, interactions and
experiences should be the focus of an anti-psychiatric study. If we examine Anna’s relations to the world and others during ‘Free Women 3’ we should, according to Laing, better understand the causes and nature of her breakdown.

The section begins with the consequences of Tommy’s attempted suicide. Tommy survives the bullet to his head which, while blinding him, seemingly ‘cures’ his own episode of madness. Tommy’s own ‘divided mind’ (239) is somehow re-integrated by the ‘damage’ caused by the gunshot wound. In fact, the bullet appears to have performed a kind of makeshift lobotomy (Molly calls him a ‘zombie’ (335) after the incident) and therefore positions his madness in terms of the medical model: ‘There never was a moment at which Tommy broke down. He gave no evidence of a collapse into unhappiness or self pity. […] He was, as the nurses kept repeating – not without a touch of uneasiness which Anna and Molly felt so strongly – “A model patient’” (331). Tommy is the ‘model patient’ of the medical model. Although Tommy has forfeited his eyesight and his movements are necessarily slower than before, he is not a ‘zombie’ at all but rather seems to have reclaimed a ‘functioning’, ‘sane’ mechanised brain: ‘His voice, like his movements, was slow, full and controlled, every word authorized by a methodical brain’ (332). The mechanical brain powers a rational, controlled and logical mind. Not only is Tommy seemingly ‘cured’ by the ‘damage’ the bullet does to his brain but his body and mind become ‘models’ of the Cartesian divide. Tommy’s ‘methodical brain’ anticipates Anna’s ‘critical, balancing little brain’ (358), but while this image of the brain leads Anna to turn quickly back to psychoanalysis, Tommy embraces his new controlled ‘authorized’ self.

Anna’s preference for the psychoanalytical model of madness, as demonstrated at the end of ‘Free Women 3’ when she embarks upon her journey across the metaphorical desert, is contrasted to Tommy’s compliance with the medical model of madness. While Anna and Molly cannot help but see Tommy as a ‘mutilated boy’ (334), and, indeed, within the psychoanalytical model his blindness should mean he has been metaphorically castrated and therefore emasculated (he is a ‘boy’, not a man), Tommy is in fact ‘the centre of the house, dominating it, conscious of everything that went on it, a blind but all-conscious presence’ (334). This description of Tommy is not that of a powerless dependent
but rather of an omniscient patriarch lording over his house and the women it contains. In fact, Tommy’s sightlessness only appears to heighten his masculine power. In the ‘Free Women’ section that follows Anna goes to see Tommy:

His dark eyes were fixed on Anna, almost centred on her, so that she felt exposed, so heavy was that dark stare. Yet it was not quite centred; the Anna whom he was forbidding or warning, was very slightly to her left. Anna felt, with a touch of hysteria, that she was being forced to move left, into his direct line of vision, or no-vision. (449)

Anna feels as if she is being forced into the line of the non-seeing gaze, which is nevertheless a male gaze. It is a gaze that constitutes the object, regardless of the subjectivity of the object of that gaze. In embracing a Cartesian model of selfhood that subordinates the (weak, vulnerable, feminised) body to the (superior, transcendent, masculine) mind – a mind that does not rely upon the workings and processes of the body (sight) – Tommy effectively secures a masculine identity independent of the damaged and damageable body. Molly, in contrast, ‘put her face in her hands and wept, differently, through her whole body. […] Anna noticed, for the first time, that her friend’s cap of rough gold hair had streaks of grey; and that around her direct but sad eyes were dark hollows, where the bones showed, thin and sharp’ (335). While Tommy transcends the body, Molly is represented wholly in terms of her body: she is face, hands, tears, hair, eyes and bones. In fact, Molly is crying ‘hysterical tears’ (334) linking madness, again, to the female body. As the section continues, it will become clear that Anna too is to remain firmly tied to her weak, disorderly, ‘hysterical’ body and the practices that regulate and maintain those gendered bodies: ‘“I think you should dye your hair,” said Anna’ (335).

The beginning of ‘Free Women 3’ sets up a distinction not only between the two models of madness but also how they are gendered as well as ‘gendering’. The medical model restores Tommy’s masculinity just as the psychoanalytical model restores Anna to a normative gendered identity within the heterosexual matrix by the end of the section. Such processes of ‘gendering’ continue throughout the section as Anna finds herself nearing breakdown. After the episode with Tommy, Anna is ‘summoned’ (336) to a meeting with Molly’s ex-husband,
Richard, in order to discuss the relationship between his son, Tommy, and his wife, Marion. At the end of the meeting, which Anna dominates and in which Richard exposes himself as emotionally vulnerable, or at least presents himself as a self-pitying victim of women’s games, he physically prevents her from leaving his office: ‘He had hastily moved around to stand between her and the half-open door. He now bumped it shut, with an impatient jerk of his buttocks’ (343). As Anna realises Richard’s intentions towards her (he is smiling, ‘breathing heavily, his dark eyes narrowed’) she becomes frightened and is ‘awkward and flustered, uselessly pushing at the door’ (343). The confidence and assuredness with which Anna has handled the meeting so far all but deserts her as she struggles desperately with the door. Without her noticing, Richard returns to his desk and releases the locking mechanism and the door opens. This small scene, this moment of humiliation, at the end of a meeting Anna has handled so deftly, causes her to ‘feel herself, under this shape of order, as a chaos of discomfort and anxiety’ (343).

Richard, despite being in a position of authority and power within his ‘rich office’ (336), finds himself unable to control Anna – she does not bow down to him like the ‘mellifluous young men’ (337) who quietly enter and exit his office and she does not submit to his charms like the succession of secretaries with whom he has affairs. Anna is even able to overcome her sense of displacement within the masculine corporate ‘empire’ (336) as she sits at the window smoking, ‘judging, critical and cool’ (340). But the close of the meeting disrupts Anna’s cool, critical attitude towards Richard. By taking control of Anna’s movements Richard re-asserts his power, both physically and sexually (if more suggestively than literally), and by doing so returns Anna to her position as the ‘weaker’ sex. She is suddenly sexual object to the predatory male. In ‘maintaining his sarcastic pressure on her’ he makes Anna feel ‘self-conscious’ (343) and effectively reduces her to a weak, awkward, helpless sexualised body wholly in his hands and his power. Indeed, Anna is only ‘released’ after he has (suggestively) ‘touched the appropriate button’ (343). Richard’s patriarchal power is different to Tommy’s – he uses his body and his sexuality whereas Tommy disavows his – but its effect is similar: Anna’s notion of herself as a strong and capable ‘free woman’ is
threatened by an encounter with a calculating and overpowering male presence. Richard commands masculine authority and Anna finds herself unwillingly submitting to that authority. Her efforts at escape are pathetic and humiliating and seemingly only serve to emphasise the futility of trying to escape her ‘biological destiny’ as the inferior sex.

This incident, however, not only seeks to (re)position Anna as the classic female victim to an aggressive, sexual male power: such an event, we might venture, would anger Anna rather than distress her to the extent that it does here. While Richard’s act does prompt Anna to play out the gender performance he initiates, more importantly, it serves to expose Anna’s sense of inner discordance. When Richard closes the door with an ‘ugly little jerk’ Anna becomes aware of the ‘smooth invisibly managed machinery of the rich office’ (343). Anna detects a conflict between the ‘smooth’ mechanical order of the office and Richard’s clumsy, erratic bodily movement. She relates this disjuncture between surface and depth to the way in which she has so far survived the meeting by way of her ‘critical smile’ but that beneath that smile she is in ‘just-concealed turmoil’ (343).

The machinery of the office is associated then with Anna’s mechanical ‘critical’ mind that is detached, ironic, and maintains order, while Richard’s body is associated with the churning ‘chaos’ her mechanical mind is attempting to manage. Although Anna’s sense of ‘chaos’ is emotional – it is the threat of the breaking down of Anna’s system of compartmentalised selves – by relating it to Richard’s impulsive physical act it becomes suggestive of the classic Cartesian divide: the unruly body is conceived of as separate to the metaphysical mind which is charged with the maintenance and regulation of that body. Richard’s ‘ugly jerk’ seems to emphasise the instability of such a division and the possibility that bodies can suddenly, if fleetingly, break free from the mind’s strict control.

The incident becomes significant then not just because of the way in which Richard attempts to position Anna as the weaker sex, but because of the way in which it reflects the disjuncture between mind and body that Anna is experiencing. Anna’s mechanical, ‘critical’ mind maintains order over her ‘chaotic’ emotional (bodily) self but this divided self, this system of existence or
‘being-in-the-world’ that Anna has come to rely upon in her schizoid state, is beginning to seem unstable.

Engulfing Anna

Although Anna leaves Richard’s office unharmed, if humiliated, the episode heightens her awareness of the possible threats all around her and the fragility of her carefully maintained divided self. In overpowering the already ontologically insecure Anna (emotionally and physically), Richard initiates a schizoid response to the situation which then colours Anna’s subsequent reactions to a series of day to day events: ‘This happens every day, this is living in a city, it doesn’t affect me – but it was affecting her; just as Richard’s aggressive need to humiliate her had affected her’ (345). Situations and circumstances that were once perfectly manageable now escalate into potentially threatening encounters. Laing identifies this reaction as symptomatic of the progression from ontological insecurity to a schizophrenic experience: ‘what are to most people everyday happenings, which are hardly noticed because they have no special significance, may become deeply significant in so far as they either contribute to the sustenance of the individual’s being or threaten him with non-being’ (45). Over the course of the rest of the day (that is, the ‘Free Women 3’ section) Anna finds that both her notion of herself as a ‘free woman’ and her already precarious sanity begin to crumble. This happens by way of several similar confrontations that seek to return Anna to the gendered body. Under the pressure of an unrelenting barrage of gendered discourses Anna is repeatedly reduced to a normative gendered identity determined by the sexed body. As Anna becomes defined more than ever in terms of her body, a body from which she is gradually dissociating herself as she further enters the schizoid state, the fragility of the mind-body divide – that is, the model upon which Anna’s divided self is based in order to maintain her ‘sanity’ – is exposed and thereby threatened. Such a threat will cause Anna’s divided self not to ‘breakdown’ but rather to ‘crack up’. As Anna is pushed further into the schizoid state the divide between mind and body does not collapse in on itself but instead becomes re-enforced to the point at which the relationship between mind and body is utterly ruptured.
When Richard eventually permits her to leave his office, Anna returns home by way of the London underground. Anna is afraid: she is ‘in a state of near collapse […] her palms and armpits wet’ (343). Anna allows several trains to come and go while she tries to muster up the courage to board. Interestingly, Stafford-Clark, in his discussion of ‘anxiety states’, writes that ‘some patients who suffer predominantly from anxiety may display this anxiety mainly or exclusively in response to certain specific stimuli. For example, they may feel utterly unable to face travelling on an underground train’ (94). After the incident in Richard’s office, Anna has entered an ‘anxiety state’ that prevents her from entering the crowded train, the ‘ooze of people’ (344). The masses have become threatening and represent for Anna the jostling, hurried, impersonal world within which she, as ontologically insecure, might become lost, within which she might lose her ‘self’. In such a mass of others she fears becoming overwhelmed, enveloped, engulfed. Indeed, Anna is suffering from the first of Laing’s ‘three forms of anxiety encountered by the ontologically insecure person: engulfment’ (43). The world and others within that world become Other to her; other people are frightening, both individually and as a mass of undifferentiated faces and bodies that constitute an ‘ooze’ of materiality. The world, as separate from any notion of selfhood, becomes a place that only threatens dissolution and thus existential death.

Unwilling to return to Richard’s office to ask for a car to drive her home, Anna eventually gathers up enough courage to face the throng of commuters. She crams herself into a train and is pushed against the bodies of the other passengers:

She was afraid she might faint. She was thinking: If someone cracks up, what does that mean? At what point does a person about to fall to pieces say: I'm cracking up? And if I were to crack up, what form would it take? She shut her eyes, seeing the glare of the light on her lids, feeling the pressure of bodies, smelling sweat and dirt; and was conscious of Anna, reduced to a tight knot of determination somewhere in her stomach. (344)

Anna’s fear of ‘cracking up’ is linked to a fear that her body will fail her, that she will faint. Although in this sense her body is connected to her state of mind it also begins to establish the way in which the body might fall away, might ‘fall to pieces’, and the way in which the self, in defence, will shrink and dissociate itself
from the body that the world and others threaten with dissolution. Anna is aware of her body as expressive of her mental state (she is sweating and faint) but she is also beginning to detach herself from that body and associate it much more with the (also) sweaty, smelly, ‘ugly’ (344) bodies that surround her. These other leaky, smelly, touching bodies are not bodies connected to individual ‘selves’, just as Anna’s body is beginning to become something separate to her own sense of self. Her body then is becoming something that exists in the world for others rather than for herself. From this ontologically insecure state Anna becomes ‘reduced to a tight knot’ inside her stomach – like a foetus, this is a self that may still be ‘in’ the body and ‘of’ the body but it is not a self that is the body. She, ‘Anna’, is separated – divided – from the body. The body is becoming much more an object in the world that threatens her existence (part of the ‘ooze’) than it is an essential, indispensable and indivisible component of selfhood.

Laing writes that the individual who feels ‘engulfed’ ‘experiences himself as a man who is only saving himself from drowning by the most constant, strenuous, desperate activity’ (44). Anna, reduced to a knot in her stomach and terrified of losing her ‘self’ to the world that threatens to engulf her, closes her eyes in order to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the train and to prevent herself from ‘cracking up’ or ‘drowning’. With her eyes closed Anna sets about pinning down a single notion of herself from the fragments that remain: ‘Anna, Anna, I am Anna, she kept repeating’ (344). Anna repeats her name (as later Saul will repeat the personal pronoun ‘I’) in order to attempt to locate her sense of self. Her first attempt to pin herself down, to define and locate herself in a stable, coherent role, sees her turning to that identity which has traditionally defined selfhood for women, motherhood: ‘I could vanish from the world tomorrow, and it wouldn’t matter to anyone except to Janet. What then am I, Anna? something that is necessary to Janet. But that’s terrible, she thought, her fear becoming worse’ (344). Anna cannot define herself simply in terms of her necessity to her child. As a modern, ‘free woman’ Anna, of course, regards defining oneself in terms of one’s role as a mother as lacking, insufficient, ‘unhealthy’. It also reduces her to the reproductive body that most thoroughly reinforces the association between woman and the body half of the mind/body binary. By trying to define herself in
terms of her role as a mother Anna is pinning her notion of selfhood to the very body that determines the normative gendered identity that she has been thus far working to escape.

In an effort to relocate herself on the privileged, masculine half of the mind/body binary Anna must ‘shut out’ (344) Janet and instead switch her focus to her notebooks: ‘Who am I, Anna? […] She saw her room, long, white, subdued, with the coloured notebooks on the trestle table’ (344). The notebooks are associated with Anna’s profession as a writer and therefore define her in these terms. The autobiographical leanings of all four notebooks also attempt to establish for Anna a sense that she is the ‘author’ of her own life. The notebooks then are emblematic of her profession, her livelihood, her ‘art’, and her life as dictated by her own terms. However, this is a retrospective account of her life, a rewriting of history that tends to emphasise Anna’s current state of mind as opposed to authorial control over her materials. In her vision she sees ‘herself, Anna, seated on the music-stool, writing, writing; making an entry in one book, then ruling it off, or crossing it out’ (344). Anna sees Anna: as Anna attempts to pin herself down she only succeeds in further dividing up her notion of selfhood, this time between a passive Anna, an Anna that watches, and an active Anna, an Anna that writes. This divide is further complicated by the nature of Anna’s writing: the notebooks are ‘patterned with different kinds of writing; divided, bracketed, broken’ (344). Anna can find no sense of a stable writing or ‘thinking’ self (that is, a unified, coherent, linear, logical, masculine narrative of selfhood) in the writing that reflects back the ‘self’ as hopelessly fragmented. Anna’s ‘divided, bracketed, broken’ writing is symptomatic of a ‘mind’ that is also divided, bracketed, broken. In fact, the fragmented writing makes Anna feel a ‘swaying nausea’ (344). Anna is again forced back to the body. With Anna’s nausea the scene changes and the ‘writing-Anna’ is replaced by Tommy ‘standing with his lips pursed in concentration, turning the pages of her orderly notebooks’ (344). The woman that writes is replaced by the man that reads. As Anna’s fragmented prose signals the diminishing capacity of her mind to ‘think’ coherently and nausea once more situates Anna within the sick female body, the role of the thinking mind is reclaimed by Tommy, the (transcendent, omniscient) male.
Although Anna’s vision of Tommy leafing through her notebooks is based upon an earlier incident in which Anna catches him reading them, there is also a sense that within the vision this is the newly blind Tommy who ‘reads’. Anna’s notion of herself as an intellectual or as having something worthy to say is then further diminished: the blind Tommy, despite his concentration, is not reading her words: her writing remains unseen, unread, insignificant.

Anna’s failure to ‘pin’ herself down in this section is expressive of her experience of fragmentation and breakdown. In her attempt to define herself by way of one, unified role or identity she finds herself repeatedly relegated to the female body – the female body as physically weak, the female body as sexual object, the female body as a reproductive body, the female body as a ‘sick’ body. However, these are not roles that Anna passively, or even begrudgingly, accepts. Anna ‘shuts out’ her daughter in order to escape an identity founded on her reproductive body, the ‘role’ of mother, and she quickly opens her eyes and returns to the frightening train in order to escape the vision of Tommy appropriating and diminishing her work. Anna’s inability/refusal to define herself either as a mother or as a writer is then a failure to define her sense of self simply and merely in terms of the female body or the masculine mind. Authorship and motherhood are associated with the same gendered opposition of mind and body where the male thinking mind is defined against the female reproductive body. Anna’s resistance to both models might then be read not as a failure to successfully locate her sense of self but as a resistance to the very need to define herself within this gendered, oppositional framework. In failing to ‘pin’ herself down, intentionally or not, Anna resists those normative discourses that seek to fix selfhood onto one side of the gendered mind/body binary. Anna’s thwarted efforts to anchor her sense of self reveal to her the inadequacy of those discourses of womanhood available to her: discourses that repeatedly tie her to the female body and bar her from making claim to what remains the ‘masculine’ mind.

Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, in an introduction to a chapter of essays (which includes extracts from Butler and Grosz and is collectively entitled ‘After the Binary’) in their anthology Feminist Theory and the Body write that ‘the task of postmodernist feminism, then, is the task of reclaiming the marginalised
female/feminine body [...] a body in process, a body that is specific rather than universal, and yet which can never be pinned down. Anna’s failure to define herself in terms of the masculine mind or the feminine body might then be read as a postmodern challenge to the hegemony of the gendered mind/body binary and the limited and restrictive identities that such a framework allows. Instead of attempting to appropriate the masculine mind and disavow the feminine body, Anna sets herself the task of reclaiming her specific ‘body in process’ without the need to ‘pin’ that body down. In this sense, Anna’s fragmented self – a self that is not a unified, coherent self that can be fixed onto any one side of the mind/body binary (even as it exemplifies that division) or within any socially defined and socially regulated and legitimated gender role – is a subversive self. It is a self that resists, a self that cannot be easily ‘pinned down’. Likewise, Judith Evans, in Feminist Theory Today (1995), writes that ‘postmodernism and poststructuralism comprise feminism’s third difference: a difference within woman. Some see this as a difference between individual women: I tend to think it means a “difference within”, the fragmentation of, the self’. Evans has reservations about both of these conceptualizations of the feminist project, but both emphasize a self that resists universalising norms, unified and coherent notions of self, the elision of difference, both within oneself and in the relations between self and other.

Anna’s inability to pin herself down appears to point to the inadequacy, or illegitimacy, of the roles available to Anna: that is, the terms by which she can define herself. By refusing to be defined simply as ‘mother’ and by finding herself ousted from her own vision of herself as ‘writer’, Anna is left without a stable sense of self. From this position, a position seemingly outside of, or at least caught between, the discourses that constitute legitimate identities, Anna might well pose a threat to the system within which she can find no place. Sawicki writes that

the fact is that people do [sic] resist what they regard as oppressive circumstances. The specific categories and practices that Foucault identifies as particularly dangerous – modern processes of individualization and normalization found in the discourses and institutions of psychiatry, sociology, criminology and so forth – are those that he was motivated to resist based upon his own experiences. (99-100)
Anna too is motivated to resist modern processes of individualization and normalization based upon her own experiences of the discursive constraints of madness and gender. In fact, Foucault’s notion of individualization is echoed in Laing’s own argument that the individual or ‘person’ is reduced by the medical model to a ‘patient’ or ‘organism’ in order that the individual can be ‘treated’ in isolation from larger social contexts. By resisting those gendered discourses that tie her to the reproductive body and by realising that her sex means that she is unable to infiltrate the ‘male’ realm of authorship and self-actualisation, Anna is recognising and avoiding, if only circumnavigating, the ‘oppressive circumstances’ of her sex/gender. Sawicki writes that

Foucault’s attention to the productive nature of power, and his emphasis on the body as a target and vehicle of modern disciplinary practices were compatible with already developing insights about the politics of personal life, the ambiguous nature of the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ in the sixties, the power of internalized oppression, and the seeming intractability of gender as a key to personal identity. (95)

Anna, as a ‘free woman’, is part of this ‘ambiguous’ sexual revolution of the sixties and her madness does seem to be connected to those ‘internalized oppressions’ even as she refuses a normalised sex/gender role as a definition of self. How might Anna’s ‘targeted body’ function then as a challenge to the dominant discourses that reduce her to that sexed body?

**Resisting Anna**

If Anna’s resistance to normative discourses of gender and identity represents a postmodern challenge to the heterosexual matrix then it is a challenge that must be performed through a reclamation of the ‘body in process’: that is, through an acceptance of the specific ‘matter’ of the body and its relationship to notions of selfhood. Such a challenge must then re-appropriate the body for women without tying or fixing woman to the body or defining woman wholly in terms of that body. In fact, such a challenge would also have to negotiate the very usefulness and potential dangers of a universalised concept of ‘woman’. This ‘challenge’ and how it might be practised has preoccupied much modern feminist thinking that
has sought to reconsider the value and importance of the female body to feminist movements and to simultaneously allow for differences between women without forfeiting the political benefits of a unified movement. This feminist project has not been without its problems and difficulties, something which Butler addresses in her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*.36 Indeed, both Butler and Foucault have struggled with theorising the potential to resist discourses that, they argue, constitute the very self that must do the resisting. However, Butler and Foucault have, to varying degrees within and across their bodies of work, found potential in those actions and behaviours, those ‘performances’, which, through sustained and reiterative practices, expose the underlying systems that create, manage and maintain normative identities.

John Rajchman’s *Michael Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* (1985) has proven useful in teasing out the implications of Foucault’s theories for the purposes of freedom and resistance.37 Rajchman argues, as Sergei Prozorov succinctly summarises, that for Foucault ‘freedom’ resides in the ability to critique the system through a reiterative practice of ‘revolt’ against one’s ‘instituted identity’:

Foucault’s nominalist histories of e.g. madness, medicine or sexuality disentangle the processes of formation of what Rajchman refers to as ‘nominal’ freedoms that in our terminology are discursively constituted, positive properties of a diagrammatically specified identity. According to Rajchman, exposing the constituted character of such freedoms serves to enhance one’s ‘real freedom’, which is understood as a practice rather than a final state, a practice that consists in one’s ‘revolt’ against the instituted identity.38

Resistance then lies in the ability to disentangle and expose the ways in which particular discourses constitute particular identities as ‘normal’ and ‘acceptable’ as well as ‘natural’ and ‘free’. Such a ‘revolt’ will reveal and thereby diminish the power of those underlying (visible but intractable) discursive systems of power that serve to grant the individual but a ‘nominal’ freedom from within those systems. Rajchman claims that, as Sawicki writes, “‘freedom’ in Foucault’s politics consisted of “a constant attempt at self-disengagement and self-invention”” (101). In order to expose the workings of the system, the ‘constituted
character of such freedoms’, the resisting subject must begin and sustain a reiterative practice of ‘self disengagement and self invention’ that challenges and reveals the limits and restrictions imposed by discursive systems of power and knowledge. Like Foucault, Butler also sees opportunities for subversion, if not always political resistance, in the ‘denaturalizing, proliferating and unfixing [of] identities in order to reveal the constructed nature of heterosexuality’.\(^3\) Anna, then, might be recognised as a resisting subject both in her attempts to embody the ‘free woman’ lifestyle (that is, as an effort at ‘self-invention’) and also in her madness, which, one might argue, is a process of ‘self-disengagement’ (that is, as participating in a non-normative state of being), particularly in its ‘anti-psychiatric’ incarnation that also resists those discourses of madness, the medical and psychoanalytical, which seek to reinstate the mad subject within the normalising systems such madness might be said to resist.

However, because of the ‘nature’ of ‘madness’, we might take a cautionary approach to claiming Anna as a ‘transgressive’ subject. Indeed, Anna’s very madness attends to the dangers of attempting to opt out of those normative practices and ‘self-invent’, even as that madness in itself opens up possibilities for ‘self-disengagement’. And here too there exists a fundamental problem: to what extent can madness ever be liberatory? Shoshana Felman, in her famous 1975 essay ‘Women and Madness’, writes that

> depressed […] women are not about to seize the means of production and reproduction: quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, ‘mental illness’ is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration’.\(^4\)

In a more recent study, Marta Caminero-Santangelo has argued that feminism’s desire to read women’s madness as subversive or as, in Susan Bordo’s words, ‘pathologies of female “protest”’,\(^4\) only serves to construct an ‘illusion of power’ and that ‘in fact [the madwoman] provides a symbolic resolution whose only outcome must be greater powerlessness’.\(^4\) The possibility of the madwoman as a resisting subject who can successfully and intelligibly oppose those institutions and systems that employ and maintain normalising and individualising practices
might not then be so easily ‘produced’ or attained. Jon Simons, in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, writes:

In general, the Foucauldian option for those who struggle against their subjection is to use the capacities and resources available to them in their particular subject position. It is perhaps significant that feminists have seen more clearly than other interpreters of Foucault the paradox inherent in the notion of subjectification: the constraining limitations that subject one (as a woman) are also the enabling limits that empower one with capacities of a resisting subject. In Foucault’s terms, all resisting subjects are caught in this paradox of refusing to be what they are.

From Anna’s ‘particular subject position’, that of the mad woman, the ‘capacities and resources’ open to her are those that can be found in performances of madness and of gender. It is from within these ‘subject positions’ that she is at once constrained and empowered. Resistance, it seems, is possible only from within the very systems that monitor and re-appropriate such resistance. Indeed, Butler writes that

the notion that there might be a ‘truth’ of sex, as Foucault ironically terms it, is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms. [...] The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’. [...] Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. (23-24)

Although Butler is writing specifically about those instances in which ‘gender does not follow from sex’ (24), her notion of discursively constructed identities, and those ‘developmental failures’ that only serve to consolidate the dominant discourses of normative genders and sexualities, can be used to further elucidate the connections between madness and sex/gender. Butler’s work emphasises the difficulty of enacting performances of resistance from within the ‘matrix of intelligibility’ that continually seeks to reinforce the “‘truth” of sex’ by way of ‘the matrix of coherent gender norms’. Madness – as performing the unintelligible – might seem to oppose those discourses that constitute and
maintain normative subjectivities, but the mad, unintelligible body is simply reabsorbed back into the same regulatory framework that defines itself against such anomalies, such ‘developmental failures’. Indeed, Anna, in her madness and in her body, finds herself caught within a web of intersecting discourses that seek either to define what is intelligible (so she becomes the mad female Other – one of the ‘moral offenders (violators of specific social norms)’) or to reabsorb her into the heterosexual matrix by way of forcing her to accept a legitimate gendered identity.

It is not surprising then that when Anna fails to ‘pin’ herself, and momentarily enters a position of possible resistance to the gendered discourses that seek to define her, she opens her eyes only to find herself having been all the while subjected to the male gaze: ‘A face, six inches away. [...] She thought: While I stood here with my eyes shut he was looking into my face and imagining it under him. She felt sick; turned her neck; and stared away from him. His uneven breath staled her cheek’ (344). When she opens her eyes Anna is immediately reinstated into the heterosexual matrix by the male gaze that defines her in terms of her sexed body. Like ‘Richard’s aggressive need to humiliate her’, this gaze both repulses and frightens Anna. Laura Mulvey, in 1975, famously argued that ‘in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly’. The male gaze ‘determines’ Anna and ‘projects’ upon her its own fantasies of womanhood, femininity and sexuality. Anna is, once more, relegated to the female body while the mind (in this case, the mind that imagines/fantasises) is reserved for the male. This experience is also exemplary of Laing’s third form of anxiety: depersonalization. Laing writes that ‘the act of turning him into a thing is, for him, actually petrifying. In the face of being treated as an ‘it’ [...] one is threatened with the possibility of becoming no more than a thing in the world of the other, without any life for oneself, without any being for oneself’ (46-47). Anna is subjected to the male gaze which not only positions her as the passive object of the male fantasy but, from within her schizoid state, threatens her with dissolution. In being regarded as nothing more than a body, Anna feels as if she is
‘no-body’. Anna is both reduced to the body and finds herself dissociated from that body. In attempting to resist an identity based upon motherhood (the female body) or authorship (the male mind) Anna’s schizoid state escalates and from within her madness she is unwillingly (re)determined by and reduced to the body that fails to define her. Immediately Anna’s moment of potential resistance founders as she is reinstated within the heterosexual matrix within which she figures as the empty (mindless) female body.

(Re)Inscribing Anna

When Anna returns to her flat she escapes the heterosexual male gaze but not gendered discourses. Her homosexual lodger, Ivor, is reading a story to Anna’s daughter, Janet, about a girls’ boarding school. The tone of Ivor’s voice mocks the ‘feminine world’ of the girls’ school and Janet ‘sense[s] the mockery being directed at her, a female. Anna directed the silent, compassionate thought towards her daughter: Well my poor girl, you’d better get used to it early, because you’re going to have to live in a world full of it’ (347). Anna opposes Ivor’s ‘defence of the homosexual’ to ‘the polite over-gallantry of a “real” man, the “normal” man who intends to set bounds to his relationship with a woman’ (347). Anna finds herself and her daughter subjected to the same discourses of womanhood from both heterosexual and homosexual men – discourses that bind and mock women on the basis of a supposed inherent inferiority. And yet Anna also subjects Ivor and Ronnie to these same normative discourses of sex/gender and sexuality. When Ivor asks if his friend Ronnie can move in she goes ‘through the conventional motions of offering to put another bed in the room, and so on. Both sides had played their parts’ (345-346). Anna and Ivor attempt to preserve the pretence of heterosexual normativity even though both sides are aware of that fiction. Anna can, intellectually, appreciate that Ivor and Ronnie suffer the same sort of oppression that she, as a woman who attempts to resist normative discourses of womanhood, also suffers. And yet Anna finds herself participating in this oppression and actively reinforcing those discourses: ‘I complain about the difficulties of being my kind of woman, but good Lord! – I might have been born a Ronnie’ (357). In the same way that Anna struggles against those discourses of
femininity that seek to define and fix her as a sexed body within the heterosexual matrix, so she too struggles with discourses that refuse to legitimate male homosexuals as ‘real men’ and instead emasculates and feminises them. Anna finds herself thinking that Ivor and Ronnie are not ‘normal’ or ‘real men’ in the way that Richard and Michael are ‘normal’, ‘real men’ – her use of inverted commas signals her uneasiness at the use of these terms but she does still use them.47 Indeed, Anna finds herself ‘disgusted’ when Ronnie, in his opulent dressing-gown, ‘appeal[s] to her as one girl to another’ (357). Anna’s fear that her ‘healthy female influence’ will fail to ‘outweigh theirs’ (347) with regards to Janet, suggests that she considers Ivor and Ronnie as dangerously and unhealthily effeminate. So, while ‘intellectually’ Anna can appreciate the similarities between Ivor and Ronnie’s illegitimate sexuality and her own attempts to break free from the rigid and limited legitimate versions of womanhood available to her, she is nevertheless unable to emotionally or empathetically tolerate their particular ‘subversive’ sexuality.

If Anna struggles with Ivor and Ronnie’s sexuality then they too struggle with Anna and her sex. Later that evening, Anna overhears the couple describing her, or women generally, as ‘fat buttocky cows’ with ‘saggy sweaty breasts’ (358). Ivor and Ronnie effectively dismember Anna, reducing her to two sexualised body parts that are dissociated from the rest of her body and the thinking self in such a way as to render them repulsive, abhorrent. This episode prompts her to recall her fear of Richard and the man on the train and is what will eventually lead to her psychoanalysed dream of the desert landscape. Ivor and Ronnie’s comments are the final straw in a long line of incidents that remind Anna that despite any aspirations to the contrary, she is defined by her sex. Anna’s final realisation that she cannot exist outside of a normative gender identity and heterosexual relationship (as signalled by her need to escape the barren, empty desert landscape) is the culmination of this barrage of discourses that have successfully wedded Anna to her body. Throughout this section of the novel Anna’s aspiration to embody the ‘free woman’ role, to be the ‘thinking’ mind, is continually thwarted by discourses that reinforce gendered normativity within a heterosexual matrix and from which, it seems, she cannot escape: woman
is mother, woman is weak, woman is victim, woman is object of the male gaze, woman is passive (as opposed to active), woman is body (as opposed to mind). Susan Bordo writes that

the cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, the body is the negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death.\textsuperscript{48}

The incidences that occur in ‘Free Woman 3’ bring Anna to the brink of breakdown by confronting her with the way in which she is relentlessly (re)inscribed into this matrix of heterosexuality and intelligibility. In ‘Free Women 3’ Lessing is explicitly linking Anna’s breakdown to the way in which she is figured and constructed by seemingly inescapable gendered discourses: discourses that, like the medical and psychoanalytical models of madness, rely upon a mind/body dualism.

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Although Anna’s madness suggests the possibility of ‘self-disengagement’ and might therefore offer the potential for liberation and freedom from those discourses that fix and maintain legitimate normative identities, for the most part Anna is simply re-inscribed into the matrix of intelligibility by discourses of madness that reinstate the mind/body binary and its gendered associations. Anna, in her madness and in her body, finds herself entangled in a web of discourses that define and reduce her to her biology by way of a system of discursive practices predicated on the division between mind and body and its gendered associations. The text demonstrates the way in which gendered discourses divide the thinking, experiencing self from the physical, material body. Anna, the ‘person’, is repeatedly reduced to the sexed body even while that link is concealed through metaphor. Anna finds that she cannot simply instate for herself an alternative, legitimate identity; she cannot choose to be a ‘free woman’ and have that role recognised or tolerated. The consequence of such an attempt is unintelligibility:
madness. Anna cannot simply opt out of the systems that establish the legitimacy of particular intelligible identities – to do so is to be ‘mad’ and to be mad is to be re-inscribed into the system by way of those models of madness that once more tie the madwoman to the very body she has been working to escape. Anna’s ‘transgressive’ efforts are simply re-absorbed into the sex/gender system and used to reaffirm the dominance of that system.

Despite Anna’s momentary lapses into the conventional medical and psychoanalytical models of madness, the text favours an understanding of madness that is ‘anti-psychiatric’ both in its critique of these models and in its representation of the experience of madness. In particular, the Laingian experience of madness, just like the discourses of madness that it seeks to evade and replace, is principally concerned with the relationship between mind and body. Considering Anna’s inability to escape those gendered discourses which fix her within the sex/gender system, it is not surprising then that when she eventually breaks down her experience of madness will exemplify not only Laing’s theory of the fragmented self, but also a much more violent, schizoid experience of division: that is, the rupture of self from body. Laing terms this ‘the unembodied self’ (65). As the novel progresses, Anna will attempt to escape from the body which has become a target of her various schizoid anxieties. But, in attempting to escape and disavow her body, Anna is not only seeking protection from engulfment, implosion and petrification, as Laing argues, but she is also seeking to remove her sense of ‘self’, her ‘mind’, from the sexed body to which a plethora of gendered discourses have tied her and which define her in such terms as to render her ‘mind-less’.

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The Psychology of the Female Body (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 3. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

*Men, Women and Madness: Understanding Gender and Mental Disorder* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1996), p. 144. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


*Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 3. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


Grosz, pp. 39-40.

Busfield, in *Men, Women and Madness*, discusses the pathologising of these three aspects of women’s reproductive biology, see pp. 155-163.


*The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* [1960] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 34. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

See Laing, *The Divided Self*, pp. 120-133. Laing’s reading of Peter’s unembodied self focuses on the way in which he has never felt “at home” in his body – something which Laing quite clearly blames on Peter’s mother.

Laing, *The Divided Self*, pp. 160-177. See also Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* in which she briefly lists a number of the female case studies featured in *The Divided Self* and the ways in which they clearly raise gender issues that Laing does not acknowledge in his commentary (pp. 231-232).


*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 17. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

*Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice: An Introduction to Existential Psychotherapy* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 60. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 28.


36 See Gender Trouble, pp. vii-xxvi.


41 Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 159. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

42 The Madwoman Can’t Speak or Why Insanity is Not Subversive (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 3.


44 Butler, p. 25, p. 23.


47 This phrase is repeated throughout this section: p. 345, p. 346, p. 356.

48 Bordo, p. 5.
The Unembodied Self: The Female Body in Madness

Within the looking-glass house of the asylum, moreover, the female body, in all its phases from puberty to senility, is always on display. In the communal bath, women gaze ‘curiously at one another’s bodies, at the pendulous bellies and tired breasts, the faded wisps of hair, the unwieldy and the supple shapes that form to women the nagging and perpetual “withness” of their flesh’ [Maude Harrison, Spinner’s Lake (1941)]. The ‘withness’ of the flesh, and its proper management, adornment, and disposition, are a crucial and repeated motif in the schizophrenic women’s sense of themselves as unoccupied bodies. Feeling that they have no secure identities, the women look to external appearances for confirmation they exist. They continually look at their faces in the mirror, but out of desperation rather than narcissism.

The abyss that opens between the schizophrenic’s body and mind, however, can be seen as an exaggeration of women’s ‘normal’ state.

Elaine Showalter, The Female Malady
In *The Divided Self* Laing argues that an experiential split between the mind and the body is the fundamental ‘symptom’ of the schizoid condition. In doing so Laing is engaging with a long established philosophical understanding of the nature of selfhood. Elizabeth Grosz writes that ‘since the inception of philosophy as a separate and self-contained discipline in ancient Greece, philosophy has established itself on the foundations of a profound somatophobia’. Culminating in Descartes’ radical split of mind from body, ‘of soul from nature’, philosophy has founded its understanding of humanity on a conception of the mind, the ‘soul’, as that which can exist independently from, and hence in opposition to, the body. Such a model of selfhood lends itself to numerous religious doctrines that rely upon the belief that the ‘soul’ can transcend its corporeal tethers. However, the reach of Cartesian dualism – and its gendered implications – extends far beyond the philosophical and the religious; a multitude of discourses, including the medical and the psychoanalytical, are predicated on the ability to conceive of mind and body as independent, divisible entities.

Laing begins then, paradoxically, with the same division between mind and body that he (and Anna) find so problematic in the medical and psychoanalytical models of madness. But Laing is not seeking to affirm this Cartesian model of human existence. In fact, Laing writes from a philosophical position that is in direct opposition to this particular Cartesian dualism even whilst it simultaneously replicates it in order to theorise the experience of schizophrenia. Laing argues that in the schizoid state the mind comes to be experienced as dissociated from the body – the ‘divided self’ is, at its most fundamental, a self that has divided into two separate entities: ‘mind’ and ‘body’. However, this division presumes an original unity and it is precisely from this position that Laing constructs his argument. The divide between mind and body is, in fact, a faulty perception of being – a phantasy of being – that the schizophrenic attempts to construct in order to manage her diminishing sense of selfhood and legitimate existence.

Laing’s notion of ontological security – that is, the state of being as experienced by the ‘normal’ and ‘sane’ subject – is derived from an existential-phenomenological philosophy that seeks to rethink the Cartesian divide between
mind and body. The concept of a cohesive sense of being which Heidegger terms ‘Dasein’ refutes Cartesian notions of mind, body and environment as experientially distinct and divisible. Heidegger writes that ‘Dasein’ is that ‘entity which each of us is himself’. This is not a ‘self’ or consciousness in isolation – a ‘self’ that is able to transcend the material, spatial or temporal – but rather a ‘Being-in-the-world’. He explains that ‘the compound expression “Being-in-the-world” indicates in the very way we have coined it, that it stands for a unitary phenomenon’. The ‘Being-in-the-world’ of the ontologically secure subject, then, is a self experienced as indivisible from the body and the (present) world. Hans W. Cohn explains that existential-phenomenological thinking maintains that ‘human existence is “embodied”’:

The separation of mind and body was one result of Descartes’s radical scepticism. This scepticism made him doubt the reality of everything except the doubting (that is ‘thinking’) and the disembodied mind. It is this split that needed healing before the mind-body dichotomy could disappear. […] The isolation of a thinking mind is untenable. Mind and world are not apart – the mind ‘thinks’ the world, and to the extent to which Descartes had seen the body as part of the world, mind and body are not separate. Heidegger expresses this mutual involvement of mind and world as ‘Being-in-the-world’ which is also a Being-in-the-body.

It is this model of being that provides the framework upon which Laing theorises his understanding of the schizophrenic experience – and at the very heart of this experience is the fraught relationship between mind and body.

Whilst the Cartesian model divides the thinking/experiencing substance (mind/soul/person/subject) from the material world (body/nature/organism/object), Laing’s existential-phenomenological model denies that any such division exists. Although Laing maintains a Freudian conception of selfhood as something established through the recognition that one is separate from one’s environment, he couples this with a phenomenological awareness of the ways in which mind and world constitute one another and therefore exist co-dependently and inextricably. In fact, the degree to which one can be said to be ontologically secure, according to Laing, is measured in terms of the extent to which one experiences the self as distinct from, but very much ‘in’,
the world, and the mind and body as undifferentiated. From this position Laing argues that to be ontologically secure, to be ‘sane’, is to experience one’s self as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question; as a continuum in time; as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth; as spatially co-extensive with the body; and, usually, as having begun in or around birth and liable to extinction with death. He thus has a firm core of ontological security. (41-42)

Laing is working with a philosophical model that sees the mind and body as inter-relational and understands mental health in terms of a secure and stable sense of embodiment, that is, a mind and body experienced as indivisible from one another. Phenomenological thinking, then, seeks to repair the Cartesian split by arguing that minds and bodies do not exist in isolation. While conceptually – or cognitively – mind and body can be differentiated from one another, phenomenology argues that experientially they are indistinct.

In madness the symbiotic relationship between mind, body and world becomes fractured. The unity of mind, body and world as experienced in the ontologically secure state begins to break down to the point at which a rupture occurs between one’s notion of one’s ‘self’ and the world – including, significantly, one’s body, which now becomes simply another object in the world as opposed to being synonymous with the self. Whilst Laing does not theorise sanity and madness in these terms, the predominance of the mind/body division in the schizoid state reflects the Cartesian model of being that Laing is opposing through a phenomenological understanding of selfhood. In Laing’s understanding of the human condition, then, the phenomenological model exemplifies the experience of one’s self in the ontologically secure (‘sane’) state whilst the Cartesian model appears to exemplify the experience of one’s self in the ontologically insecure (schizoid/psychotic) state.⁸

Laing writes that ‘existential phenomenology attempts to characterize the nature of a person’s experience of his world and himself. It is not so much an attempt to describe particular objects of his experience as to set all particular experiences within the context of his whole being-in-his-world’ (17). The anti-
psychiatrist’s aim is not to assess the behaviour of the patient (the ‘objects of his experience’) but to come to understand the way in which the patient experiences herself in terms of her relationship with the world – and her perception of that world. The anti-psychiatrist seeks to understand the patient’s sense of ‘Being-in-the-world’ and to value the patient’s experiences and behaviours as valid and logical from that position. What becomes clear in *The Divided Self* is that one’s experience of ‘Being-in-the-world’ is always caught up with the way in which one perceives of oneself as ‘Being-in-the-body’. Laing writes that ‘in ordinary circumstances, to the extent that one feels one’s body to be alive, real and substantial, one feels oneself alive, real and substantial’ (66). In unordinary circumstances, however, the body no longer confirms and validates one’s existence but becomes a site of perceived vulnerability:

> The question one must now attempt to answer is what form of relation with himself is developed by the ontologically insecure person. I shall try to show how some such persons do not seem to have a sense of that basic unity which can abide through the most intense conflicts with oneself, but seem rather to have come to experience themselves as primarily split into a mind and a body.

The ‘basic unity’, that of mind and body as one, comes undone as the ontologically insecure person attempts to withdraw from the world it now perceives as threatening – that is, as a threat to the survival of the patient’s diminishing sense of her ‘self’.

**Laing and ‘The Unembodied Self’**

Laing explains that ontologically insecure persons are persons who do not feel themselves as a significant presence in the world, as ‘real’ and with a firm sense of their reality and identity. As such the ‘self’ comes to be experienced as vulnerable and, consequently, retreats from the world that threatens its survival. The world, and others in it, become sources of danger – threats to the sanctity of selfhood. The ontologically insecure person becomes plagued by anxieties connected to this now-threatening external world which seems to pose a very real danger to her continued existence. These anxieties are described by Laing in terms
of engulfment, implosion and petrification. He offers several examples of these anxieties, including: stories of patients who feel suffocated by love (as Lynda Coleridge does in *The Four-Gated City*); who fear drowning; who feel as if they are being engulfed by fire or water; who fear being buried alive; who fear turning into a mere animal or, like Anna above, an automaton. These forms of anxiety threaten the insecure person in her entirety – that is, in mind and body – pointing towards the phenomenological account of being in which one concept cannot be said to exist independently from the other. However, by adopting a phantasy of a Cartesian model of being – where mind and body can exist independently from one another – the insecure person can fool herself into a false sense of security in which the body can be dissociated, rejected, lost, even killed, without threatening the existence of the true, now ‘inner’, self.

In response to the external threat the ‘self’ retreats from the world: ‘there are individuals who do not go through life absorbed in their bodies but rather find themselves to be, as they always have been, somewhat detached from their bodies’. Because the anxieties of the ontologically insecure person are particularly associated with the vulnerability of the body, she comes to believe that by dissociating her self from the body it can be protected from those threats. Whilst the ontologically secure person – ‘those “ordinary” people’ – might be said to be ‘embodied’ and therefore experience the body as biologically alive and situated in time and space, able to experience both the pains and frustrations and the pleasures and desires of the body, the ontologically insecure person might be said to be ‘unembodied’ and therefore experiences the body as divorced from her notion of self. Laing writes that from this position ‘the body clearly occupies an ambiguous transitional position between “me” and the world. It is, on the one hand, the core and centre of my world, and on the other, it is an object in the world of the others’ (131). The unembodied self does not experience the world through the body and does not engage directly with the body. Rather, this self looks upon the actions and functions of the body from a distance, just as one would observe another’s body or other objects in the world. The self achieves a sense of safety and security from the external world by way of dissociating the
‘mind’ from the boundary which, one might argue, separates that self from the world: the body.

In an ironic echo of traditional psychiatry, which divides the ‘person’ from the ‘organism’ in the medical model, the schizoid too divides her sense of self from the body and, by doing so, the external world. However, this ‘self’ that now exists as separate from the body is not the same transcendent, ‘disembodied mind’\(^\text{15}\) that Descartes imagines. The schizophrenic dislocation of the self from the body constitutes a far more literal and crippling experience of dissociation – it is not, at least at this point in Laing’s work, a kind of spiritual transcendence.\(^\text{16}\)

The schizoid person, when she feels continually in danger, may come to rely upon this process of disembodiment to such a degree that the self becomes completely and negatively ruptured from the body. In severe cases the unembodied person feels that they are so insignificant in the world, such a ‘nobody’, that she will actually feel as if she has ‘no body’.\(^\text{17}\)

In explaining Laing’s understanding of the schizoid state as enacting a Cartesian split between mind and body, I, like Laing, have been referring to ‘the body’ in such a way as to suggest that that term can encompass all bodies. ‘The body’, in this sense, appears to represent a ‘generic’ body that we can all recognise or accept as a particular object in the world. Laing does not acknowledge any particularities or peculiarities of the body. The bodies he is theorising in \textit{The Divided Self} are, in effect, ‘neutral’ bodies. Laing, therefore, does not suggest that ‘the body’ – as a concept and as a material reality – might be understood or experienced differently by his patients, either in the ontologically secure or ontologically insecure state. However, much contemporary critical thought in feminist, queer and postcolonial fields, argues that there can be no ‘\textit{the} body’. Bodies are always marked – by gender, by sexuality, by race, as well as by history, by class, by science, by religion, and so on. Whilst ‘the body’ remains a useful term within contemporary theory as a convenient shorthand for considering questions of embodiment in terms of gender, race, etc., it is always used in the knowledge that there is no single, universally applicable concept of ‘the body’ that can encompass all those differently perceived, understood, constructed, and experienced bodies. Similarly, we might use the phrase, for instance, ‘the female
body’ (as much feminist theory does – and has to) but only in so far as that term functions as a shorthand that acknowledges the limitations of such a term and/or continues to allow for other crucial differences and idiosyncrasies.

It is this particular difference, the differences between men and women and the way in which they experience their gendered bodies, that is particularly troubling in Laing’s work. There are, of course, other differences between bodies that might be considered in connection with ontological insecurity and disembodiment – not least those concerning race or notions of bodily ‘normality’; but it is, gender, as that fundamental binary so closely linked to the Cartesian divide between mind and body – not to mention sanity and madness – that seems particularly relevant to the way in which one might experience the self as unembodied. How might the schizoid state of disembodiment, as an enactment of the Cartesian division between mind and body, become complicated by gender?

For Laing, disembodiment is, at its most basic, an attempt to escape the body which, for the ontologically insecure, has become a target of schizoid anxieties. However, invoking the perspective of Judith Butler’s work on performativity, one could argue that for women, disembodiment may also offer an opportunity, albeit from within the schizoid state, of escaping the sexed body by which they are so detrimentally defined. Butler writes:

In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy. The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the phantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether.18

In *The Divided Self* Laing appears to posit the schizoid ‘unembodied self’ as a Cartesian phantasy at odds with the ‘real’ phenomenological unity of mind and body, but in his later texts he too will see the potential in such a phantasy for his – and humanity’s – betterment. In *The Divided Self* there is a small reference to this potential when he writes that ‘from certain points of view, one may regard embodiment as desirable. It is possible to suggest from another point of view that the individual should try to disentangle himself from his body and thereby achieve a desired state of discarnate spirituality’ (66). This passage has a footnote attached
that references R. Bultmann’s *Primitive Christianity* (1956) which argues, as Laing summarises, that ‘redemption was conceived of as a total breach of dissolution of soul and body. He quotes a Gnostic text as follows: “[the body is] the dark prison, the living death, the sense-endowed corpse, the grave thou bearest about with thee”’ (66). In *The Divided Self* Laing does not expand upon this idea – an idea that is central to his later publication *The Politics of Experience* and which I will discuss further in Parts Three and Four of this thesis – but it does begin to suggest that whilst disembodiment may primarily be the ‘schizoid’ response to one’s untenable circumstances, it may also have the potential to challenge, even re-imagine, notions of selfhood and human existence. For women then, there might be an opportunity in the schizoid phantasy of disembodiment to come to know or imagine themselves independently of the body that continues to define them within the sex/gender system. As a Butlerian ‘spectre[] of discontinuity and incoherence’ (23) the figure of the madwoman could have the potential to disturb the mind/body binary and its gendered associations and thereby call into question, as Butler writes, the ‘laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the “expression” or “effect” of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice’.19

Laing’s ‘gender neutral’ work does not consider such possibilities; however, it is explored in Lessing’s novel when Anna, as she descends further into the schizoid state, appears to enact Laing’s theory of disembodiment during two phantasies in which her mind-self attempts to escape the confines of her body – a body that is explicitly and troublesomely gendered throughout *The Golden Notebook*. From within the anti-psychiatric model, Anna, ‘discontinuous’ and ‘incoherent’ in her madness, might very well serve to destabilise the links between mind as masculine and body as feminine and trouble the ‘natural’ link between sex and gender upon which the heterosexual matrix is based and maintained.
Unembodied Selves

As an ontologically insecure woman on the verge of ‘cracking up’, Anna experiences two episodes of disembodiment in *The Golden Notebook*. In these two instances she seeks to play out – with limited success – a phantasy of total dissociation and disposal of the ‘body-as-object’. The first episode, recorded in ‘The Blue Notebook’ and read aloud by Tommy in the ‘Free Women 2’ chapter, juxtaposes Anna’s current mental state with Tommy’s own ‘divided self’. In the notebook entry Anna is narrating a phantasy of disembodiment that presents a very different experience of bodily ‘transcendence’ to the one later accessed by Tommy, which emphasises the significance of gender in the ability to produce and sustain such a state of being. Indeed, Anna’s experience of disembodiment, while ‘mad’ and very similar to Laing’s description of this experience in *The Divided Self*, is nevertheless only a fleeting phantasy and not a sustained state of being.

The second episode, also contained in ‘The Blue Notebook’ and this time a dream, further explores the importance of gender in the dissociation of mind from body in the schizoid state. In this episode, Anna again experiences herself as ‘unembodied’ but, again, she struggles to maintain the division between self and body. This struggle appears to be directly connected to the fraught relationship Anna has with her body in terms of its gender and materiality. As the dream progresses Anna becomes more and more panicked as she desperately seeks freedom from the constraints of her sexed body whilst simultaneously fearing the loss of a ‘self’ that she discovers she cannot ‘know’ or sustain without reference to that body.

In the ‘Free Women 2’ section of *The Golden Notebook* Tommy visits Anna and, in ‘a flare of anger’, he begins to read her notebooks, something he later admits to having done on previous occasions without her knowledge. This scene occurs before Tommy’s suicide attempt and haunts Anna throughout the rest of the text; it is this incident that informs Anna’s vision of Tommy flicking through her notebooks when she is on the underground train. After reading for a long while, ‘perhaps as long as an hour’ (246), he confronts Anna with a particularly disturbing entry from ‘The Blue Notebook’, an entry that she has bracketed off and followed with a list of groceries:
Here you’ve got an entry, it was when you were still living in our house. ‘I stood looking down out of the window. The street seemed miles down. Suddenly I felt as if I’d flung myself out of the window. I could see myself lying on the pavement. Then I seemed to be standing by the body on the pavement. I was two people.’ (246)

The entry appears to narrate a suicide phantasy in which Anna imagines herself jumping from a window. Before considering the ways in which this phantasy relates to and complicates Laing’s theory of disembodiment, I want to consider Tommy’s role. It is significant that it is through Tommy that this entry is narrated, and not by Anna in one of ‘The Blue Notebook’ sections. First of all, the entry echoes an earlier reference in this section (made by Molly) to Tommy jumping out of a window: ‘I got the feeling if I’d said, Jump out of the window, he’d have jumped’ (234). The window in Anna’s phantasy is, in fact, a window in Molly and Tommy’s house. Anna’s entry in ‘The Blue Notebook’, then, emphasises the connection between Anna’s precarious mental health and Tommy’s similar mental state. In this section Tommy is reading ‘all those madness books’ (235) – which might conceivably include The Divided Self – and is struggling with his own ‘divided mind’ (239). Tommy wants to understand Anna’s impulse to bracket off this ‘flash of madness’ (246) and compartmentalise her selves into the four notebooks because he too is struggling with understanding the sense of ‘chaos’ (the sense of ‘madness’) that is produced as one resists the rationale of the modern world.

Tommy’s and Anna’s ‘divided selves’ are represented as a similar response to their – in many ways, shared – environment and ‘unteenable circumstances’, just as Laing will go on to theorise in his later texts. Indeed, it is clear that both Anna’s and Tommy’s sense of division is a response not only to the untenability of their individual situations – their home lives, for instance – but also to the untenability of the much larger systems and discourses within which they must exist and function. As Anna and Tommy discuss the state of their world and the world at large – from Richard’s capitalist empire and Anna and Molly’s now latent communist sympathies to a more general disillusionment, sense of failure and betrayal, questions of power, revolution and war – they find they are both suffering from similar schizoid impulses that require one to carve up the self in
response to a modern world that demands, for instance, a dissociation of reality (death, destruction, cruelty, betrayal) from a programme of supposed ‘progress’ (revolution, modernisation, urbanisation, globalisation). Pre-empting the development of Laing’s argument, Anna and Tommy exemplify the idea that one is driven ‘mad’ by attempting to be ‘sane’ within a mad world. To function ‘sanely’ within a cruel, hypocritical, mad world one must accept and adapt oneself to that world, to that madness. Part of this process involves separating out the conflicting aspects of one’s ‘self’ that arise out of such a state of Being – in order to stay ‘sane’ the self must be divided up and compartmentalised. However, such a precarious strategy for retaining one’s ‘sanity’ is always vulnerable and subject to breakdown. Laing writes that while there is a ‘sane schizoid way of being-in-the-world’ it risks the possibility of advancing into a ‘psychotic way of being-in-the-world’ (17). If this happens, the compartmentalised self is no longer a ‘sane’, if ‘schizoid’, strategy for survival in the world, but rather the beginnings of a much more pronounced – and ‘psychotic’ – withdrawal from the world, including one’s own body. What was once a method of separating out conflicting aspects of one’s ‘self’ in order to exist within a chaotic world, now becomes a process of completely removing that self from the world in order to simply survive. More specifically, this involves a shift in one’s notion of selfhood in which the body is no longer considered as integral to that self – indeed, it becomes something to be feared, rejected and even killed.

Anna and Tommy, like Anna and Saul Green later in the text, are both struggling to maintain their ‘sanity’ and it might seem that they suffer from a similar – even identical – state of madness. In this sense, the text would be very Laingian in the gender neutrality of Anna and Tommy’s madness and, as discussed earlier, this might in fact have appealed to Lessing’s own post-‘sex war’ stance. However, for all the similarities of their madness (the compartmentalised selves, the sense of division, the perceived ‘untenability’ of their worlds), their experience of that madness is fundamentally altered – and gendered – by way of the text’s preoccupation with the way in which their bodies figure within various discourses of madness. For instance, at the beginning of this exchange between Anna and Tommy, madness is immediately situated within the medical model:
‘She calmed herself, thinking: He hasn’t been here five minutes, but his hysteria’s infecting me already’ (236). The idea that two people can be mad together and ‘catch’ madness corresponds, to some extent, with Laing’s understanding of madness within the phenomenological model – that one’s Being does not exist in isolation but is constituted by way of relations with the world and others. In another sense, Anna’s notion of Tommy’s hysteria as infectious – as a contagious disease – aligns his version of madness with the medical model. Anna’s madness is thereby aligned with this model and, with it, the Cartesian binaries on which it is predicated – particularly those lateral associations that have historically linked the mind with the masculine and the sane, and the body with the feminine and the mad. Indeed, the use of the term ‘hysteria’ in this passage, which is etymologically and culturally linked to the feminine, reinforces this association. But Tommy, in surviving his suicide attempt, goes on to ‘cure’ himself by way of this medical model – he is therefore no longer the feminine hysteric but instead identifies himself with the masculine transcendent mind – a mind that is privileged over the (feminine/hysterical) body. Tommy, then, returns to a mode of ‘schizoid-sanity’ by way of the Cartesian discursive structure that favours and prioritises the (male) mind over the (female) body.

That Tommy’s ‘sanity’ is actually still schizoid according to Laing’s phenomenological framework, a complex phantasy of division and bodily transcendence that enables him to continue to function in the world, is interesting in itself but what makes it pertinent to Anna’s mental state is that if she were to accept this version of ‘sanity’ then she would not have access to the mind half of the division in the same way that Tommy does, but would instead be consigned to the body half of the division. Grosz writes that men can access this role of ‘neutral knowers only because they have evacuated their own specific forms of corporeality and repressed all its traces from the knowledges they produce. In appropriating the realm of mind for themselves, men have nonetheless required a support and cover for their now-disavowed physicality. Women thus function as the body for men’. The progression from the schizoid to psychotic state for Tommy makes an almost instantaneous transition from the ‘divided self’ to suicide – that is, a killing of the ‘self’, in its entirety. Anna’s progression,
however, is a gradual descent that advances from the ‘divided self’ to a ‘self’ that becomes less and less sure of its legitimacy – in particular, the way in which that ‘self’ relates to her body. While Tommy is quickly absorbed back into a ‘sane’, if ‘schizoid’, mode of Being after his failed suicide attempt, Anna continues to progress slowly and painfully – if not entirely successfully – towards the psychotic state. During this process, Laing argues, the body becomes a focal point – a target – for all the patient’s ontological anxieties and as such the ‘self’ attempts to disengage from the body and exist as an ‘unembodied self’. Tommy, who can legitimately experience himself as disembodied within the ‘sane-schizoid’ state, does not experience his body in this way and has no need for this process: he simply transitions from ‘divided self’, to suicidal, to ‘cured’. But Anna, who is so thoroughly determined by her body throughout the text – its materiality, its processes, its sex – does experience her body as a focal point for her anxieties. She wishes to escape her body not through suicide – which is a killing of both body and self – but through disembodiment – a killing of the body in order to protect and preserve the self. By way of ‘the unembodied self’ Anna attempts to save and secure her sense of ‘self’ from the body which has become the focal point for her schizoid anxieties.

Although the entry in ‘The Blue Notebook’ might appear to narrate a suicide phantasy, it is actually a phantasy that explores not death but disembodiment. Anna does not die when her body hits the pavement – she (her ‘self’) continues to exist and looks down upon the body she has killed. The death of the body is not the death of ‘Anna’. The entry continues: ‘Suddenly I felt as if I’d flung myself out of the window. I could see myself lying on the pavement. I was two people. Blood and brains were scattered everywhere. I knelt down and began licking up the blood and the brains’ (246). Anna’s entry gives very little away in terms of the motivations behind any of the actions that occur in the phantasy. Even during Tommy’s cross examination, the significance of Anna’s dissociation from the body remains unexplored in favour of the narrative structure of the notebooks. However, by reading Anna’s phantasy in terms of Laing’s understanding of the schizophrenic experiences it becomes clear that it is the content of the phantasy,
and not simply its juxtaposition with the grocery list, that is significant. Laing writes that

the splitting of the self […] forms the basis of one type of hallucination. One of the fragments of the self generally seems to retain the sense of ‘I’. The other ‘self’ might then be called ‘her’. But this ‘her’ is still ‘me’. […] It is in fact such attacks such inner phantoms that compel the individual to say he has been murdered, or that “he” has murdered his ‘self.’ (158)

More specifically, in the case of Anna’s phantasy, or hallucination, it is the way in which the ‘I’ self and the ‘her’ self is figured in terms of the mind (the ‘I’) and the body (the ‘her’). The phantasy is not only another manifestation of Anna’s ‘divided self’, the fragmentation and separating out of the conflicting versions of her self, but it further advances this division to the point at which a much more fundamental rupture between mind and body occurs. The correlation between ‘I’ and self and ‘her’ and body in the phantasy reveals the extent to which Anna is advancing from the relatively ‘sane’, if schizoid, ‘divided self’ (that is the fragmented and compartmentalised self) to the ‘unembodied self’ and, therefore, towards the psychotic, or schizophrenic, way of being-in-the-world. Anna is now ‘two people’ and, although initially this might appear to be a doubling of Anna, it is in fact a dividing. While the Anna that looks down is a conscious, thinking ‘self’, the Anna that has flung herself from the window is now only a body: a corpse, in fact. There are two Annas here but they are not both ‘whole’ Annas in the way that Ella functions as a mirror image of a whole fragmented Anna – here, one Anna is the ‘self’ and one Anna is only the body of Anna. And, not only does Anna experience her sense of ‘self’ as separate from the body, but that body is dead to her, killed of her own volition. The ‘metaphysical’ mind is split, quite literally, from the materiality of the body. Anna is, it seems, ‘the unembodied self’.

By ‘killing’ the body Anna removes that site of perceived weakness and danger and the self is preserved as an unembodied entity that can no longer be harmed by the external world. Indeed, in the phantasy, Anna’s ‘self’ (the ‘I’) is still alive and she (or perhaps ‘it’ – now that the ‘self’ is separated from the body that self might no longer be gendered) looks down from the window at ‘the body’
that she/it has murdered. However, the unembodied Anna does not leave the body that should now be dead to her; instead she is immediately drawn back to it. The unembodied Anna stands over her body, looking, and then she ‘kne[els] down and beg[ins] licking up the blood and the brains’ (246). On the one hand, the Anna-self is able to instantly disappear from the window and reappear on the pavement and is therefore, seemingly, not governed by corporeal laws; but, on the other hand, in order to consume the Anna-body the Anna-self requires a body. As soon as Anna removes her sense of ‘self’ from her material body she appears to construct for herself a phantasy body. She conceives the notion of a ‘self’ that, while able to ‘detach’ itself from the body, is unable to discard that body completely.

In *The Divided Self* Laing acknowledges this difficulty and, in fact, his theory accounts for the continued presence of the body even in experiences of disembodiment – the body does not disappear but rather becomes the core of the false-self system designed to hide, protect and deflect attention away from the ‘inner’ self. Laing writes that ‘instead of being the core of his true self, the body is felt as the core of a false self, which a detached, disembodied, “inner”, “true” self looks on at with tenderness, amusement, or hatred as the case may be’ (69). The body is transformed into a kind of mask or puppet that performs the actions and expectations of the body and embodied existence whilst the ‘self’ remains detached – if not quite indifferent – to that body. In Anna’s phantasy there is little room to develop a false-self system as such (Lessing deals with this more explicitly in *The Four-Gated City*), but, as in *The Divided Self*, Anna is unable to simply ignore the body even after she has dissociated her sense of ‘self’ from its ‘confines’. The false self, according to Laing, is constructed around/upon/through the disavowed body (exactly how is not made clear) – in Anna’s case, she appears to construct a false-body around the unembodied self. Unable to simply dissociate herself from the body, she immediately replaces that body with another. This seems to emphasise not the importance of constructing an acceptable ‘self’ for the body which can then continue to function in the world and mask the ‘inner’ self residing outside or hiding deep inside that body; rather, it emphasises the impossibility, for Anna, of conceiving of any sense of self without reference to the
parameters of bodily existence. In order to ‘be’ Anna – to be a ‘self’ – she must
immediately construct for herself a phantasy, or ‘false’, body.

Indeed, Anna not only immediately constructs a false body for her now
unembodied self but that false body then attempts to ingest the material body from
which the self has fled. The Anna-self resides in its own vampiric, phantasy body
but this immaterial body, which is but a ghost of a body, is insufficient and
Anna’s impulse is to feed on the materiality of her ‘dead’ body. Anna’s actions
appear to be an attempt to re-integrate the two Annas and heal the rupture between
the mind and the body. The Anna-self’s consumption of the brains and the blood
of the Anna-body again reinstates the phenomenological model in which mind and
brain, self and body, must always exist as one, unified concept. The appearance of
the phantasy body and the attempt to consume the dead body both correspond
with the notion that mind and body must be united, even during what is a phantasy
of disembodiment. Laing states that even as the self retreats from the body it also
desires a reconnection with the body in order to participate in the world again – to
be ‘normal’ again. Laing writes that ‘the self then seeks by being unembodied to
transcend the world and hence to be safe. […] Yet the self may at the same time
long more than anything for participation in the world. Thus, its greatest longing
is felt as its greatest weakness and giving into this greatest weakness is its greatest
dread’ (80). Here Laing’s phenomenological framework re-binds the self to the
body even as it theorises its dissociation within the schizophrenic experience. The
schizophrenic dissociates her ‘self’ from the body but simultaneously desires a
reconnection with that body – thus returning her to a ‘true’ phenomenological way
of being-in-the-world. The Cartesian/schizophrenic phantasy of dissociation and
division is in constant battle with the phenomenological ‘truth’ of a unified,
‘whole’ self.

Anna’s phantasy of disembodiment demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining
the schizophrenic/Cartesian divide between mind and body. This can be
explained, as above, by reference to Laing’s phenomenological framework in
which any division of mind from body is only a phantasy of division – and, in
fact, Anna’s disembodiment is quite literally a phantasy: it is a daydream.
However, Anna’s particular difficulties with disembodiment might serve not
simply to reflect Laing’s phenomenological understanding of the nature of (sane) selfhood, but rather the difficulty of attempting to disown the body for women. Although Anna’s disembodiment is not explicitly gendered in the passage, the fact that it is read by Tommy who can sustain a phantasy of disembodiment, that is, of ‘sane’ masculine transcendence, and the fact that the text is so attentive to the specificities of women’s bodies, suggests that Anna’s difficulties in sustaining the schizophrenic division between self and body are directly connected to her sex/gender. Tommy, as I have argued above, will be able to ‘sanely’ transcend the body by way of a Cartesian discourse that privileges the (male) mind. This is not an option for Anna who, within this discursive model, is denied the (male) mind and consigned to the (female) body. It could be argued that the very concept of an ‘unembodied self’ presupposes a ‘self’ that can be conceived of without reference to the sexed body, but the unembodied Anna-self immediately acquires a phantasy body. This demonstrates her inability to conceive of her ‘self’ without reference to the body by which that self comes into being through discursive practices. It also emphasises the importance of the ‘materiality’ of the body – and how this too is produced by discursive means. Anna has no body and yet her narrative must construct a phantasy body, the language of embodiment, in order for her to ‘be’. The ‘phantasy body’ is not a ‘material’ body in the same sense as the corpse it attempts to consume, but the unembodied Anna-self is not conceivable without the discourses of embodiment. How can Anna possibly sustain a phantasy of disembodiment to the extent that the phantasy seems experientially ‘true’ and ‘real’, when her ‘self’ is continually and reiteratively constituted by way of the gendered body?

The appearance of the phantasy body, as well as the impulse to ingest the dead body, seems to point to the problem that there is no ‘Anna’ – no ‘self’ – that exists without the body. The conceptual division of mind and body is constructed and maintained by discursive practices that do not simply associate women with the body and the biological; rather these discourses, as Butler argues, produce the very notion of ‘woman’. Anna’s sense of ‘self’ – her subjectivity and intelligibility – is constituted by way of the body. Thus, Anna’s subjectivity, even if that subjectivity is one of Otherness, lack and materiality, depends upon and is
legitimated by the gender that her sexed body is discursively assigned and made to maintain. Tommy is likewise constituted by way of his sexed body, but the deeply rooted discursive constructions of masculinity, which do not implicate embodiment, make it much easier for him to elevate his ‘self’ from the body. The gendered discourses that maintain Anna’s identity, however, centre upon the female body, its materiality, its biology, its ‘nature’. When Laing introduces his theory of embodiment, as predicated upon the mind/body divide characteristic of the schizoid state, he writes that ‘usually they [the patient] feel more closely identified with the “mind”’ (65). But Laing’s ‘gender neutral’ ‘they’ fails to encompass, and therefore consider, the implications of historical and cultural discourses of femininity that bind women to the body – that construct female subjectivity solely in terms of that body – and complicate any attempt to easily identify with the ‘mind’ half of the mind/body binary.

Unoccupied Bodies

The significance of Anna’s gender in sustaining Laing’s ‘unembodied’ state is explored more extensively in her second phantasy of disembodiment. In the third instalment of ‘The Blue Notebook’ Anna begins to have a recurring dream. Often in these dreams Anna experiences herself as in some way dissociated from her body or the body as freed from its limitations – she can fly, for instance – but they can quickly become nightmares in which she finds herself falling or desperately trying to cling onto her sense of self. Laing writes that ‘in the classical nightmare the dreamer wakes up in terror. But this terror is not the dread of losing the “self” […] At worst, in this nightmare, he is threatened, […] but not with the dissolution of his very being’ (49-50). Anna’s nightmares are not ‘classical’ but ‘schizoid’ because they pose what feels like a very real threat to her existence. One such dream occurs during Anna’s affair with Saul Green, just before she begins ‘The Golden Notebook’. Anna recounts a nightmare in which she is unembodied in a similar way to the first example. Her unembodied self watches her body from a distance as various characters from the earlier sections of the novel attempt to enter it:
I knew I had to get to bed, so I walked carefully over the heaving floor towards it, and lay down. But I, Anna, was not there. Then I fell asleep, although I knew as I drifted off this was not an ordinary sleep. I could see Anna’s body lying on the bed. And into the room, one after another, came people I knew who stood at the foot of the bed, and seemed to try and fit themselves into Anna’s body. I stood to one side, watching, interested to see who would come into the room next. (522)

The body is ‘Anna’s body’ while the self is the ‘I’ that has dissociated itself from that body. Laing writes that in the ‘schizoid state’ of disembodiment the ‘self’ becomes a ‘mental observer, who looks on, detached and impassive, at what his body is doing or what is being done to his body’ (79). The Anna-self, or her ‘mental observer’, looks down at the body from which she has dissociated herself and, although interested in what is happening to that body, she is not currently regarding that body as ‘her’ – it is ‘Anna’s body’ but it is not ‘Anna’. Laing writes that ‘the “self” has become an invisible transcendent entity, known only to itself. The body in action is no longer the expression of the self. The self is not actualized in and through the body. It is distinct and dissociated’ (114). Anna does not ‘kill’ her body, as in the first phantasy; rather, this is a ‘body in action’, albeit sleeping.

This vulnerable, alive body lies on the bed as various people from Anna’s life attempt to penetrate and possess it. Laing writes that ‘the dissociation of the self from the body and the close link between the body and others, lends itself to the psychotic position wherein the body is conceived not only as operating to comply with and placate others, but as being in the actual possession of others’ (144). This is quite literally the case in Anna’s dream. Interestingly, the Anna-body does appear to have some agency in this dream: ‘These people stopped, looked at Anna, and moved on. I stood to one side, wondering: who will she accept?’ (522). ‘She’, the Anna-body, however, is hardly in a position to accept or reject anyone – it is the ‘ghosts’ who seem to decide whether or not to ‘fit themselves’ into Anna; she is but a body lying on a bed, unconscious, passive, empty. There is an illusion of agency here, just as there is an illusion of agency in the schizophrenic’s ‘decision’ to dissociate herself from the world. This illusion breaks down when Paul, an ex-lover of Anna’s who died in Africa, comes into the room next and tries to enter her body: ‘Then I was conscious of danger, for Paul
came in, who was dead, and I saw his grave whimsical smile as he bent over her. Then he dissolved into her, and I, screaming with fear, fought my way through a crowd of indifferent ghosts to the bed, to Anna, to myself. I fought to re-enter her’ (522). When Paul attempts to ‘possess’ Anna’s body he, unlike the other characters, succeeds in threatening her sense of ‘self’ despite her disembodiment. This is primarily because Paul is dead and therefore represents and threatens death for Anna. Theoretically, Anna – as an ‘unembodied self’ – is no longer connected to the body and so is not subject to the threats it might face. However, Anna is clearly terrified that Paul’s possession of her body will result in the death of the body and consequently of her ‘self’: ‘I fought to re-enter her. I was fighting against cold, a terrible cold. My hands and legs were stiff with cold, and Anna was cold because she was filled with the dead Paul. I could see his cool grave smile on Anna’s face. After a struggle, which was for my life, I slipped back into myself and lay cold, cold’ (522-23). Laing explains that while disembodiment is supposed to act as a way of preserving the self – by removing the self from the vulnerabilities associated with embodiment – the self is still ‘subject to all the anxiety it originally sought to evade’ (150). Even in the schizoid state Anna cannot sustain the belief that the unembodied self will survive without the body; but the particularities of Anna’s experience also point towards a much more complex relationship between mind and the gendered body.

Like the vampiric associations of the first episode, this attempt at disembodiment also has supernatural, as well as sexual, overtones. Paul is dead (a ‘ghost’) and also a previous lover of Anna’s. By attempting to enter her body without her consent he is ‘possessing’ her in a demonic sense as well as metaphorically raping her. Like Tommy, Paul’s state of Being is one of ‘masculine transcendence’ – in fact, as a ‘ghost’, Paul represents the ultimate state of disembodiment. Laing’s ‘unembodied self’, severed from the body, still retains a connection – however, tenuous – to that body (for instance, as the core of the false-self system), but the ghostly Paul is a self that no longer has any connection whatsoever with its material body. And, having completely transcended and forsaken his own material body, Paul now attempts to possess Anna’s. Grosz writes that ‘the coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to
inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same
time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal
contact through their access to women's bodies and services’ (15). Paul’s
possession of Anna’s body – his metaphorical raping of her – can be read as a
playing out of this process: Paul, the transcendent male mind, appropriates Anna’s
passive body in order to designate it as the corporeal receptacle for his own
disavowed materiality. The male mind requires the female body to fulfil and
deflect – to stand for and thereby conceal – his own material existence and
processes. Thus, despite Anna’s disembodiment, her body continues to function
within – and be constituted by – those discursive practices that she is attempting
to escape.

Anna achieves a state of disembodiment but, ultimately, this does not enable
her to construct a sense of self that can exist independently from her body and free
from the discourses of sex/gender. As in the first example, once Anna manages to
disconnect from her body she is immediately drawn back to it – she is fascinated
by what is happening to that body that is and is not her. Indeed, what Anna
discovers is that the body she has escaped is not something that can ever be
‘nothing’ to her – rather it is a body that, despite her efforts, continues to exist and
continues to bring ‘her’ into being. The body, with or without her sense of being
lodged within it, continues to be ‘seen’ and brought into existence by way of the
discourses that make that body intelligible as a ‘being’ in the world. This ‘being’–
shaped by the very gendered discourses Anna is attempting to escape – is being
constituted outside of her control. This self is Laing’s ‘false self’ – a body-self
that interacts with the world and performs and meets the expectations of that
world – although, in The Divided Self, Laing (like the body in the passage) retains
a sense of agency in this process. The illusion of agency in this passage is shown
to be just that, an illusion. Butler, in Bodies that Matter, is likewise keen to
demonstrate that any sense of agency in the performance of gender is only an
illusion and that it is not a case of choosing which gender to perform, or how to
perform, or even whether to perform. The self, with or without one’s cooperation,
is constituted by way of a system of discursive practices that make that self
intelligible by way of its sex/gender. Anna believes her body has a choice of
which ghost to ‘accept’ but Paul’s appearance and attempted violation of her body reveals the extent to which, even as an unembodied self, she is subject to determining factors over which she has no control. There is no ‘opting out’ of this sex/gender system. Anna, detached from her body, watches in terror as the body she has escaped – and which should therefore hold no meaning for her anymore – continues to be brought into existence – to be shaped and formed – by way of its sex/gender. Her body is confronted, constructed, and appropriated by a system of discursive practices that have always regarded her as an empty, ‘mindless’ body anyway. In leaving her body she discovers she is not constructing for herself a ‘mind’ that exists independently from the body, but is relinquishing all sense of resistance, futile or not, to those processes and practices that have been denying her that claim. If the mind and body are in fact a unified concept, then in trying to detach the mind from the body Anna only succeeds in constructing a phantasy in which her power to resist the discourses that determine her, however limited that resistance might be, is surrendered. In rejecting the body Anna can no longer control how that body is ‘used’ – how it is appropriated. In order to prevent Paul – or, rather, the discourses of gendered embodiment – from taking complete possession of her body she must return her sense of ‘self’ to that body in order to reclaim what she suddenly realises is ‘[her]self’ – a self that is both mind and body, united and unified. Anna says: ‘I had been delivered from disintegration’ (523).

When Anna has wrestled her body back from Paul she continues to struggle to keep her sense of self and her body united and avoid ‘disintegration’: ‘I said to myself in my sleep, hold yourself together, you can do it if you get to the blue notebook and write’ (523). But when Anna reaches for her pen she finds that she is holding a gun and that the body she is inhabiting is that of a soldier, and not ‘herself’: ‘And I was not Anna, but a soldier […] I understood I was on a hillside in Algeria, I was an Algerian soldier and I was fighting the French. Yet Anna’s brain was working in this man’s head’ (523). The body Anna has fought so hard to reclaim from Paul – from the discourses of gendered embodiment – is, after all, not ‘herself’ but the body of an Algerian soldier. The unembodied self – or ‘Anna’s brain’ – has lodged itself not in her own body but in a male body – and,
just as Paul represents the ultimate ‘transcendent male’, so this body represents the ultimate ‘masculine’ body. It is a soldier’s body – strong, aggressive, powerful, violent, holding his phallic gun. In a reversal of the episode with Paul, Anna is the possessor here – it is she who enters another’s body. Anna, the woman, is the ‘mind’ and the soldier, the man, is the body. Anna is re-enacting the episode with Paul but this time *she* is the disembodied ‘mind’ usually reserved for the male and *he* is the body which is available for her to appropriate. And yet it becomes clear that Anna is unable to claim the body of the soldier as he very quickly overwhelms her sense of self: ‘Then Anna’s brain went out like a candle flame. I was the Algerian, believing, full of the courage of belief. Terror came into the dream because again Anna was threatened with total disintegration’ (523). For a moment she believes she has become the soldier, ‘I was the Algerian’, but in fact she is again threatened with ‘disintegration’ and is quickly expelled from his body. Whilst Paul’s disembodied self threatens the unembodied Anna’s discarded ‘body’, the soldier’s body threatens Anna’s ‘brain’ (or ‘mind’ or ‘self’) – but the outcome is the same: the threat of ‘total disintegration’. As long as her mind and her body are not ‘one’ she continues to risk the complete loss of self: that is, existential death.

Once expelled from the soldier’s body – a male body within which it seems she does not belong and which she cannot control – Anna searches for a new body. The unembodied Anna is flying over the world, searching for a body to lodge her sense of ‘self’ within. Her own body is now forgotten, lost, and, unlike before, she appears to be uninterested in its whereabouts; however, remaining as an unembodied self, flying around, does not appear to be an option – Anna is flying with the express purpose of finding herself a new body to reside within. It is now the unembodied Anna, rather than the discarded Anna-body, which is represented as having some degree of ‘agency’ in this section of the dream. As an unembodied entity she is attempting to secure for herself Paul’s transcendent state as well as his perceived ‘right’ to appropriate the body of the Other. And the body Anna chooses is an Othered body:

I said in my dream: I am here because I want to be a peasant with other peasants […] I came down to the ancient earth of China, and a peasant
woman stood at the door of her hut. I walked towards her, and just as Paul had stood, bending, by the sleeping Anna a short time before, needing to become her, so I stood by the peasant woman, needing to enter her, to be her. It was easy to become her. She was a young woman, and she was pregnant. (523-24)

The body Anna ‘chooses’ is, this time, a female body – a pregnant female body. On the one hand this is a body Anna is familiar with – not only in its sex but in its state of pregnancy. Anna, it appears, chooses a body that is not only similar to the one she has discarded, but also a body that might be considered another ‘ultimate’ example of its sex. If Paul is the ultimate ‘transcendental male’, and the soldier is the ultimate ‘masculine’ body, then Anna has now sought out an example of the ultimate ‘feminine’ body. The simple, peasant woman is ‘mind-less’, she is a mere body that toils, she is young but ‘made old from work’ (524), she is a body that reproduces, and she is a body that is connected to the ‘ancient earth’. This is a body that is ‘easy to become’. Anna, also a young mother, seeks out a body that represents everything she has been wishing to escape but is nevertheless ‘easy’ to inhabit. It is the hypothetical body that she, as a woman, by rights, should inhabit.

In the peasant woman’s pregnant body Anna is returning to – and accepting – a feminine, maternal identity that she both desires and fears. Anna, in many ways, enjoys being a woman and a mother and even entertains the possibility of enjoying being a wife; but she also repeatedly expresses her frustration with her body, its materiality and processes, with how that body’s sex determines how she is regarded, treated, what rights she is granted, what opportunities she is afforded. The Chinese peasant woman’s body is a body that exists outside of Western sex/gender discourses that would turn her against her own body. The peasant woman is, of course, subjected to a very similar sex/gender system as that which Anna is attempting to escape, but (Lessing seems to suggest) the peasant woman has not yet recognised or learnt to question that system. Anna is reconnecting with a female body that – although still defined, constructed and legitimated by gendered discourses – has not yet come to abhor, resist and attempt to defy those discourses. Anna is attempting to return to a female body – maternal, natural, and of the ‘ancient earth’ – that has not yet learnt to resist these associations and the
oppression that stems from them by turning away from and rejecting the body, as Anna has been forced to do.

However, when Anna enters the body of the peasant woman she is not suddenly released from the gendered discourses that determine her sense of self. Although Anna desires ‘dissolution’ (524) she finds that ‘Anna’s brain was in her still, and I was thinking mechanical thoughts which I classified as “progressive and liberal”. That she was such and such, formed by this movement, that war, this experience, I was “naming” her, from an alien personality’ (524). Anna’s ‘brain’ continues to function as ‘Anna’ within this body – and it continues to function as the schizoid mechanised brain automatically churning out thoughts that categorise, explain, justify, ‘name’. Anna cannot simply ‘inhabit’ this body; instead she sets about deconstructing it and making it intelligible by way of the discourses and events that have brought it into being. Anna brings to the body the very things she is trying to escape – the discourses of gender, class, race and history. She classifies, categorises and neatly explains this body. Anna is attempting to submit herself to a body that, while shaped by these discourses, is not aware of their existence, their power and the resistance demanded of her in response to them – instead, her own mind enters this body and immediately constructs it in terms of Western discourses of knowledge and power. Anna tries to allow herself to dissolve – to allow her mind to flicker out in this woman’s body and let go of this mode of thinking and knowing and being – but terror, once more, prevents her from letting go: ‘Then Anna’s brain, as it had done on the hillside in Algeria, began to flicker and to wane. And I said “Don’t let terror of dissolution frighten you away this time. Hold on.” But the terror was too strong. It drove me out of the peasant woman, and I stood to one side of her’ (524). Although dissolution into the peasant woman’s body is seductive to Anna, just as unembodiment is seductive to her as an ontologically insecure person, it is also terrifying. Allowing herself to ‘become’ the peasant woman might be ‘easy’ but it is also a kind of death. To become only a reproductive body, a body shaped by discourses it does not know exist and does not therefore resist, is, again, to relinquish any sense of resistance against the discourses that attempt to constitute her.
The three episodes within the dream – Paul in Anna, Anna in the soldier, and Anna in the peasant woman – each comment upon the need for mind and body to be united, but, more significantly, on why that unification is essential to gender politics. Anna’s own discarded body, the soldier’s body and the peasant woman’s body are all shown to be defined not by the self that lodges within it – which is in all cases the same ‘Anna-self’ – but by the discourses that make the body intelligible by way of its sex/gender and thus produces that self. So when Paul attempts to enter Anna’s empty body this reveals the extent to which Anna’s body – whether she resides in it or not – is defined by a sex/gender system that makes that body available to appropriation from the male and subject to a plethora of gendered discourses that shape and make intelligible that body. When Anna attempts to reverse this process by entering the body of the soldier – when she attempts to take possession and appropriate the male body – she is quickly overwhelmed and expelled from that body. In the peasant woman’s body Anna is unable to subdue her need to categorise, explain and ‘Westernize’ that body and, in fact, subjects this body to the very discursive practices she so despises and desires to escape. In each instance the sex/gender system reasserts itself and foils Anna’s escape. Anna is unable to exist outside of this system as an ‘unembodied self’, or as a male body, or as an ‘ancient’ reproductive body that has yet to be forced to turn against itself. The agency that is repeatedly alluded to within the dream is shown to be merely illusory as Anna is repeatedly left in terror, struggling to hold onto her ‘self’ in the face of dissolution.

And yet whilst the bodies Anna attempts to reside within, including her own, in many ways remain outside of her control and continue to be constituted by gendered discursive practices, each of these instances also features moments of resistance or expresses the need for resistance. When Anna’s terror prevents her from allowing Paul to possess her body, from allowing the Algerian soldier to take over her mind and from allowing her ‘self’ to dissolve into the peasant woman’s body, she is resisting the sex/gender system: she resists allowing her body to be appropriated by men as a receptacle for their disavowed materiality, she resists the male mind’s attempt to ‘extinguish’ her mind in place of its own, and she resists the seductiveness of the reproductive body because it would mean
relinquishing her sense of injustice and defiance at the way in which that ‘easy’ reproductive body is constructed, devalued, and oppressed. In the end, Anna must return to her own body because it is only from within that body that she can secure a sense of self both in terms of a subjectivity born out of and legitimatised by gendered discursive practices and, paradoxically, in terms of a place from which she can enact some form of resistance to those very same discourses. And so when Anna awakes she writes that she is both ‘changed by the experience of being other people’ but that she also ‘did not care about Anna, I did not like being her’ (524). Anna’s return to her body is bitter-sweet. On the one hand she needs to be within her own body in order to enact any kind of resistance – unembodiment, it seems, is not an act of resistance but an act of surrender – but, on the other hand, Anna has been confronted with the way in which her own body is something over which she must struggle for control and which she must wrestle from those discourses that attempt to construct that body as something within which she no longer wishes to reside. Anna writes: ‘It was with a weary sense of duty I became Anna, like putting on a soiled dress’ (524). Anna ‘becomes’ Anna again by returning to her body but it is a body that is ‘soiled’ and that continues to feel as if it is something that is Other to her, something she ‘puts on’ because to not ‘put it on’ would be to forgo any kind of resistance to that ‘soiling’, her ‘duty’, however limited that resistance might be.

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The unembodied self, whilst only a phantasy of Being, is experienced as very ‘real’ for the patients in The Divided Self and exists as an often prolonged, even continuous mode of being-in-the-world for the schizoid self as it progresses to the psychotic state. But Anna’s experiences of disembodiment remain in phantasies and dreams and occur as temporary, unsustainable instances of Being. Laing does write that ‘temporary estrangement of the self from the body may be represented in dreams’ (79) but this is in reference to a ‘normal’ person’s response to a threatening situation. This ‘normal’ person ‘develops a schizoid state’ (79) in order to temporarily escape that situation. But Anna, particularly in the second
extract which occurs immediately before her final breakdown, is not simply flirting with ‘schizoid states’ to escape a specific threat to her notion of selfhood. She is, as Laing writes of the schizophrenic, living in ‘a world that threatens [her] being from all sides, and from which there is no exit’ (79). The fact that Anna’s experiences of disembodiment remain fleeting might be explained, then, not by reference to the severity of Anna’s mental state, but rather because her notion of selfhood is so thoroughly and inextricably caught up with her body. Anna cannot sustain her phantasy of disembodiment because of the way in which women come to ‘be’ women, to ‘be’ subjects, to ‘be’, though the reiterative performance of their gendered identity on and through the body. However much Anna might wish to escape those gendered discourses that tie her to her body, however much she might desire the ‘gender neutrality’ of the schizoid bodies in *The Divided Self*, however much she would like to become ‘unembodied’, she finds herself immediately returning to that body. The madness of gender, the ‘mad’ discourses that perpetuate a naturalised link between one’s gender and the sexed body, mean that Anna is not simply oppressed or degraded by those day-to-day confrontations with her own sexuality, but that her own sense of subjectivity, of being-in-the-world, is born out of those discourses. This process of coming into existence – of being made intelligible by way of her body and its sex – has, as I have argued, contributed to Anna’s schizoid way of ‘being-in-the-world’ but it has nevertheless also provided her with a legitimate and intelligible place, role and identity within the world. How then can Anna hope to separate her sense of self from the body when that sense of self is constituted and maintained by way of her body?

The two episodes of disembodiment in *The Golden Notebook* initially appear to exemplify Laing’s idea of the unembodied self but they also go beyond his theory in order to examine how Anna’s gendered embodiment complicates this experience. In doing so, the text questions the credibility of Laing’s use of ‘gender neutral’ bodies in order to think about an experience – that is, of (metaphysical) mind divided from (material) body – that is historically and culturally so pervasively gendered. Lessing’s text, unlike Laing’s, does consider the experience of disembodiment as a gendered experience. Consequently, Anna’s attempts at freeing herself from her body are much more complex and sinister experiences
than Laing’s explanation of disembodiment in *The Divided Self* might suggest. The body Anna is trying to escape is not a ‘gender neutral’ body but a body that is constructed by way of its sex/gender; her attempts at disembodiment are caught up with a plethora of gendered discourses that seek to fix her, as a woman, within that body. Achieving and sustaining a state of disembodiment is much more difficult for Anna than for the ‘gender neutral’ bodies in Laing’s text. This suggests that the potential for the schizoid experience of disembodiment to offer women a sense of ‘self’ outside of the sex/gender system – and thereby call that system into question – is unlikely to be realised. *The Golden Notebook* articulates the need for a new way of securing a legitimate subjectivity, outside of the sex/gender system, but ultimately it struggles to imagine an alternative or a way out – even from within anti-psychiatric discourses of madness.

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2. Grosz, p. 6.
3. I am using ‘phantasy’ as opposed to ‘fantasy’ in relation to notions of ‘being’ throughout because, firstly, Laing uses this term and secondly, as Barbara Creed writes in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), the term ‘phantasy’ emphasises ‘the Freudian sense in which the subject is represented as a protagonist engaged in the activity of wish fulfilment. “Fantasy” sometimes has the connotations of whimsy – a notion I wish to avoid’ (6). ‘Phantasy’ better expresses how the hallucinatory and schizophrenic manifestations of “self” are connected both to Freudian notions of desire as well as the ‘phantoms’ of other fragmented versions of self.
4. Laing does not adhere to any one theory of existential-phenomenology. In the preface to the first edition of *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* [1960] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), Laing writes that ‘the reader versed in existential and phenomenological literature will quickly see that this study is not a direct application of any established existential philosophy’ (9). There are several brief references to Heidegger in *The Divided Self* and Laing uses his term ‘Being-in-the-world’ extensively throughout the text. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
8. The pervasiveness of the Cartesian model as a framework for Being might seem to suggest, by way of this argument, that a large majority of the West should therefore be in the ‘schizoid’ state rather than the sane. Indeed, Laing will come to argue just this. However, for the time being, it is helpful to consider sanity and madness in their traditional senses (as Laing does in *The Divided Self*) before complicating (in fact, reversing) these terms as Laing and Lessing attempt to do in their later works.
9. Laing, p. 66.
10. Laing, p. 43.
11. Laing, p. 43-46.
12 Laing, p. 66.
13 Laing, p. 66.
14 Laing, p. 65. Like Laing, I use the terms ‘unembodied’ and ‘disembodied’ interchangeably throughout.
15 Cohn, p. 62.
16 This distinction will become less pronounced in Laing’s later works. Indeed, even in The Divided Self there is a brief gesture toward the development of Laing’s thinking: ‘It is possible to suggest from another point of view that the individual should try to disentangle himself from the body and thereby achieve a desired state of discarnate spirituality’ (66).
17 See ‘The Case of Peter’ in Laing, The Divided Self, pp. 120-133, (p. 133).
19 Butler, p. 23.
**Being-in-the-Body**

When Anna, with a ‘weary sense of duty’, ‘becomes’ Anna again she switches on the lights and hears the movements of her lover, Saul Green, in his room above: ‘As soon as I heard him my stomach clenched up, and I was back inside sick Anna who had no will’. Anna’s experiences of disembodiment have emphasised the need to be ‘within’ her body in order to make claim to a legitimate subjectivity based on her sex/gender and to resist those same gendered practices that produce such subjectivity; but this does not mean that embodiment or resistance is easy or conflict free. On returning to her body Anna is still ‘sick’ and within this sick body she finds she has ‘no will’. Just as being ‘in’ her body does not magically return her to a state of ontological security, neither does it magically produce the will and ability to begin resisting gendered discourses. There is no simple transition from the relinquishment of resistance in the state of disembodiment to the ‘will’ to resist once she is again embodied. Anna has begrudgingly returned to the body she discovers she is unable to discard, but that body is still, to her, a ‘soiled dress’ (524).

The use of the term ‘sick’, a term associated with the medical model of madness, might suggest that when Anna fails to access a sustained state of disembodiment she turns away from anti-psychiatric models of madness in favour of a return to more conventional psychiatric discourses based on medical and psychoanalytical models. Anna does think back to her sessions with Mother Sugar during this time, she does refer to herself as ‘sick’ and ‘ill’ throughout, and at one point she even rings a psychiatrist (on Saul’s behalf) who encourages her to come in for an appointment. However, the doctor’s advice is clearly not derived from conventional psychiatry but rather from anti-psychiatric discourses: ‘Please don’t be alarmed, you’d be surprised how many charming people are walking our streets, the mere ghosts of themselves. […] I’d say, hazarding a guess, and not saying a word too much, it’s all due to the times we live in’ (501-502). Anna does not make an appointment but her madness is resituated within anti-psychiatric discourses of madness. Despite her failure to divide mind from body she continues to experience herself as a ‘divided self’, as fragmented and multiple, as a host of hallucinatory other selves: ‘I went to sleep […] conscious of two other
Annas, separate from the obedient child’ (492). And as Anna finally breaks down at the end of ‘The Blue Notebook’ that breakdown is still very much framed by an anti-psychiatric understanding of the experience. Anna’s decision not to make a doctor’s appointment is a refusal to submit herself to the psychiatric ‘establishment’; by refusing the intervention of doctors and asylums, Anna is aligning herself with the anti-psychiatric challenge to the hegemony of the psychiatric system.

However, whilst Anna’s eventual descent into madness is clearly framed by anti-psychiatric discourses of madness, it does deviate from Laing’s account significantly. As I have already argued, Anna is unable to sustain a state of disembodiment because her gendered subjectivity is constituted by way of her body. To deny herself her body is to deny any sense of self and to deny herself the ability to challenge and re-imagine that construction of gendered selfhood. Laing’s notion of the ‘unembodied self’ as a schizophrenic strategy for survival does not work for Anna – either in terms of its usefulness as a mechanism to escape the anxieties associated with ontological insecurity or in its promise of escaping the confines of the body and destabilising the discourses of gendered embodiment. Thus, Anna’s continued experience of madness is an embodied experience but it is also still an experience represented in terms of Laing’s account of the schizophrenic experience. Anna is back ‘inside’ her body but she is still subject to those schizophrenic fears and anxieties disembodiment seeks to evade. And so, when Anna returns to her body she is almost immediately confronted with an instance of Laing’s first schizoid anxiety, engulfment: ‘I felt as if sucked into quicksand, or pushed on to a conveyor belt that would carry me into grinding machinery’ (525). But this example from Laing does not exist in isolation. Not only has Anna failed to evade the anxieties of the ontologically insecure by remaining embodied, she has also failed to evade the inscription of gendered discourses upon her body. The reference to engulfment is therefore supplemented by an example of Anna’s being reabsorbed into discourses of gender normality:

He [Saul] sat on my bed and he took my hand and looked at it with a consciously whimsical admiration. I knew then, that he was comparing it with the hand of a woman he had just left. […] He remarked: ‘Perhaps I
like your nail varnish better after all.’ I said: ‘But I’m not wearing nail varnish.’ (525)

Saul’s taking of her hand, his comment on her (non-existent) nail polish, and her inference that he is comparing her to another woman, all entangle Anna within the codes and power play of the heterosexual sex/gender system. This passage emphasises the expectations associated with a female gender performance, both in terms of the nail polish that signals femininity and the suggestion of male infidelity that signals female degradation. This passage also emphasises Anna’s lack of control over how her body is read (or ‘misread’) and constructed by others. But the significance of this passage is in its juxtaposition, its further entanglement, with the instance of engulfment. After Anna’s failed attempts at disembodiment the text cannot continue to follow the pattern of schizophrenic experience as set out by Laing – it must evolve to account for Anna’s embodiment and the necessity of the body in constructions of female subjectivity. So, when Anna is overcome by the fear of engulfment the gendered nature of her embodiment is immediately foregrounded in order to account for the return of this anxiety.

The consequences of Anna’s return to the body appears to have produced a need to qualify, or supplement, Laing’s understanding of the schizophrenic experience so that it takes into account how women’s experience of schizophrenia necessitates a being ‘in’ the body. The Golden Notebook remains committed to understanding madness in terms of anti-psychiatry. The novel does not fall back on discourses of psychoanalysis or the medical model of madness – Anna does not return to Mrs Marks or see a doctor despite the severity of her breakdown. However, anti-psychiatric theories are now explored alongside a particular awareness of how they might be adapted in order to account for Anna’s continued embodiment. The emphasis shifts from Laing’s rather rigid and prescriptive account of the experience of schizophrenia – in which bodies are generic, neutralised, absent – to an account that attempts to examine schizophrenic experience in terms of a material body that has proven unavoidable, undividable, in fact, integral to any notion of female subjectivity – sane or mad.

The novel, then, ends with an account of a specifically gendered experience of breakdown that takes place ‘within’ the body but which nevertheless remains
broadly Laingian in its representation of madness. It does not discard Laing’s work but rather adapts and modifies it in order to account for how the female body complicates and troubles his theories. This is most evident, and most significant, in Anna’s experience of ‘self consciousness’. *The Divided Self* breaks down the experience of schizophrenia into four broad, chronological stages: the onset of ontological insecurity, the establishment of the unembodied self, the creation of the false-self system and, lastly, the experience of self-consciousness. As the schizoid state develops, the patient will traverse these stages until the point at which she progresses to the psychotic stage and becomes a ‘chronic schizophrenic’. Anna’s madness advances to the ‘unembodiment’ stage but then falters. Although there are certainly examples of a ‘false self’ at various points in the text, because Anna never fully disengages from the body there is no need to create a false-self system. However, the stage of ‘self consciousness’ is attained.

Laing explains that ‘self-consciousness, as the term is ordinarily used, implies two things: an awareness of oneself by oneself, and an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else’s observation. […] In the schizoid individual both are enhanced and both assume a somewhat compulsive nature’ (106). Anna is subject to self-consciousness and demonstrates an acute awareness – or interest in – how her body functions in both of these ways. In *The Divided Self* this observing of the body takes place from a state of disembodiment and the body is caught up in the performance of the false-self system. The dissociated ‘inner’ self, or ‘mental observer’, watches with great interest how the rejected body, acting as the outer shell of the ‘false self’, projects a ‘self’, performs for others, and interacts with the world. This experience of compulsive self-consciousness is also closely linked to feelings of guilt, inadequacy and inauthenticity. The body is still a target for schizoid anxieties and a site of conflict – on the one hand the presence of the body signals one’s continued existence but on the other hand it reveals that existence to others and puts the self back in danger. Laing writes that ‘the “self-conscious” person is caught in a dilemma. He may need to be seen and recognized, in order to maintain his sense of realness and identity. Yet, at the same time, the other represents a threat to his identity and reality’ (113). The patient (Laing uses ‘James’ as an example) seeks out others to confirm his
existence but fails to ‘be himself’ (114) and instead hides behind a false-self system that interacts with others while protecting his inner self. Laing writes that ‘here the “self” has become an invisible transcendent entity, known only to itself. The body in action is no longer the expression of the self. The self is not actualized in and through the body. It is distinct and dissociated’ (114).

However, Anna’s awareness of her body does not occur in terms of a dissociated, invisible, transcendent entity that observes ‘the body in action’ as part of the false-self system. Anna is embodied and, therefore, has not had to establish an extensive and pervasive false-self system (which is not to say that Anna’s fragmented self does not also include various ‘false selves’ too). In the epigraph to this section, Elaine Showalter writes about the ‘unoccupied bodies’ of madwomen but, at the same time, the ‘nagging and perpetual “withness” of their flesh’. The body does remain as object in so far as it is still Other to her and implicated in the various divisions of self that Anna constructs, but her ‘self-consciousness’ is not experienced from outside of the body and it is not simply an observing of the ‘body as an object in the world’ (106). Anna’s self-consciousness is an examination of her body from within that gendered body. Like Laing, Showalter sees the madwoman’s preoccupation with appearance as a way to confirm her continuing existence but Anna is not simply looking to her body to grant her an identity – she is becoming aware of the ways in which the body already constitutes her notion of self and how gendered discourses of embodiment are rendering that self ‘mad’.

For the remainder of the text Anna is continually aware of her bodily processes, sensations and materiality. Her body is not an abstract, transcendent, ‘gender neutral’ ‘concept’ – it is ‘her’, in its materiality, its sex, its processes and its biology. Anna’s interest in her body as a material fact indicates a desire not to escape the body or find confirmation of her ‘realness’ through its recognition, but rather to come to terms with how her body relates to her sense of selfhood and to the complex systems of discursive practices that grant her an intelligible subjectivity.
Bodily Matter(s)

Margaret Moan Rowe compares Virginia Woolf’s murder of the ‘Angel of the House’ to a similar impulse in Lessing’s fiction, what she calls the murder of the ‘Angel of the Body’.4 Rowe writes that ‘in *The Golden Notebook* Lessing kills “the Angel of the Body” and gets close to what Woolf said she and no other woman writer had been able to do: “telling the truth about my experiences as a body”’ (42). Ruth Saxon, also writing on Woolf and Lessing, recognizes a similar correlation: ‘Doris Lessing seems to succeed where Woolf fails, writing about the female body in all its realistic, even clinical, detail, including menstruation, pregnancy, abortion, childbirth, varieties of lovemaking, illness, weight gain and loss, aging, and deterioration’.5 However, Rowe writes that ‘in reality, in spite of all the attention to woman’s body from adolescence into postmenopausal old age, Lessing, like Woolf, perpetuates a deep schism between mind and body, in which the female body is seen as a shell that severely limits woman’s experience and both distorts and disguises her identity’ (95). Anna’s failings at disembodiment do not allow her to completely disown her body in favour of a masculine transcendence, but this is equally not a triumph of mind/body unity. Throughout the text it is clear that Anna’s body is represented in terms that reinforce, but also complicate, the conceptual boundary between mind and body.

Before Anna’s breakdown at the end of the novel, her body and bodily processes have been represented in terms of the discursive means by which they can be articulated. There are two particular bodily processes that Anna confronts in her notebooks: sex and menstruation. Both of these topics appear as problematic subjects that Anna must force herself to write about. In fact, she is challenging herself to write about the material body and face the difficulties associated with finding an appropriate and truthful way in which to describe bodily processes and experiences. In the first section from ‘The Yellow Notebook’, for instance, Anna is writing Ella’s story but her authorial voice breaks in to discuss the problems she is experiencing in trying to write about sex: ‘Sex. The difficulty of writing about sex, for women, is that sex is best when not thought about, not analysed. […] As for me, Anna, it was a remarkable fact that until I sat down to write about it, I never analysed how sex was between myself
and Michael’ (199-200). Ella reappears very quickly and her story continues but
Anna’s need to break into the text to explain and justify her need to write about
sex, and also the difficulties of doing so, emphasises the absence of the material
body within traditional literary discourses and the absence of a suitable discourse
with which to write about women and sex. Anna must draw upon the discourses
available to her and those discourses are, of course, male discourses. Anna
confronts the question of how to write about sex as a woman and from a woman’s
perspective when that woman’s experience is entangled with misogynistic
discourses that deny her sexuality, agency and pleasure.

One of the most infamous assertions of this ‘feminist’ text, however
ironically intended, is that women are unable to orgasm when not in love with
their sexual partner. Here the body is wedded to the emotional self in such a way
as to emphasise the dynamics of mind (emotional self) and body and the
relationship between them, but also, to produce an extremely conservative reading
of sexual difference. During Ella and Julia’s second discussion on the topic of
‘free women’, Ella asks: ‘And what about us? Free, we say, yet the truth is they
get erections when they’re with a woman they don’t give a damn about, but we
don’t have an orgasm unless we love him. What’s free about that?’ (404). Ella’s
statement perpetuates a construction of female sexuality that is dependent upon an
emotional self that the body responds to in kind. According to Ella (as written by
Anna) women experience orgasm only in response to, first of all, a male lover,
sexual pleasure is dependent on love, and orgasm is only ‘real’ and ‘true’ if
experienced through vaginal penetration rather than clitoral stimulation. Anna
writes that ‘as when Ella first made love with Paul, during the first few months,
what set the seal on the fact she loved him, and made it possible for her to use the
word, was that she immediately experienced orgasm. Vaginal orgasm, that is. And
she could not have experienced it if she had not loved him’ (200). Ella’s – or, as
Ella asserts later in the text, women’s – pleasure is reflective of and dependent
upon her own, and her partner’s, emotional position within the relationship.

In addition to this, Ella makes a marked distinction between vaginal and
clitoral orgasm: ‘There are several different sorts of clitoral orgasms, and they are
more powerful (that is a male word) than the vaginal orgasm. […] but there is
only one real female orgasm and that is when a man, from the whole of his need and desire takes a woman and wants all her response. Everything else is a substitute and a fake’ (200). The ‘real’ orgasm, that is, the orgasm stimulated by vaginal penetration, can only occur, Ella insists, when both partners are in love and committed to the relationship. This is a text that relies upon ‘real men’ to provide ‘real orgasms’. The passage also emphasises the need to use ‘male words’ in order to talk about her own sexuality – something that does not necessarily express accurately her own experience. Her own experience is, after all, caught up with, and experienced by way of, sexual discourses that are male.

Ella’s belief in the value of ‘feminine’ vaginal orgasm over ‘masculine’ clitoral orgasm has nothing to do with the degree of pleasure each generates. She admits, using those ‘male words’, that they are ‘more powerful’ and ‘there can be a thousand thrills, sensations, etc.’ (200), but female sexual pleasure is discursively constructed as dependent upon its role as pleasure giving. This is not to imply agency or ‘activity’ in the woman’s role – she is passively offering a pleasure that he can take. Indeed, Anna discusses this with Saul later in the text when she asks him why men say they ‘they get laid (male) […] always in the passive’ when surely it is they who ‘lay’ (489-490). Anna is exposing the hypocrisy of Saul’s ‘modern’ sexual phraseology – a phraseology that reverses the discursive construction of male virility and female passivity. Saul’s ‘modern’ sexual discourse actually only perpetuates the structures it appears to be refiguring. This phrase, ‘he got laid’, seeks to conceal the lack of female sexual agency – the man ‘gets laid’ by the woman. The phrase suggests female sexual agency when in fact it is simply recasting the woman who ‘lays’ as predatory and himself as her victim – this discourse does not empower but casts them, once more, on the ‘whore’ side of the old virgin/whore dichotomy.

When Ella tries to express her feelings about sex and love and pleasure to Paul he responds by saying: ‘Do you know that there are eminent physiologists who say women have no physical basis for vaginal orgasm?’ (200). He recounts the time he went to a lecture led by a male professor who had proven that female swans do not orgasm. The professor uses this ‘useful scientific discovery as a basis for a short discussion on the nature of the female orgasm in general’ (201).
Paul retells the story, challenging the validity of Ella’s – women’s – sexual experiences and their ability to ‘know’ and own those experiences and, consequently, their bodies. Whilst Ella laughs at the absurdity of the claim, she nevertheless casts women’s ability to orgasm only within the confines of a loving relationship, something she soon comes to experience herself: when she feels Paul emotionally pulling away from her she ‘no longer ha[s] real orgasms’ and comments: ‘In short, she knew emotionally what the truth was when her mind would not admit it’ (200). In fact, not only does Ella construct her sexual pleasure as reliant upon love but once the relationship ends she can find no pleasure in other men (whom she does not love) nor through masturbation which results in only ‘a sharp violence’ (277). There are no Irigarian ‘self caressing lips’ here and eventually Ella ‘becomes completely sexless’ (404). When Paul abandons Ella, any notion of a sexual body disappears with him. She becomes, in effect, sexually dormant. The female sexual body in this text is a passive body, a body awakened only by the male touch, and a body that betrays the emotional inner self. This is not a ‘free body’ but a body experienced as bound by its gender and materiality as constructed by male discourses of female passivity.

As well as examining how to write about sex from a female perspective, Anna also confronts the problem of writing about menstruation. In the second section from ‘The Blue Notebook’ Anna makes a promise to ‘write down, as truthfully as I can, every stage of a day. Tomorrow’ (297). She is then disconcerted that on that day she begins her period and that she must ‘write’ this bodily process. In fact, the day has already begun with a literary problem – that is, how to write about the ‘impersonal’ sex between Anna and Michael, a passage which demonstrates the very argument she has made earlier in ‘The Yellow Notebook’. The passage illustrates the way in which women are apt to write not of the ‘technical’ aspects of sex but instead the emotional impact of sex. Indeed, throughout the morning Anna is anxious because she believes Michael will soon end their relationship. Her morning routine is thus divided between a loyalty towards Michael (a loyalty she fears he does not reciprocate) and a desire to care for and protect her daughter, Janet. The passage perfectly illustrates Anna’s ‘divided self’ as she adopts different attitudes, different personas, for the role of
lover and the role of mother. Although obviously complicated and difficult, Anna
does write about these things (we assume) truthfully. However, when she realises
that she has started her period she almost breaks her promise to write the entirety
of the day: ‘(I wondered it would be better not to choose today to write down
everything I felt; then I decided that the instinctive feeling of shame and modesty
was dishonest: no emotion for a writer). I stuff my vagina with the tampon of
cotton wool’ (303). Anna can write a version of sex (a non-technical version that
borrows from male discourses) and she can write her own schizophrenic division
of self, but she is filled with ‘shame and modesty’ when it comes to writing her
period. The following line, ‘I stuff my vagina’, purposely seeks to erase that sense
of shame with a defiant, almost vulgar, gesture. And yet she then writes ‘I roll
tampons into my handbag, concealing them under a handkerchief, feeling more
and more irritable’ (303). The concealing of the tampons reinforces the sense of
shame and modesty Anna believes is ‘dishonest’. Indeed, over the course of the
day, Anna repeatedly writes about her sense of shame and her anxiety in
connection with her period: ‘I am worrying about this business of being conscious
of everything so as to write down, particularly in connection with my having a
period. […] I am thinking, I realize, about a major problem of literary style, of
tact’ (304). But what Anna quickly realises is that this is not a problem of style
and tact but a much more complex and fundamental problem that constructs
femininity in terms of the Other.

When Anna menstruates she experiences that bodily process in terms of a
disjuncture between the freedom from gendered societal norms she is seeking and
the material body within which she must function. Anna’s menstruating body is
fraught with connotations of dirtiness, smelliness and otherness. What initially
poses itself as a literary problem quickly becomes a revealing narrative on the
ways in which the menstruating body betrays the construction of female identity.
Anna writes:

And I read recently in some review, a man said he would be revolted by
the description of a woman defecating. I resented this; because of course,
what he meant was, he would not like to have that romantic image, a
woman, made less romantic. I realize it’s not basically a literary problem
at all. For instance, when Molly says to me, with her loud jolly laugh:
I’ve got the curse; I have instantly to suppress my distaste, even though we are both women; and I begin to be conscious of the possibility of bad smells. Thinking of my reaction to Molly, I forget about my problems of being truthful in writing (which is being truthful about oneself) and I begin to worry: Am I smelling? [...] the smell of faintly dubious, essentially stale smell of menstrual blood, I hate. And resent. It is a smell that I feel as strange even to me, an imposition from outside. Not from me. (304)

Laing writes that the self-conscious ‘schizoid individual is frequently tormented by the compulsive nature of his awareness of his own processes, and also by the equally compulsive nature of his sense of his body as an object in the world of others’ (106). But Anna’s fear of smelling and her feeling that the smell is something that is disconnected from her, from her body, is not presented exactly in the same terms as Laing’s schizoid anxieties or in terms of disembodiment. When the subject of Laing’s case study, Peter, expresses anxiety about a smell emanating from his groin, Laing explains that his self consciousness in this respect ‘was a desperate attempt to retain that very dimension of a living body’ (131). He later concludes that Peter had ‘severed himself from his body by a psychic tourniquet and both his unembodied self and his “uncoupled” body had developed a form of existential gangrene’ (133). But Anna’s period is not an ‘existential’ period and she is not unembodied – she is ‘in’ her body and her body is emanating menstrual smells, however faint or concealed. Anna writes that it is ‘faintly dubious’, it is ‘stale’ it is ‘a bad smell’ (304). Anna’s self-consciousness, even before her failed attempts at disembodiment and her eventual breakdown, are not straightforwardly anti-psychiatric because it is not a self-consciousness fixated upon ‘existential’ bodies or smells – Anna does smell and she therefore does, legitimately, feel the need to be self-conscious, to monitor that smell, and to police the body in accordance with a mythic ‘romantic image’ of femininity. However, Anna’s insistence that her experience of her body – as a body that menstruates and something that must emulate an idealised image of femininity – is somehow external to her returns us once more to not only discourses of anti-psychiatry and the body as ‘an object in the world’ (106), but also the female body as Other.
Anna is not simply reiterating an anti-psychiatric discourse of self/body division but is coupling that discourse with a much more profoundly gendered discourse – one that figures the reproductive body as something alien, something Other, something abject, even to oneself. Menstrual blood is, of course, a primary example of the abject, of that which disturbs boundaries, particularly bodily boundaries. Usually Anna will ‘deal with [it], without thinking about it’ (304) but having to write down her period emphasises not its effect on her body – the pain is ‘slight’ (304) and the inconvenience is not great – but its effect on her sensibilities, particularly the way in which it puts her in a position where her body is seemingly turned against her. Although Anna fixates on the smell of menstrual blood and the resentment that it fosters, this is prefaced by reference to a man’s reaction to the idea of a woman defecating. Anna’s resentment toward the smell of menstrual blood is actually resentment toward the way in which all women’s bodily processes are constructed as Other and thereby succeed in turning women against their own bodies. Anna is attempting to be ‘truthful in writing (which is being truthful about oneself)’ – she is trying to write (right?) her ‘self’ but in doing so she is repeatedly confronted with inadequate discourses that turn her against her own body. Anna eventually does ‘censor’ her writing and writes very little else about her period for the rest of the day’s entry; however, she cannot erase the material body from the page. It has already been ‘written’ and is committed to the page along with the feelings of fear and resentment that accompany the process and the sense of shame and modesty occasioned by having to write about it. Although Anna is not yet able to write about her period – and sex – without shame or without recourse to ‘male words’ she is nonetheless imprinting the page with her body and its materiality.

Of course, menstruation has a history that links it to sickness and discourses of madness: it is the ‘female trouble’ that, as Butler writes, ‘thinly veiled the notion that being female is a natural indisposition’ (xxvii). As Molly’s use of the phrase ‘the curse’ testifies, such associations do not always simply dissipate as they come to be found medically or socially absurd; rather they are metamorphosed and reabsorbed into current cultural practices and imaginings so that, for instance, nineteenth-century ‘female troubles’ become twentieth-century
‘pre-menstrual syndromes’, and nineteenth-century ‘hysterics’ become twentieth-century ‘schizophrenics’ – all categories which continue to be linked to ‘the notion that being female is a natural indisposition’. Anna, who ends ‘The Blue Notebook’ by describing her body as ‘sick’ and ‘soiled’, has so far found it difficult to find the words and terms to construct a sense of self that resists such discourses. However, when she realises that she is not going to be able to achieve a state of sustained disembodiment and therefore is not able to become an ‘unembodied self’ she realises that she must reconcile her sense of self with the gendered discourses that construct and bind her body. When Anna puts away the coloured notebooks and begins ‘The Golden Notebook’ she once more sets herself the challenge to ‘write herself’, this time with ‘all of myself in one book’ (528).

‘The Golden Notebook’

It is in this last notebook section of the novel, ‘The Golden Notebook’, that Anna finally dismantles the divided self and confronts the ‘chaos’. By confronting her madness she seeks to regain her ontological security: ‘And now it was terrible, because I was faced with the burden of recreating order out of the chaos that my life had become’ (538). Before examining Anna’s final breakdown in ‘The Golden Notebook’ it is necessary to distinguish between Anna’s madness and that of her lodger and lover, Saul Green. The breakdown Anna has been struggling against throughout the text occurs in tandem with Saul’s breakdown. Anna and Saul’s complicated relationship plays out the ways in which love and hate and sex and madness are intimately intertwined and the ways in which those experiences occur not in isolation but in the interactions between self and other. In Self and Others: Further Studies in Sanity and Madness, published a year after The Divided Self in 1961, Laing writes about the various ways in which selfhood is experienced and understood in relation to a social network of other people. In one chapter, entitled ‘Driving the Other Crazy’, he writes that there are ‘ways and means whereby one person’s position may be rendered untenable by others’. It is this proposition that Laing will build upon with A. Esterson in Sanity, Madness and the Family and will lead to his indictment of the harmful contradictory and
hypocritical nature of the family (or, rather, the mother). But in *Self and Others*, Laing is setting out the various ways in which anyone can adversely affect the other, particular with regard to sexual interactions. Saul’s effect on Anna resonates with the list of examples Laing borrows from H. F. Searles’ 1959 article ‘The Effort to Drive the Other Person Crazy’, which Laing interprets as ‘any kind of interpersonal reaction which tends to foster confusion’ (133). These include:

1. *p*[erson] repeatedly calls attention to areas of the personality of which *o*[ther] is dimly aware, areas quite at variance with the kind of person *o* considers himself or herself to be.
2. *p* stimulates *o* sexually in a situation in which it would be disastrous for *o* to seek sexual gratification.
3. *p* simultaneously exposes *o* to stimulation and frustration or to rapidly alternating stimulation and frustration.
4. *p* relates to *o* at simultaneously unrelated levels (e.g. sexually and intellectually).
5. *p* switches from one emotional wave-length to another while on the same topic (being ‘serious’ and then being ‘funny’ about the same thing).
6. *p* switches from one topic to the next while maintaining the same emotional wave-length (e.g. a matter of life and death is discussed in the same manner as the most trivial happening).

(131-132)

All of these points accurately describe Saul’s effect on Anna throughout their relationship. However, despite Saul’s arrival and his madness coinciding with Anna’s, and despite his treatment of her, the text does not allow the reader to blame Saul for Anna’s breakdown. He may be ‘driving the other crazy’ but Anna has been verging on crazy from the opening pages of the novel when she declared ‘everything’s cracking up’ (25). Saul then, however negative an influence upon Anna, is not the cause of her madness – but the way in which their relationship develops as they descend into madness together is significant. Lorna Sage reads it as ‘a calculated – if crude – parody of the conventional happy ending, in which two become one, and so symbolise the underlying orderliness of social life. Here, two become legion, and represent a world of conflict. Saul and Anna are truly children of violence’. Anna and Saul are in conflict with one another as well as in conflict, together, with the world in which they must function. This is because the world they wish to escape, the social structures which govern acceptable behaviour and determine structures of power, is always present in the relations between self and other. The relations between self and other are, of course, part of those social structures and subject to the same laws. Anna and Saul’s
heteronormative relationship depends upon the performance of their respective gender identities and, though their madness in some senses challenges the boundaries of these performances, they are, Nonetheless, continually forced to acknowledge, partially negotiate, and ultimately reinscribe the gender norms upon which their union is based.

Another way in which Laing theorises the relationship between self and other, this time in The Divided Self, is by way of the ontologically insecure person’s need and simultaneous fear of the other. This, he argues, can result in a love-hate, but highly dependent, relationship with another person:

If the individual does not feel himself to be autonomous this means that he can experience neither his separateness from, nor his relatedness to, the other in the usual way. A lack of sense of autonomy implies that one feels one’s being to be bound up in the other, or that the other is bound up in oneself, in a sense that transgresses the actual possibilities within the structure of human relatedness. (52-53)

Anna certainly feels herself to be bound up with Saul. She experiences her sense of self as caught up with Saul’s to such an extent that she does transgress the boundary that separates self from other: Saul’s moods, his fear, his madness, infect Anna - just as Tommy’s hysteria was ‘infecting’ (236) her earlier in the novel. Again, phenomenological models and medical models converge: a medical discourse is being employed to express the significance of the other upon the self. But here, the relationship between self and other is not simply being expressed in terms of the phenomenological importance of oneself ‘in relation to’ the other, but rather in the transgression of the very boundaries that separate one’s notion of one’s self from the other. According to Laing, this ‘means that a feeling that one is in a position of ontological dependency on the other (i.e. dependent on the other for one’s very being), is substituted for a sense of relatedness and attachment to him based on genuine mutuality’. Anna and Saul’s relationship has moved beyond the ‘relatedness’ and ‘attachment’ of a love affair and is rather, at least in Anna’s case, demonstrative of an ‘ontological dependency’ that can oscillate between ‘complete isolation’ and ‘complete merging of identity’. These two extremes are ‘equally unfeasible’ and as such the relationship is permeated with fear and anxiety. In ‘The Blue Notebook’, Anna writes that ‘it was love from fear,
and the Anna who was afraid responded, we were two frightened creatures, loving through terror’ (493). Saul and Anna feed off of one another’s insecurities and fear in, what Laing terms, a ‘vampire-like attachment’ (53). In fact, Anna describes Saul’s effect on her in precisely these vampiric terms. In the short story synopsis from ‘The Yellow Notebook’ that corresponds with Saul,\(^\text{13}\) Anna writes: ‘Her personality as “an artist” goes into his, he feeds off it, works from it, as if she were a dynamo that fed energy into him. Finally he emerges, a real artist, fulfilled; the artist in her dead’ (469-70). This synopsis also contains echoes of Paul’s attempt to possess her body, as well as the mechanistic metaphors of much earlier in the text, when Anna sees her brain as a ‘ticking’ machine (359). The various discourses Anna has been subjected to, or constructed herself in terms of, are reappearing and closing in on Anna. It is, therefore, particularly significant that Anna and Saul’s relationship is based not only on sex and fear but is also caught up with their own aspirations as ‘artists’ – as writers. As such, language, writing, and various gendered discourses are central to the ways in which Anna and Saul interact and express their particular experiences of madness. They argue over words, over meanings, they write journals which the other will secretly read, they fight over the golden notebook which Saul scribbles in, and, most significantly, they ‘read’ one another’s bodies and postures and words in terms of a madness that is highly gendered.

Anna’s breakdown is caught up with Saul’s and her sense of self is so thoroughly entangled with his that she says: ‘I understood I’d gone (18*) right inside his craziness. […] I could no longer separate myself from Saul’ (512). The short story synopsis the asterisk refers back to concerns a woman who changes personalities in response to ‘one man who is a psychological chameleon’ (473). Thus many Lessing critics have been apt to read Anna’s and Saul’s respective experiences of madness as not only similar but in fact the same madness: they ‘reflect’ back one another’s madness. Margaret Moan Rowe writes that ‘Anna takes on Saul’s madness’ (44-45), Ruth Whittaker writes of how ‘Saul both initiates and echoes Anna’s symptoms of madness’,\(^\text{14}\) Jeanette King writes that ‘the breakdown of barriers between Anna and Saul includes him in Anna’s sense of self’,\(^\text{15}\) and Mona Knapp writes that ‘Anna and Saul absorb each other’s
personality’.\textsuperscript{16} Even Lessing, in the Preface, writes that ‘they “break down” into each other. […] They hear each other’s thoughts, recognize each other in themselves. […] You can no longer distinguish between what is Saul and what is Anna’.\textsuperscript{17} Anna and Saul descend into madness simultaneously, they share that experience of madness, they are both mad, together – this is true, but it does not mean that their experiences of that madness are identical. As in the earlier episodes with Tommy, sex/gender difference means that the correlation between Anna’s madness and Saul’s madness is not nearly so straightforward. The relationship between Anna and Saul, instead, emphasises the way in which the sexed body influences the schizophrenic experience. Anna and Saul, like Anna and Tommy, experience madness in significantly different ways because of the way in which that experience of madness is tied up with the sexed body and thus constructions of gendered subjectivity. Saul’s madness functions not as a mirror image of Anna’s madness, but rather reflects back a distorted image of her through the prism of the (‘mad’) male gaze. Saul’s madness might, on one level, function in order to express humanity’s unity and the phenomenological fluidity of divisions between self and other, but on another level his madness functions in order to contrast with and emphasise the specifically gendered and embodied schizophrenic experience that Anna suffers.

**Male** Self and **Female** Other

The initial meeting between Anna and Saul immediately foregrounds the different ways in which they experience their bodies and, therefore, the different ways in which they will experience their madness. When Anna first meets Saul it is his physical appearance which initially unsettles her: ‘I was uncomfortable with him, I didn’t know why, something in his manner. And there is something upsetting about his appearance, as if one instinctively expects to find something when one looks at him that one doesn’t find’ (482). What ‘one doesn’t find’ is a secure sense of ‘self’. Saul, who arrives already in the schizoid state is, feasibly, already ‘unembodied’. Indeed, he certainly appears to be exhibiting a false-self system. Saul, the ‘psychological chameleon’ (473), continually switches between his multiple personalities. Mona Knapp calls him a ‘multiple schizophrenic, who
unpredictably assumes and sheds half a dozen personalities’ (62) and Anna never knows which Saul she will encounter: ‘I was thinking how, in any conversation, he can be five or six different people’ (501). In Laing’s terms, Saul has become an ‘unembodied self’ and the body which he has transcended is now the centre of a false-self system of multiple personalities that he enacts through that body. What Anna finds so ‘upsetting about his appearance’ is the way in which the body is but a shell upon which a series of personalities are projected and acted out. Saul has successfully dissociated himself from his body and acquired the schizophrenic state of disembodiment and (male) transcendence. In fact, Saul’s body is, quite literally, disappearing: he has lost a considerable amount of weight when Anna meets him. She calls him a ‘thin bony man in loose hanging clothes’ (484). Anna also infers that he feels he is ‘being spied on’ (482) and it appears that this indication of Laing’s theory of self-consciousness is leading Saul to perform a highly stylized and self-conscious masculine bodily identity:

I saw his pose, standing with his back to the window in a way that was like a caricature of that young American we see in the films – sexy he-man, all balls and strenuous erection. He stood lounging, his thumbs hitched through his belt, fingers loose, but pointing as it were to his genitals. […] And Saul stood lecturing me about the pressures of society to conform, while he used the sexy pose. It was unconscious but it was directed at me, and it was so crude I began to be annoyed. (484)

Laing would argue that this is not an ‘unconscious’ pose but rather the product of acute self-consciousness. The pose is part of the false-self system employed to protect the inner self. Saul’s body, even as it enacts a stereotype of masculine virility, is diminishing, both literally as he loses weight and figuratively as his inner self withdraws from the world and the materiality of the body.

Anna will come to respond to these different personalities but these are only reflections of Saul’s false self and not performances of a false-self system of her own. Unlike Saul, Anna is not an ‘unembodied self’. Anna is still a ‘divided self’ but not in terms of disembodiment. Rather Anna’s division is characterised through the fragmentation of self, the compartmentalisation of self, and the hallucinatory ‘other’ versions of self that haunt her. Laing writes that ‘the self in chronic schizophrenic states seems to fragment into several foci each with a
certain I-sense, and each experiencing the other fragments as partially not-me’ (158). Anna continues to experience multiple ‘I’-senses but none of these can transcend the body. Throughout the remainder of the text Anna is acutely aware of how her body is functioning not as an entity separate from her ‘self’, or assigned to one particular fragment of self, but as part of all her versions of selfhood and therefore the ways in which those various, sometimes conflicting, versions of ‘self’ are constructed by way of her body. So when Anna’s sense of self seems to correspond to Saul’s numerous false-selves it emphasises how her own various feminine gender identities are constructed specifically in response to those performances of masculinity.

Anna observes Saul’s performances, or parodies, of masculinity – sometimes manly, sometimes boyish, sometimes patriarchal, sometimes egomaniacal, sometimes intellectual, sometimes artistic, sometimes misogynistic, the ‘crude American’ (490), sometimes ironically gallant, the ‘heroic cowboy’ (485) – but they do not simply act as masks to protect Saul’s inner self; they also act upon Anna’s body. The false-self system born out of Saul’s own ontological insecurity and schizoid state creates a myriad of masculine poses that Anna unwillingly responds to in terms of her own performances of femininity – performances that she then enacts, unlike Saul, from within the sexed body. Thus, Anna relates Saul’s masculine ‘cowboy pose’ (484), to her own construction of gendered selfhood: as she passes him she says, ‘I’m sorry I’m not dressed like Marlene Dietrich on her way to the back room’ (487). Anna’s sarcastic comment emphasises the relation between the masculine pose and the expected corresponding feminine pose – as well as how each pose is in effect only a parody of an already unnatural gender performance. That said, just half a dozen lines later it is clear Anna has, however unwillingly, responded to Saul’s cad-like masculinity: ‘I was going to fall in love with Saul Green. […] [A] calm, secretly triumphant determination grew, and this feeling was related to the rake’s pose, thumbs in his belt, and the cool sardonic stare’ (488). Although Anna has ridiculed the process by which his pose attempts to initiate a ‘feminised’ response she nevertheless finds herself succumbing to a version of womanhood that is reflected back at her from his masculine performance. Each of Saul’s masculine
performances initiates a corresponding version of womanhood that is inscribed upon Anna’s body. As I have argued throughout, Anna’s sense of self is constituted by way of her sexed body, and that sexed body is constituted in adherence to heteronormative discourses. From within this sex/gender system Anna is forced to construct her body and her sense of ‘self’ in relation to the heteronormative system – in response to the masculine pose that determines her place within this system and grants her a legitimate gender identity.

Elaine Showalter, in the epigraph to this section, writes of the way in which the incarcerated madwoman’s body is reflected back at her through the other female bodies that populate the asylum and therefore confirm her existence and grant her an identity. But throughout *The Golden Notebook* it has been men, not women, who have served as either initiators of, or companions in, madness for Anna: Tommy, Richard, Ronnie, Paul, and now Saul. Jeanette King writes that the men in *The Golden Notebook* are depicted ‘as “naming” women, using the patriarchal order to define and thus limit women […] [and] women, in turn, collaborate in this process. […] They fall in love with those men who “name” them, who give them a distinct and authorized sense of identity’. Anna is not looking at other women’s bodies in order to seek ‘confirmation [she] exists’, but rather looking at the male body – and her own body by way of the masculine gaze – to confirm her existence and construct for herself an identity. Anna’s notion of selfhood is continually complicated and distorted by Saul’s male gaze, the masculine performances he enacts, and the gendered discourses he employs. Saul inscribes upon Anna’s body the gender identity that legitimates their heterosexual relationship. Anna to some extent collaborates with this gendering and allows herself to fall in love with Saul (and in doing so couples her madness with his). However, because it is a male body she sees reflected back at her, and not other female bodies, she is also interrogating the means by which her body, and her self, are being constructed by way of these processes in contrast to the male body/self.

Anna says that Saul’s pose and his lecture on ‘the pressures of society to conform’ are like ‘two different languages being spoken to me at the same time’ (484). Anna sees hypocrisy in Saul’s self-conscious gender performance combined with a lecture on the ‘pressures of society to conform’ (484). For Saul,
of course, the two ‘languages’, one of gender and one of revolutionary politics, need not overlap, and he does not register the contradiction, but Anna is acutely aware of the ways in which various structures of power and discursive practices produce and maintain heteronormative gendered identities that must conform to the sexed body. In fact, later Saul will tell Anna that ‘I’ve come to the conclusion I’ve always been a hypocrite, and in fact I enjoy a society where women are second-class citizens, I enjoy being boss and being flattered’ (526). Before Anna and Saul sleep together she confronts him about his attitude towards women and, more specifically, the language he uses to describe them:

The other day you were talking about how you fought, with your American friends, about the way language degraded sex – you described yourself as the original puritan, Saul Galahad to the defence, but you talk about getting laid, you never say a woman, you say a broad, a lay, a baby, a doll, a bird, you talk about butts and boobs, every time you mention a woman I see her either as a sort of window-dresser’s dummy or as a heap of dismembered parts, breasts, or legs or buttocks. (490)

The way in which Saul speaks about women – the kinds of discourse he uses – divides and separates the female body into its (sexual) constituent parts. Under this male gaze Anna not only experiences her body as an object in the world but as a mere collection of parts readily available for man’s consumption. Elizabeth Grosz writes that ‘in the experience of breasted existence in society, for example, breasts are an inherent bodily attribute subjectively lived and at the same time function as objects, both for men and women. […] The relations between immanence and transcendence, between owning and being a body, between subject of object or one subject and another, are not the same for women as for men’. Anna’s madness, in contrast to Saul’s madness, is experienced in conjunction with an examination of her self as immanent rather than transcendent. Thus, as Anna and Saul both progress to the ‘psychotic’ stage they progress along very different routes. Saul disowns the body which his gender allows him to so easily transcend and so his madness can neatly follow Laing’s basic tenets of the schizophrenic experience. Anna, meanwhile, must continue to ‘own’ her body and therefore Lessing must move away from Laingian principles in order to account for her particular gendered and embodied experience of madness.
The final section of ‘The Blue Notebook’ and ‘The Golden Notebook’ demonstrates the very different gender constructions that Anna and Saul inhabit. Saul, throughout these sections, expresses his particular madness in terms of a tirade of language. The text is punctuated by his rants, all characterized by his repetitive use of the personal pronoun: ‘I I I I, like a machine-gun ejaculating regularly’ (554). Laing writes that ‘there is still an “I” that cannot find a “me”. An “I” has not ceased to exist, but it is without substance, it is disembodied, it lacks the quality of realness, it has no identity, it has no “me” to go with it’ (172). Anna ‘listens to the words spattering against the walls and ricocheting everywhere, I I I, the naked ego’ (546). The ‘I’-Saul calling out for the ‘naked ego’, is, in Laing’s terms, the inner self that Saul has so expertly hidden beneath his false-self system and that he now discovers is as dead and as ‘unreal’ as the selves he performs for the external world. Laing writes that ‘the inner self itself becomes entirely unreal or “phantasticized”, split, dead, and no longer able to sustain what precarious sense of its own identity it started with’ (138):

The self can be ‘real’ only in relation to real people and things. But it fears it will be engulfed, swallowed up in any relationships. If the ‘I’ only comes into play vis-à-vis objects of phantasy, while a false self manages dealings with the world, various profound phenomenological changes occur in all elements of experiences. Thus the point we have already got to is that the self, being transcendent, empty, omnipotent, free in its own way, comes to be anybody in phantasy, and nobody in reality. (143)

Saul, who has dissociated himself from his body in favour of a phantasy of a ‘transcendent’, even ‘omnipotent’, state of disembodiment, finds that his unembodied, inner self has all but vanished and he is now left shouting out ‘I I I I’ into the large room, desperately attempting to re-manifest his self in language. Saul’s ‘unembodied self’ is possible because of those gendered discourses that associate masculinity with the mind, reason and logic; but Saul’s ‘unembodied self’ is not simply a masculine transcendence but also a schizophrenic disembodiment in which the mind, the ‘self’, already metaphysical, is becoming less and less tangible, less and less ‘real’. Indeed, in order to shore up that association of man and mind, Saul directs his tirade towards Anna, and all women: ‘for now it was not only I I I I, but I against women. Women the jailors,
the consciences, the voice of society, and he was directing a pure stream of hatred against me, for being a woman’ (546). Saul attempts to protect the ‘naked ego’ from the ‘superego’ that he imagines is embodied by women. Ironically, he sees women as the ‘the jailors’, the ‘voice of society’. The ‘I’ Saul is attempting to re-establish is an ‘I’ that is ‘against women’, an ‘I’ that comes into being only by way of opposing itself to ‘women’ and, by extension, reconstructing his sense of the masculine ‘I’ against Anna’s female body. According to Laing, as the inner self becomes more and more dissociated from the external world it becomes ‘more and more charged with hatred, fear, and envy’ (140). Indeed, after he directs his tirade against women at Anna, who cries, he punishes her: ‘he dragged me up, scandalized and lustful, and came into me, very big like a schoolboy, making love to his first woman, too quick, full of shame and heat’ (546-546). This is a physical act that firmly resituates Anna as a mere body, a receptacle for his lust, but Saul remains safely distanced from his own physicality – the false self of the ‘guilty schoolboy’, the ‘good American boy’ (547), takes credit for this act and Saul, the ever diminishing ‘I’, remains safely dissociated from his body and its materiality. The only ejaculation that this inner self takes credit for is the ‘machine-gun ejaculation’ of words, of language, of the phallus as opposed to the penis. Saul’s madness is not a madness of the body, it is a madness expressed in language, in the symbolic. Saul uses what Anna calls a ‘hot aggressive language, words like bullets’ (554). Saul’s language is a masculine language, phallic and violent. His rants are fervently seeking to reaffirm his existence in the symbolic, metaphysical realm of masculine selfhood and transcendence, to assert his ‘I’-dentity at the expense of the material body which he assigns to Anna.

During Saul’s tirade, Anna lies meekly on the floor, listening. While Saul shouts, Anna continues to suffer debilitating cramps: ‘I lay on the floor […] and felt the tension lay hands on my stomach. Sick Anna was back. […] I could feel the violence of his black power attack every nerve in me, I felt my stomach muscles churning, my back muscles tense as wires’ (545). Whilst Saul is the ‘naked ego’ Anna is (literally) the naked body. He occupies the realm of language and transcendence – however schizophrenic – and Anna occupies her body. Denied recourse to the ‘unembodied self’, Anna’s madness is not expressed as an
exhausting procession of false selves and angry tirades that send ‘words spattering against the walls’. Hers is a madness that is not expressed as a struggle for a metaphysical existence that can deny the body and remain intelligible, but rather as a struggle with her material existence. As Anna descends ever deeper into her particular madness, she becomes ever more aware of the materiality of her body and how that materiality has been constructed in terms of the abject. From ‘within’ the body Anna’s madness expresses itself most forcibly in terms of physical sickness and repulsion. Julia Kristeva writes that ‘the abject has only one quality of the object - that of being opposed to I’.22

If Saul is the disembodied ‘I’ seeking his corresponding ‘me’, then Anna is the embodied self seeking to reconcile that self with her body. For the remainder of the text, and her ‘madness’, Anna attempts this by examining the various ways that she is made to feel about her body and how she feels in that body. This includes the body as the Other (to the male mind as well as to her sense of self); as object (of Saul’s male gaze); as both subject and as abject (of her own sense of selfhood); and as gendered, as female, as ‘her’. During the novel as a whole, Anna has been attentive to the ways in which she experiences her body, her materiality, and how multiple gendered discourses she has encountered throughout the text – including the medical, the biological, the genetic, the mythic, the romantic, and the anti-psychiatric – create and shape that experience. Anna, in confronting her madness, must now also confront the ways in which her body has been discursively constructed and how this has come to constitute her sense of conflicted and fragmented selfhood.

**Confronting the Female Body in Madness**

In ‘The Golden Notebook’ Anna finally embraces the chaos, inconsistencies, and contradictions she has worked so stringently to keep at bay throughout the novel. The survival strategies she has relied upon are either removed (the coloured notebooks), or have broken down (the unembodied self), or have been refused (psychoanalytic help). Anna is now left to ‘confront’ her madness outside of conventional treatments or discourses of madness. This confrontation involves an examination of her particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’ and, as I have argued,
this is, for the madwoman, always also a ‘being-in-the-body’. Anna’s final breakdown is shared with Saul but her experience is not the same as his – she is tied to her body in ways that he is not, although his gaze and his words remain integral to Anna’s sense of herself and her body. Thus, when ‘The Golden Notebook’ section opens, it is through her body that Anna registers her current psychic state.

Anna and Saul have ‘made love’ (531) and they have laughed together; when he leaves her she experiences a ‘moment of pure happiness’ (531). This is because by having sex with him she has given him the gift of inspiration. He says: ‘Well now perhaps I can work’ (531). Anna recognises the same ‘egoism’ (531) she feels when she wants to work and she laughs. But when Saul leaves to ‘work’ Anna does not also ‘work’ – that is, write – but instead remains naked in the bed. She has given to Saul precisely what she in fact needs. However, she is able to ignore her own need because she has given the gift of inspiration to Saul and therefore fulfilled her ‘duty’ as his lover. But this is not a role Anna wishes to fulfil and her ‘moment of pure happiness’ is a lie which, once confronted, sends her spiralling back towards depression. Throughout ‘The Blue Notebook’ and ‘The Golden Notebook’ Anna’s feelings for Saul oscillate between hatred and love, fear and passion. Just as Laing theorises, Anna moves between moments of feeling completely isolated and cut off from Saul and moments in which she cannot distinguish herself from him. So, when Anna feels ‘pure happiness’ it is only for the brief amount of time that she can sustain ‘lying to [her]self’ (531). She pretends that ‘the fear, the terror, the anxiety’ are external to her and not ‘inside [her]’ (531). And yet, just half a dozen lines later, she ‘watche[s] [her] happiness leak away’ (531-532). What is particularly interesting though is the way in which that happiness and misery is connected not only to Saul but to how she feels within her body.

When Anna is experiencing her ‘moment of pure happiness’ she defines the ‘I’ that ‘needed that moment’: ‘me, Anna, sitting naked on the bed, my breasts pressing between my naked arms, and the smell of sex and sweat. It seemed to be that the warm strength of my body’s happiness was enough to drive away all the fear in the world’ (531). The body is ‘me’, it is ‘Anna’, and the body is even
‘happy’. This is not a body Anna wishes to escape, or a body that feels alien to her. It is also a body that luxuriates in its sexuality, its materiality, its bodily contours. This is a female sexed body and it is also a strong, powerful body that she ‘owns’ wholeheartedly. Her body reflects – in fact, embodies – her emotional state. This conception of embodied selfhood reinstates a sense of mind/body unity, although it also invokes the problematic relationship between the (feminine) emotional self and bodily pleasure that leads to Anna/Ella’s belief that women do not orgasm when not in love. Anna’s anti-psychiatric goal might be to unite mind and body and once more experience the body as integral to her notion of selfhood, and thus regain an ontologically secure state of being, but her larger goal is to confront the way in which that body’s sex constitutes a gendered identity which is untenable for her but which she cannot easily escape. Therefore, the ‘lie’ that Anna tells herself, that all her fears and terrors and anxieties do not exist ‘inside [her]’, and which allows her to feel her ‘body’s happiness’, must be faced.

When Anna hears Saul’s pacing footsteps above her this quickly occurs: the ‘happiness leaked away’ (531). Anna’s perception of her self and her body also reverses and the ‘sick Anna’ returns: ‘My stomach clenched. I watched my happiness leak away. I was all at once in a new state of being, one foreign to me. I realized my body was distasteful to me’ (531). Anna’s ‘new state of being’ – an advanced schizoid state of being – turns herself against her body once more. She is still ‘in’ the body, but it is ‘distasteful’. Anna continues:

I remembered Nelson telling me how sometimes he looked at his wife’s body and hated it for its femaleness; he hated it because of the hair in the armpits and around the crotch. Sometimes, he said, he saw his wife as a sort of spider, all clutching arms and legs around a hairy central devouring mouth. I sat on my bed and I looked at my thin white legs and my thin white arms, and at my breasts. My wet sticky centre seemed disgusting, and when I saw my breasts all I could think of was how they were when they were full of milk, and instead of this being pleasurable, it was revolting. This feeling of being alien to my own body caused my head to swim. (531-532)

Like the ‘new state of being’ that is foreign to her, Anna also feels ‘alien’ to her own body. It is perhaps significant that it is not the body that is alien but the self that is alien to the body. The body has been accepted as the basis of ‘her’ – of her
identity, of the gendered construction of a legitimate subjectivity – but Anna is
struggling to match her sense of self to that body. It is the ‘self’ that is not
corresponding to the identity her body constructs for her. Anna, as ‘embodied’, is
exposed to the very imagining of the female body she has been avoiding – the
female body as disgusting, an all encompassing, devouring monster. She
experiences her body briefly as warm, strong, happy, but, prompted by the sound
of Saul’s footsteps above her head (he is quite literally ‘walking all over her’), she
is plunged back into the paradox that is female embodiment. Her body is abject,
she is what Barbara Creed terms ‘the monstrous feminine’. 23

Creed summaries Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject in terms of the human
subject as related to ‘(a) the “border” (b) the mother-child relationship and (c) the
feminine body’ (8). Later Creed writes that ‘the more critically popular images of
woman, those which represent woman as monstrous also define her primarily in
relation to her sexuality, specifically the abject nature of her maternal and
reproductive functions’ (151). When Anna looks at her body through Nelson’s
male gaze (which is projected onto his wife and then back at Anna) she sees her
body in these ‘abject’ terms – as that which disturbs and transgresses social and
bodily borders: virgin/whore, human/animal, inside/outside, maternal/sexual.
Creed develops these ‘abject’ qualities alongside Freud’s theories of castration
and ‘the Freudian position that woman horrifies because she is castrated’:

Whereas Freud argued that woman terrifies because she appears to be
castrated, man’s fear of castration has, in my view, led him to construct
another monstrous phantasy – that of woman as castrator. Here woman’s
monstrousness is linked more directly to questions of sexual desire than
to the area of reproduction. The image of woman as castrator takes at
least three forms: woman as the deadly femme castratrice, the castrating
mother and the vagina dentate. (7)

Creed revises Freud’s ‘Little Hans’ case study and argues that Hans’ phobia of his
mother’s genitals is not so much connected to her castration but rather to her
ability to castrate (89) by emphasising Hans’ memories of ‘the mother’s genitals
[as] bloody; […] that the girl’s genitals are like lips; and oral sadistic fears [that
are] associated with breastfeeding’ (98). Creed then goes on to consider how this
image of the castrating female genitals can be seen to ‘pervade[] the myths and
legends of many cultures’ in the sense that ‘the threatening aspect of the female genital is symbolized by the *vagina dentate* or toothed vagina’ (105). When Anna looks at her body by way of Nelson’s male gaze she sees it in terms of his castration anxiety. Laing connects castration anxiety specifically with self-consciousness and guilt over a desire for superiority: ‘every time his body is on show, therefore, the neurotic guilt association with this potential avenue of gratification exposes him to a form of castration anxiety which “presents” phenomenologically as “self-consciousness”’ (108). By assuming Nelson’s gaze, Anna is also subject to Nelson’s castration anxiety and also the ‘self-consciousness’ of the schizoid state as redirected back at herself; thus her gaze transfigures her body into a monstrous spider, her vagina its black body with a ‘devouring mouth’. This image of her body is clearly connected to Creed’s refiguring of the male castration anxiety as fear of women’s ability to castrate. The female body is a predatory spider whose spindly legs will ‘clutch’ her male prey to her ‘devouring mouth’ and castrate him. Both the female body and female sexual desire is therefore figured as monstrous, as castrating, as not only transgressing her own ‘feminine’ nature but by doing so threatening male virility and power. In addition, and of particular significance to Anna, is the way in which, as Grosz writes, ‘the fantasy of the *vagina dentate*, of the non-human status of woman as android, vampire, or animal, as voracious, insatiable, enigmatic, invisible, […] castrator/decapitator of the male, dissimulatress or fake, predatory, engulfing mother, are all consequences of the ways in which male orgasm had functioned as the measure and representative of all sexualities’.24

Considering Anna’s own conceptualisation of sex in terms of male experience (penetrative orgasm as the ‘goal’ of intercourse) as analogous with female fantasies of romance (penetrative orgasm as the ‘proof’ of love), it is not surprising that when she observes her sexed body it is discordant – sex is constituted in male terms but the female body is invested with gendered discourses that legitimate female sexuality only in terms of reproduction, not pleasure.

Indeed, while Anna first constructs her body in terms of this monstrous, female sexuality she swiftly switches to include her maternal body. But when she
looks at her body in terms of its reproductive functions she sees it as equally monstrous. She looks down at her breasts she remembers them as ‘full of milk’ and, as such, ‘revolting’. The rest of her body is a mere collection of meaningless thin limbs, white sticks that protrude uselessly from the dual foci of female sexuality and reproduction: a ‘wet sticky centre’ and breasts ‘full of milk’. Just as Nelson hates his wife’s body for its ‘femaleness’, so too does Anna. Her body is disgusting to her because it ties her to those roles she does not wish to be defined by – lover and mother. Her body is not ‘for her’ but for others. It is a body that serves Saul, serves Janet, and serves the perpetuation of the sex/gender system in its very materiality. It does not serve Anna. It is ‘alien’ to her and it makes her ‘head swim’. Seeing her body through the male gaze causes her mind to become dizzy and confused – this construction of the female body, as sexual and as reproductive, does not, of course, require a mind. The mind can slip away, disappear, leaving only the ‘sticky centre’ and lactating breasts.

But Anna is unwilling to succumb to an identity that is devoid of the thinking mind and centred only on a material body that functions for others. With an effort Anna regains clarity by ‘anchor[ing] herself’: ‘clutching out for something, to the thought that what I was experiencing was not my thought at all. I was experiencing, imaginatively, for the first time, the emotions of a homosexual’ (532). Anna explains that ‘for the first time the homosexual literature of disgust made sense to me’ (532). In one sense, Anna is seeing the heteronormative female body through the (male) homosexual gaze which, she believes, finds her body repulsive. In another sense this statement refers back to the passage in ‘The Blue Notebook’ in which Anna recounts Mother Sugar’s lesson about ‘obsessions of jealousy being part homosexuality’ (512). Anna’s relationship with Saul is fraught with fears about his fidelity. It is significant that Anna’s experience of homosexuality is only ‘imaginative’ – Anna’s repulsion toward homosexual relations remains firmly in place and her ‘homosexual’ vision of her own body is thoroughly caught up with that ‘disgust’. The heterosexual male gaze, the homosexual male gaze, and her own imaginative ‘homosexual’ gaze (which is ‘not my thought at all’), all construct the female body in terms of a repulsive sexuality that Anna does not associate with her sense of self. The body
is thus the abject – that which is ‘alien’ and ‘foreign’ to her. It is not, however, that which, as Kristeva writes, ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ (4) – this construction of the female body is part of the ‘order’ that secures her identity as woman, be it as lover (monster) or mother (angel). In killing Rowe’s ‘The Angel of the Body’ (42) Anna seems to have simply replaced her with ‘The Monster of the Body’.

When Saul enters the room and sees her ‘in a fug of stale self-disgust’ (532) he is, as Anna predicts, similarly disgusted: ‘It was too dark to see his face, but the shape of his body, standing alert by the door, expressed a need to fly, to run from Anna sitting naked and repulsive on the bed. He said in the scandalized voice of a boy: “Put some clothes on’” (532). Saul’s reaction mirrors Anna’s own perspective on her body (which was already a mirror of his/Nelson’s imagined response to her) but once he leaves the flat Anna’s feelings of repulsion leave with him: ‘As his feet went down the stairs, my mood of self-disgust went with him. I sat and luxuriated in my body’ (533). Released from his presence and his male gaze Anna is able to reassess her body – to experience her body outside of the dominant masculine discourses that construct her as sexual monster (lover) or functional angel (mother). Her body is now something inscribed not with the male discourses of virgin/whore but with the personal discourse of her self and her life: ‘Even a small dry wrinkling of skin on the inside of my thigh, the beginning of being old, gave me pleasure. I was thinking: Yes, that’s as it should be, I’ve been so happy in my life, I shan’t care about being old’ (533). Here the body is no longer being viewed through the sex/gender system that can only read her body in sexual and reproductive terms. Her gaze no longer only sees her vagina and breasts but sees – and values – her limbs, the tiny wrinkles of skin, her body’s gradual maturation. She makes a narrative of her body, inscribing upon it her own history and, therefore, her role not as a wife or a mother but as a writer. This version of her body might still register its sexual and maternal history but it is not defined by them.

Anna’s glimpse of a body that exists not for others but for herself and is constituted not by the sex/gender system but by her own life history is just that – a glimpse. Just as her homosexual gaze is something ‘imagined’, so too is this
fleeting moment of mind/body unity. The body that Anna sees exists in an ‘imagined’ gender-neutral world, outside of social structures of power and the gendered discourses that support those structures. Unsurprisingly then this moment of luxuriating in her body, as before, is only momentary and she immediately spirals back down into her ‘fug of stale self-disgust’: ‘But even as I said it, the security leaked away again. I was back in disgust. I stood in the centre of the big room, naked’ (533, my italics). Anna crawls to the bed and lies down, ‘covering myself’ (533). Anna’s brief moment of mind/body unity, of ontological security, ‘leak[s] away’ and is once more replaced with a sense of disgust and shame directed at a body that betrays her mind – she returns again to a state of ontological insecurity.

Anna cannot escape the schizoid state and she oscillates violently between moments of extreme, crippling self-consciousness and moments of ‘pure happiness’ in which mind and body briefly reunite. However, by way of these alternate readings of her body she comes to realise the significance of her relationship to her body to her mental state:

*I stood in the centre of the big room, naked, letting the heat strike me from the three points of heat, and I knew, and it was an illumination – one of those things one has always known, but never really understood before – that all sanity depends on this: that it should be a delight to feel the roughness of a carpet under smooth soles, a delight to feel heat strike the skin, a delight to stand upright, knowing the bones are moving easily under flesh. If this goes, then the conviction of life goes too.* (533)

By examining her body in terms of those various discourses and gazes that construct ‘her’ in terms of her sex, Anna comes to recognise that how she feels about her body is directly connected to how ‘secure’ she feels. Anna is finally able to grasp Laing’s central tenet of ontological security and sanity: that the individual’s body is their ‘starting-point’ and that ‘the experience of his body [is] a base from which he can be a person with other human beings’ (67). What Anna realises is that this is not a straightforward process of simply ‘being’ a body or being ‘in’ a body, but is a much more complex process of performing and negotiating various gender norms to the extent that those performances construct her sense of identity and selfhood. Although Anna is ‘in’ her body, that body is
still ‘an object in the world of others’ – or, rather, for, others – in terms of the way in which that body is constructed by the sex/gender system. She is embodied but her body is nevertheless something that remains other, ‘alien’, to her:

But I could feel none of this. The texture of the carpet was abhorrent to me, a dead processed thing; my body was a thin, meagre, spiky sort of vegetable, an unsunned plant; and when I touched the hair on my head it was dead. The walls were losing their density. I knew I was moving down into a new dimension, further away from sanity than I had ever been. (533)

Anna’s moment of ‘illumination’ is a recognition that sanity and madness are intrinsically bound up with how one experiences one’s body. Mental health is therefore connected to the extent to which constructions of bodily identity are congruent with perceptions of one’s selfhood – a selfhood born out of those same gendered discourses which, however, have the ability to shift and encompass opposing versions of womanhood precisely because they are not ‘natural’ but discursive. In Volatile Bodies Grosz writes that bodies are ‘always extend[ing] the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control’ (xi). So as Anna looks forward to the changing social and cultural landscape of 1960s Britain she, intellectually, desires the freedom and liberation of her body from the traditional virgin/whore binary, to be a ‘free woman’. However, the existing frameworks still control how she experiences her body. Anna is granted subjectivity – a legitimate gendered identity – by that existing framework, so even while she attempts to resist that old order, and struggles to imagine a new order, she is nevertheless still bound by that framework and haunted by the constructions of self that manifest themselves upon her body. Anna desires a subjectivity that, while not divorced from the body (she still needs to be able to feel ‘the roughness of a carpet under smooth soles’), refigures that body not in terms of sex/gender but in terms of a personal history, a narrative of one’s life as marked upon the flesh. Rather than constructions of the sexed body inscribing selfhood, selfhood inscribes itself upon the body.

Writing the Female Body in Madness
By the end of ‘The Golden Notebook’ salvation, it seems, lies in the ability to write – firstly, to write ‘all of [her]self’ in one book – mind and body, however disconnected – and then secondly to ‘imagine’ and write a new story for herself. Fittingly, it is Saul, the male possessor of language, power and knowledge, who passes onto Anna a re-initiation into language and writing. Saul gives to Anna the first line of her new novel:

‘I’m going to give you the first sentence then. There are the two women you are, Anna. Write down: The two women were alone in the London flat.’
‘You want me to begin a novel with The two women were alone in the London flat?’
‘Why say it like that? Write it Anna.’
I wrote it. (554)

Writing has served to help divide her, to compartmentalise her fragmented sense of self in the coloured notebooks; writing has served to help confront the chaos and, at least attempt, to unite her divided selves in the golden notebook; and writing will now serve to re-examine her own life narrative as the novel comes full circle with the opening line of ‘Free Women 1’.

The ‘Free Women’ sections of The Golden Notebook are, together, the novel that Anna will eventually write. In Part One, I argued that this opening line signals the beginning of a project that examines the relationship not necessarily between women (although this is, of course, a concern of the text), but rather the relationships of women to the notion of ‘woman’. This project begins with acknowledging that any construction of ‘woman’ is predicated upon the male/female binary in which ‘woman’ is the negative, inferior term and it looks forward to the point at which women can be free of this sex/gender structure – to the point at which they can truly be ‘free women’. Saul’s first line extends to Anna the opportunity to begin all over again – to start inching the boulder back up the mountain which, with each push and subsequent roll back down, nevertheless gradually continues the process of change. What Saul offers Anna, then, is the opportunity to rewrite her notebooks into a narrative – to take the fragmented scribblings and reform them into a linear, chronological, single piece of prose writing, to impose upon them a narrative structure that Anna’s experience has
lacked. But, if we are to assume that Anna’s completed novel is not only the five ‘Free Women’ sections but rather The Golden Notebook in its entirety, then Anna resists this masculine imposition upon her experience and instead folds within the framework of ‘Free Women’ all her notebook sections. What is produced then is not a ‘rational’ or ‘logical’ prose narrative that neatly repackages her feminine and schizophrenic experiences, but a text that exposes the way in which immediate experience is made sense of, made ‘sane’ and coherent, only by way of external structures and systems that legitimate that narrative. Just as the narrative logic of the ‘Free Women’ sections organises and makes sense of Anna’s fragmented narrative in the notebooks, so the sex/gender system organises and makes sense of Anna’s fragmented sense of selfhood, however violently and negatively. But, again, just as the completed novel retains the notebook entries and therefore exposes the artifice of the ‘logical’ ‘Free Women’ narrative, so too does the text retain Anna’s resistance and therefore exposes the artifice of the sex/gender system. Although the text does not – and cannot – replace the entire system, it nonetheless plants those seeds that will, one day, germinate into new discourses of womanhood, of madness, of humanity.

Saul’s first line works on two levels: it offers Anna the opportunity not only to re-examine ‘the two women you are’ – the woman she is (her legitimate gender identity) and the woman she wants to be (a ‘free woman’) – but also the opportunity to examine and perhaps resolve the conflicting relationships between constructions of womanhood. In turn, Anna offers Saul a similar task:

‘You want me to give you the first sentence of your novel?’
‘Let’s hear it.’
‘On a dry hillside in Algeria, the soldier watched the moonlight glinting on his rifle.’ (554)

Anna’s first line to Saul, which refers back to her own fleeting moment of transcendence and her brief lodging of her self in the male body, also provides the opportunity to re-examine gender identities, this time masculine identities. Anna’s offering works on two levels too: she provides him with a subject through which he can objectively explore the various constructions of masculinity he has been performing by way of his false-self system but she also bestows upon him her
own narrative, as contained in the golden notebook in which she writes his first line.

Before Anna hands over the notebook to Saul, she writes that ‘I felt towards him as if he were my brother, as if, like a brother, it wouldn’t matter how we strayed from each other, how far apart we were, we would always be one flesh of one flesh, and think each other’s thoughts’ (556, my italics). Elizabeth Maslan interprets this mutual act in bodily terms and writes that ‘each of them [are], as it were, inscribing the other’s body’.27 Actually, each of them are providing the other with the opportunity to re-inscribe their own bodies, their own versions of identity, of ontological security that rebinds mind and body, be it the disembodied self to the disavowed body or the embodied self to the body as abject. However, as the resulting narratives demonstrate, there are no easy answers here and no simple recourse to ‘new’ versions of selfhood outside of the sex/gender system. What both Saul and Anna produce is a critical examination and reassessment of the relationships between self and body and self and other that establish one’s sense of selfhood and the degree to which that self is ontologically secure.

Mother Sugar tells Anna, in a rare moment ‘outside the analyst-patient relationship’ that in order to ‘keep ourselves sane’ we must ‘learn to rely on those blades of grass springing up in millions of years’ (478). Ostensibly, these blades of grass represent the first ‘tentative’ instances of re-growth after a nuclear disaster (Anna is talking about the possibility of a H-bomb ‘obliterat[ing] half of Europe’ (478)), but they also represent the ‘new’ that is born out of the destruction of any major structure. Mother Sugar, momentarily, speaks to Anna as one human being to another rather than as analyst to patient; this is in fact where Laing begins in *The Divided Self*: that is, with the notion that analyst and patient should meet on an equal footing, each willing to understand the other’s particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’. When Mother Sugar discards the hierarchy of the analyst/patient relationship she speaks to Anna ‘anti-psychiatrically’ and acknowledges that it is not Anna who is ‘mad’ but the world, and that the only way to stay ‘sane’ is to focus upon the point far in the future where the world will right itself. These blades of grass – the new and the joyful – that emerge out of the ‘lava’ – the dismantling and destruction of the old order – are offered as the focus for Anna’s
hope for a better world. Anna, however, is suspicious of passively awaiting ‘what is still an idea, a shadow in the willed imagination only’ (478). Although Anna acknowledges that change happens only gradually and change will not be brought about by a communist revolutionary stand that will immediately reverse the entire systems of power and knowledge that structure the Western world, she nonetheless refuses to stand aside, passively watching as pain and fear terrorize humankind. If it is the incongruity between how Anna believes the world should be, and the way the world actually is, that initiates her breakdown, then it is though exposing those incongruities and the effects of such hypocrisy and conflict that she can begin to work towards those new visions of the world and humanity. Anna is not to be an agent of a sweeping wave of destruction, but rather part of a process of planting the seeds that will become the new blades of grass, the future discourses by which the world and selfhood will come into being. The planting of the grass seeds represents, then, the dissemination of her experience, the dissemination of new narratives that expose and attempt to resist the boundaries and limitations of existing structures of power and knowledge.

Towards the end of ‘The Golden Notebook’ section Anna reflects on her breakdown and the various ‘illuminations’ she has encountered:

During the last weeks of craziness and timelessness I’ve had these moments of ‘knowing’ one after the other, yet there is no way of putting this sort of knowledge into words. Yet these moments have been so powerful, like the rapid illuminations of a dream that remain with one waking, that what I have learned will be part of how I experience life until I die. Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want. (549)

Anna argues that words cannot adequately describe her experience and that ‘the people who have been there, in the place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know what I mean’ (549). Nick Bentley has recently written about Lessing’s own ‘feeling that language is often inadequate in conveying feelings and emotions and [how] she also attributes the discovery of this position in relation to the process of writing The Golden Notebook: “I recognized the limitations of language for the first time when I was searching for the words to depict Anna’s dreams”. Of course, the irony is that Anna is writing her
experience and, even if it cannot quite encompass all that she has come to ‘know’ and how she has come to that knowledge, she nevertheless attempts to use words in order to express and share that experience. Anna writes:

> But there is a terrible irony. [...] It is a question of bowing to it, so to speak, with a kind of courtesy, as to an ancient enemy: All right, I know you are there, but we have to preserve the forms, don’t we? And perhaps the condition of your existing at all is precisely that we preserve the forms, create the patterns, have you thought of that? (549)

The ‘forms’, both in terms of narrative and in terms of social structures (both of which operate by language/discourse), must remain but in preserving those forms – or perpetuating those forms – there is still then room for moments of subversion. Bentley argues that ‘by employing a series of metafictional techniques and writing styles [Lessing] wants to draw attention to the materiality of writing and thereby to emphasize the political and ideological contexts in which different literary forms operate and produce meaning’ (52). Just as *The Golden Notebook* plays and experiments with various narrative forms and thereby exposes the limitations of those forms, even as it uses and retains them, so too does the novel play and experiment with various gender identities and thereby expose the limitations of those equally constructed structures. Anna does not escape these constructions and they continue to influence her social frames of reference as well as her own sense of selfhood, but she does identify their effects, including their violent impact upon her self and body. In doing so, Anna lifts the veil – she exposes the nature of the system and its supposed ‘naturalness’. The contours of the system are revealed and this gives Anna the strength to keep going. She is not ‘cured’ – the conflicts between the mind and body do not suddenly resolve themselves – but she is able to ‘pull [her]self together’ (326) and face each day.

Although the forms might persist, the content, the individual gender identities that exist within the system and subvert or transgress the parameters of acceptability and intelligibility, can gradually work to alter the contours of the old forms. Just as when Anna’s boulder rolls back down the hill and always comes to stop a few inches above its last starting point, so too can the individual resisting subject work to very slowly, very gradually, reshape the systems that determine
intelligible selfhood. The experience and knowledge Anna has gained – the
glimpse of a self that can exist beyond, or differently, to those gendered
identities/bodies that are currently discursively constructed as legitimate – exists
but it exists only from within the structures it opposes. Just as Anna must re-
imagine the relationship between self and body from ‘within’ her body, so too
must she begin to imagine new social orders from ‘within’ the social order – from
subverting and fleetingly transgressing the boundaries and limitations of that order
until its borders stretch, crumble, ‘breakdown’, and allow the new ‘blades of
grass’ to emerge. Anna explains to Saul that

there are a group of people who push a boulder up the mountain. When
they’ve got a few feet up, there’s a war, or the wrong sort of revolution,
and the boulder rolls down – not to the bottom, it always manages to end
a few inches higher than when it started. So the group of people put their
shoulders to the boulder and start pushing again. […] But meanwhile we
are meditating about the nature of space, or what it will be like when the
world is full of people who don’t hate and fear and murder. (545)

As a boulder pusher, Anna is not passively waiting for the world to change, for
the ‘right’ kind of revolution, but actively, if slowly and painfully, paving the way
for the future. Moments later she writes: ’I don’t think I am prepared to give all
that much reverence to that damned blade of grass, even now’ (551). However,
the still ephemeral blades of grass, the ‘shadow in the willed imagination’, is the
goal towards which Anna must keep pushing her boulder.

Poised though she is on the cusp of the second wave of feminism, Lessing is
nevertheless, and unavoidably, working from within gendered systems and
discursive structures that seemingly serve only to position women as ‘second class
citizens’.  As such, Lessing’s narrative has little recourse to a Butlerian
“person,” a “sex,” or a “sexuality” that escapes the matrix of power and
discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those
concepts. It might seem that Anna finds it increasingly difficult to imagine a
version of herself that can exist outside of those discourses that constitute
acceptable gendered subjectivities and consequently, it seems, breed madness.
However, the text does expose those existing constructs and the damage that they
cause. As Butler argues, there does exist the potential to destabilize and trouble
these normative categories from within them. Lessing’s text can be read, therefore, as

an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity.31

By dismantling and fragmenting gender identities through the anti-psychiatric understanding of schizophrenia, The Golden Notebook exposes the multiplicity of identity, the instability of discursively produced bodies, as well as the duplicity of the ‘naturalisation’ of gender and sex.

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In The Golden Notebook Lessing critically engages with medical and psychoanalytical models of madness as well as an emerging anti-psychiatric understanding of the experience of madness. Lessing is using the tenets of anti-psychiatry both in terms of their broader aims and ideas, which became prevalent in Laing’s later texts, and in its specificities (that is, the detailed accounts of the schizophrenic experience as set out by Laing in The Divided Self). Lessing, like Laing, is interested in exploring the reasons behind the prevalence of mental health issues in a supposedly ‘advanced’ twentieth-century Western society; its history in terms of medical models and, ultimately, how madness is experienced by the patient, not in terms of a ‘diagnosis’ or the ‘signs and symptoms’32 of the ‘disease’, but in terms of one’s ‘being-in-the-world’. The text intervenes in Laing’s anti-psychiatric discourse in order to account for how Anna, as a woman, experiences madness not simply as part of a political and cultural system that attempts to divide the sane from the mad, but as part of a system that divides man from woman and treats her as ‘a second class citizen’. The text, by considering Laing’s understanding of the experience of madness in terms of this sex/gender system (that he does not acknowledge), suggests that the experience of madness
can only be understood, for women, in terms of embodiment. Disembodiment, however seductive and however potentially liberating such a state might seem, is not a phantasy that women can sustain. Within the sex/gender system they are continually situated in terms of their sexed body and, thus, any legitimate claim to subjectivity is established only by way of that body. The text explores not only how gender oppression might lead to madness but the way in which anti-psychiatric discourses and gendered discourses can collide, disclosing the fact that notions of subjectivity are always gendered and that this ‘gendering’ is a consequence of the material body and the way in which that body is discursively constructed. So, while the basis of Laing’s theory holds and the text contains many echoes of specific experiences recounted in The Divided Self, Lessing’s novel also moves beyond it.

Lessing negotiates with Laingian theory to represent a particularly female experience of mental breakdown, an experience that cannot be divorced from the body even in the schizoid state. The Golden Notebook examines the divisions and fractions that occur within Anna as she strives to construct for herself a new female identity as a ‘free woman’ whilst simultaneously knowing that in order to be intelligible she must meet, and embody, the expectations of her sex/gender. Anna does not escape those restrictions upon her body and, subsequently, her selfhood, but she does confront their arbitrariness, their limitations, and by exposing the boundaries of intelligibility she can begin to work from within the sex/gender system to resist, subvert and gradually erode the old, traditional constructions of female identity and the discourses by which they are produced and maintained. Through confronting her madness, which is the madness of the systems by which she is made intelligible, the ‘madness of gender’, Anna is able to experience her particular ‘madness’ outside of the medical and psychoanalytical models of madness that tie her to her body in line with the sex/gender system. By appropriating a Laingian model of madness, and adapting that model to account for the sex/gender system that Laing so clearly does not account for, Anna is able to examine and re-imagine, if not yet reconstruct, that system. By choosing to re-imagine her madness in terms of the anti-psychiatric model, as opposed to those conventional discourses of madness, Anna is not
simply reabsorbed into the system. She remains ‘within’ it, but not unconsciously so, and therefore not uncritically so. Although she cannot, as yet, escape its confines, her confrontation of her madness and her body allows her to identify the structures of the system: its binaries and their negative associations; the arbitrary nature of the ‘natural’ links between sex and gender; and the body as discursively constructed within heteronormative frameworks so as to uphold and perpetuate the heterosexual matrix.

2 *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* [1960] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) p. 178. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
4 Doris Lessing, *Women Writers Series* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 42. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
10 Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 53.
11 Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 53.
12 Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 53.
13 Each synopsis is numbered and corresponds to a section within ‘The Blue Notebook’. Some of the synopses are written as the ‘real’ story occurs, while some prefigure the course of the relationship.
18 Showalter, p. 212.
19 Jeanette King, p. 40.
20 Showalter, p. 212.
21 *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 108. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 3. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 106.


Butler, p. 44.

Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 28.
Sanity, Madness and the Mother: Re-imagining Discourses of Madness

There was a slow integration, during which she, and the little animals, and the moving grasses, and the sunwarmed trees, and the slopes of shivering silvery mealies, and the great dome of blue light overhead, and the stones of earth under her feet, became one, shuddering together in a dissolution of dancing atoms. She felt the rivers under the ground forcing themselves painfully along her veins, swelling them out in an unbearable pressure; her flesh was the earth, and suffered growth like a ferment; and her eyes stared, fixed like the eye of the sun. Not for one second longer (if the terms for time apply) could she have borne it; but then, with a sudden movement forwards and out, the whole process stopped; and that was ‘the moment’ which it was impossible to remember afterwards. For during that space of time (which was timeless) she understood quite finally her smallness, the unimportance of humanity […]

For that moment, while space and time (but these are words, and if she understood anything it was that words, here, were like the sound of a baby crying in a whirlwind) kneaded her flesh, she knew futility; that is, what was futile was her own idea of herself and her place in the chaos of matter. What was demanded of her was that she should accept something quite different; it was as if something new was demanding conception, with her flesh as host; as if it were a necessity, which she must bring herself to accept, that she should allow herself to dissolve and be formed by that necessity.

Doris Lessing, Martha Quest
The Four-Gated City (1969)

In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna expresses her desire to ‘be able to separate in myself what is old and cyclic, the recurring history, the myth, from what is new, what I feel or think that might be new…’. Anna attempts to embody this ‘new’ construct of subjectivity, to be a ‘free woman’, but by the end of novel she is forced to accept that, for now, the ‘new’ must remain bound by the old structures of subjectivity in order for her to function and be ‘sane’. The nature of the text’s structure, the return to the beginning by way of the first line of her new novel, suggests the recurrence of the same fragmented self with which the text began. Anna’s story, then, is ‘cyclic’, a ‘recurring history’, but it is also always critical of that history. In returning to tell her story all over again, the text’s structure is a version of the boulder analogy – after each re-reading of the text the ‘new’ that occurs within the ‘old’ becomes a little more familiar, becomes a little more established, becomes a little more the ‘norm’ that will replace (through small, almost imperceptible changes) the old manner of being.

Mrs Marks tells Anna that she must focus upon those metaphorical ‘first blades of tentative green grass’ (478) that will emerge out of the destruction of the old structures, but there is no moment of large scale destruction in *The Golden Notebook*. Resistance is not collective revolution here but a series of small, personal ‘illuminations’ that expose and might potentially, gradually erode the old order. If *The Golden Notebook* is a novel for which the ‘new’ is still ‘a shadow in the willed imagination only’ (478), then *The Four-Gated City*, published seven years later, is the novel in which that shadow is made tangible. *The Four-Gated City* has not only the literal ‘destruction’ of the old, a (suggested) nuclear disaster as predicted by Anna in *The Golden Notebook*, which ‘obliterate[s] half of Europe’ (478), but with it the collapse of old discursive structures – not least those of (supposed) madness and gender. Indeed, *The Four-Gated City* attempts to realise the still shadowy hopes of the more modest *The Golden Notebook* by way of destroying the old order within which Anna remains as a resisting, but still bound, individual subject.

In *The Golden Notebook*, when Anna tells Mrs Marks that she feels and thinks things that are ‘new’, she comments: ‘I saw the look on her face, and said:
“You are saying that nothing I feel or think is new?” (416). Mrs Marks denies this but the exchange that follows reveals much about their respective positions with regard to madness, psychiatry and the potential for ‘new’ versions of self:

‘I have never said…’ she began, and then switched to the royal we… ‘we have never said or suggested that further development of the human race isn’t possible. You aren’t accusing me of that, are you? Because it’s the opposite of what we say.’

‘I’m accusing you of behaving as if you didn’t believe it. Look, if I’d said to you when I came in this afternoon: yesterday I met a man at a party and I recognized in him the wolf, or the knight, or the monk, you’d nod and you’d smile. And we’d both feel the joy of recognition. But if I’d said: Yesterday I met a man at a party and suddenly he said something, and I thought: Yes, there’s a hint of something – there’s a crack in that man’s personality like a gap in a dam, and through that gap the future might pour in a different shape – terrible perhaps, or marvellous, but something new – if I said that, you’d frown.’

‘Did you meet such a man?’ she demanded, practically.

‘No, I didn’t. But sometimes I meet people, and it seems to me the fact they are cracked across, they’re split, means they are keeping themselves open for something.’

She said, after a long thoughtful silence: ‘Anna, you shouldn’t be saying this to me at all.’ (416)

This exchange between Anna and Mrs Marks identifies the themes that remain to a large extent unexplored in *The Golden Notebook* but which form the basis of *The Four-Gated City*. Here Mrs Marks becomes a ‘we’ – the ‘institution’ of psychiatry – and that ‘we’ stands united, not against Anna’s suggestion that the human race might develop and evolve beyond its present state, but against the idea that human development might be initiated by the ‘mad’ rather than the sane. Psychiatry aims to ‘right’ the mad, to recognize, categorize, accept and thereby relinquish the various Jungian archetypes or Freudian neuroses and psychoses that haunt the individual patient. Such an approach is, as Anna implies, predicated on the assumption that human nature is largely fixed and that each individual patient presents as a specific neurosis or as a particular ‘type’. Anna suggests, following the logic of anti-psychiatry, that the development of the human race might not be through ‘curing’ madness but through madness itself. Laing, as early as *The Divided Self*, makes a similar, if undeveloped, claim: ‘the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may let in light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane
people whose minds are closed’.2 Through the ‘cracked mind’ of the schizophrenic there is the potential for enlightenment – the potential for new ways of perceiving the world and thus of ‘being-in-the-world’. Madness, then, might free the self from the social structures that determine selfhood and ‘open’ the self up to new ways to feel and think, to new ways of, for instance, ‘doing’ one’s gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes:

> Even if heterosexist constructs circulate as the available sites of power/discourse from which to do gender at all, the question remains: What possibilities of recirculation exist? Which possibilities of doing gender repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized?3

The potential for the ‘new’, then, always exists because the ‘old’, as Butler argues, is discursively constructed. If the ‘old’ ways of being are not ‘natural’ or inherent, then they are always open to change and there will always be ‘cracks’ in the reiterative performance of intelligible selfhood. However, as *The Golden Notebook* suggests, and as *The Four-Gated City* demonstrates through its central ‘madwoman’ figure, Lynda Coldridge, the dominance of the heterosexual matrix keeps in check such deviations from the norm through processes of exclusion and claims of ‘abnormality’ that then serve to reinforce the ‘naturalness’ and dominance of the system. Thus such challenges to the dominant order are simply reabsorbed back into the system and the potential for change exists only in the accumulation of barely perceptible subversive performances (instances of hyperbole, dissonance, etc.) that may gradually reshape the parameters of the system from within its confines. For the majority of *The Four-Gated City*, this is the process that Lessing’s protagonist, Martha Hesse, observes in Lynda and, later, participates in as a ‘madwoman’ herself. Towards the end of the novel though, the text seeks to imagine what might happen if the ‘old’ order is suddenly and irrevocably destroyed so that the future is severed from the past. Suddenly, the future is no longer a continuation of the past and subject to the discursive structures that have made the past world intelligible. What ‘new’ kinds of ways to ‘think or feel’, what new tentative ‘blades of grass’, might then emerge from the rubble?
**Children of Violence**

*Marta Quest*, published in 1952, is the first instalment in a series of five novels Lessing titled *Children of Violence*. The series, a bildungsroman narrating the personal and political journey of Martha Quest, ended in 1969 with the publication of *The Four-Gated City*, although one of the central characters in this final novel, Lynda Coldridge, recurs in the first of Lessing’s *Canopus in Argos* ‘space fiction’ series, *Shikasta* (1979). In the middle of writing *Children of Violence*, in 1962, Lessing wrote and published her most influential work to date, *The Golden Notebook*. The evolution of this realist series over the five novels is in some ways interrupted by *The Golden Notebook*, not simply chronologically, but by the way in which it takes much of the *Children of Violence*’s early stories and rewrites them, reshapes their narrative structures, and thus reinvests those stories with a different, more experimental, emphasis. The final two texts, written after *The Golden Notebook*, *Landlocked* (1965) and *The Four-Gated City*, are strongly influenced by the themes, if not the narrative experimentation, of this novel. Indeed, *The Four-Gated City* is, in many ways, as much as a sequel to *The Golden Notebook* as it is to *Landlocked*.

If the text of *The Golden Notebook* is permeated by the theme of madness, then *The Four-Gated City* is saturated with it. Barely a character survives this novel without some kind of episode, be it neurotic, depressive, schizoid, or psychotic. Lynda is the ‘classic’ madwoman of the text – institutionalised, medicated, suicidal – and, over the course of the novel, she is joined in her basement by other madwomen – Dorothy, Sandra, and, of course, Martha. Other madwomen that appear in the narrative include Patty, who has a nervous breakdown after Stalin’s death, although because ‘Socialist circles were not admitting the possibility that mental trouble existed […] Patty’s illness was being claimed as purely physical’; Gerald’s wife who is ‘depressed’, has shock treatment and, although she ‘feels better’, will be having more treatments (239); Jimmy Wood’s wife, Mavis, is ‘unhappy’ and is institutionalised (239); Phoebe who ‘had headaches, and nausea and could not sleep’ but ‘continued not to believe in “psychology”’ (Martha comments that ‘she was having a breakdown nonetheless’ (393)); Margaret, Mark’s mother, is also having ‘the kind of
breakdown that could easily not be noticed’ (395); Sarah-Sally, Paul’s mother, commits suicide when her husband deserts her; and finally, Mrs Quest, Martha’s mother, is clearly unbalanced during the section of the text which she narrates; other minor female characters that suffer from various mental illnesses include Zena (Paul’s girlfriend), Rose and Molly (residents of Paul’s communal house), Elizabeth (Mark’s niece), and Terence Boles’ wife (Mark’s publisher). The sheer number of women who suffer from mental distress in the novel is overwhelming and establishes a picture of post-war Britain that is characterised by a ‘mad’ female population. Elizabeth Wilson, in *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Postwar Britain: 1945-1968*, argues that various factors contributed to the perceived increase in ‘madness’ as a social phenomenon in post-war Britain. She explains that because of the introduction of psychiatric drugs and the move from institutionalisation to hospitalisation and more ‘care in the community’ directed treatments, mental illness was, to begin with, simply more visible than it had been previously. Significantly, the more prominent role of psychoanalysis as a treatment meant that those seeking psychiatric help were not necessarily classed as ‘mentally ill’ in the traditional sense, but rather ‘unhappy’.

Wilson writes that ‘the depressed housewives, homosexuals, thwarted artists, and hyper-anxious business men who sought help for their unhappiness were accepted as patients’ (117). Wilson links women’s ‘unhappiness’ in particular to a post-war oppressive ideology of femininity which was fuelled, she argues, by increased (though not universal) affluence, domesticity and welfarism: ‘hopes for a better world for men, women, and children masked, to some extent, the conflict, uncertainty, and division over women’s place’ (16). Almost all of the female characters in *The Four-Gated City* are unhappy and conflicted, and each is seen to be periodically descending into madness or in (temporary) recovery from it.

And yet it is not only women who suffer – Dorothy’s would-be husband, Jack (Martha’s lover at the beginning of the novel), Paul, and Jimmy all also suffer from mental disorders. However, these ‘disorders’ are less easy to diagnose and classify as specific mental illnesses and none of the male characters are ‘treated’ or incarcerated. Rather these men, Jack, Paul and Jimmy, all have a skewed or ‘absent sense of right and wrong’ (397) that leads them to believe
themselves outside of the normal moral and ethical rules that govern most people. This is most terrifying in Jimmy. When his wife is incarcerated she can only say to Mark that ‘sometimes she thought Jimmy wasn’t all there, but, of course, it must be her fault if Mark said that he thought he was’ (239). The only characters to seemingly escape the madness epidemic are Mark Coldridge and his son, Francis. Mark, who relinquishes his wife, Lynda, to the psychiatric establishment and who bankrolls Jimmy’s experiments (however unknowingly), represents the ‘sane’ society of intelligent indifference and rationality: as a white, middle class male he perpetuates the system that determines that Lynda is ill and Jimmy is sane. So, if Jimmy is ‘sane’ according to Mark (‘society’) then poor Mavis, who believes he is not, must be mad. Much later in the novel Mark will discover the true extent of Jimmy’s psychotic tendencies when he uncovers the ten years of projects and inventions creating machines intended to destroy parts of the brain. Mark charges Jimmy with ‘pathological indifference to any ordinary ideas of decency’ but reasons that he ‘would not be arrested, not suffer in any way at all, because he was merely “contributing to human knowledge”’ (539). Jimmy, the ‘mad scientist’, occupies a very different position to his wife, Lynda and the various other ‘madwomen’ of the novel. Interestingly, when Studs Terkel, in a 1969 radio interview, asked Lessing if ‘these characters, Lynda and Martha, could’ve as easily been two men?’, she answered, simply, ‘Yes’. And yet madness, although experienced by both men and women in *The Four-Gated City*, as it is in *The Golden Notebook*, is not ‘gender neutral’ here. The women and men do not experience madness in the same ways – and society does not treat their madness in the same ways. Lynda is absorbed into the ‘machinery’ of the psychiatric establishment, as are many of the other women in the texts – some of whom are only ever known as the mad wives of male characters – while the men, their husbands, remain ‘outside’ of that ‘machinery’ – and, in Jimmy’s case, developing the very technology used against those women by the psychiatric establishment. In *The Four-Gated City*, Lessing is differentiating between gendered experiences of madness: ‘male madness’ is a morally neutral space within which the rational (and largely destructive) potential of humankind (*mankind*) can be tested, whilst ‘female madness’ is initially
aligned with the diagnoses of the psychiatric establishment which figures it as illness. Later, when the madwomen are freed from these medical and psychoanalytical models of madness, their madness helps to reveal and realise the evolutionary possibilities of humankind. Such a gendered divide might appear to neatly map onto gender binaries: man and the rational and the technological, woman and the irrational and the biological (in terms of both illness and evolution). But this would be oversimplifying the representation of gender and madness in what is a vast, sprawling and complex novel. To begin with, as in The Golden Notebook, women’s madness is not represented as a consequence of female biology but it *is* an embodied madness – a madness that is necessarily caught up with the ways in which intelligible selfhood is derived from discursively constructed bodies. Though women are, almost without exception, ‘mad’ in The Four-Gated City, that madness is almost always shown to be initiated by social factors and, as Laing writes, one’s ‘untenable position’.9

In Laing’s 1967 text, The Politics of Experience, he makes clear that schizophrenia is not a ‘disease’ and that the schizophrenic ‘experience’ that he mapped out in The Divided Self is not initiated primarily through faulty genetics, nor through the repression of one’s past or unconscious desires, but rather through one’s current circumstances and present state of ‘being-in-the-world’.10 Laing is careful not to fully dismiss a ‘genetic factor’ for schizophrenia and, like the ‘recent work’ he cites, he ‘leaves this matter open’ (100). However, with reference to studies conducted with David Cooper and A. Esterson, he writes:

> In over 100 cases where we have studied the actual circumstances around the social event when one person comes to be regarded as schizophrenic, it seems to us that *without exception* the experience and behaviour that gets labelled schizophrenic is a *special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation*. In his life situation the person has come to feel he is in an untenable position. […] The social system, not single individuals extrapolated from it, must be the object of study. (95)

These ‘untenable positions’ are, at first instance, the positions, or roles, the patient must fulfil as part of a family unit. This is most fully explored in Laing and A. Esterson’s co-authored Sanity, Madness and the Family, published in 1964. In The Politics of Experience Laing goes further and claims that the majority of
humankind, by the age of ‘fifteen or so’, are ‘half crazed creature[s], more or less adjusted to a mad world. This is normality in our present age’ (50). And, in opposition to this ‘normality’, is the schizophrenic who has failed to sufficiently adjust to the ‘mad world’. In Laing’s view, we are all the ‘children of violence’, whether ‘sane’ (adjusted to a mad world) or ‘mad’ (maladjusted to a mad world). Laing once more uses the bomb analogy, first mentioned in the 1964 preface to The Divided Self, to illustrate this reversal of the sanity/madness binary:

[The term schizophrenia] does establish as a social fact that the person labelled is one of Them. It is easy to forget that the process is a hypothesis, to assume that it is a fact, then to pass the judgement that it is biologically maladaptive and, as such, pathological. But social adaptation to a dysfunctional society may be very dangerous. The perfectly adjusted bomber pilot may be a greater threat to species survival than the hospitalized schizophrenic deluded that the Bomb is inside him. Our society may itself have become biologically dysfunctional, and some forms of schizophrenic alienation from the alienation of society may have a sociobiological function that we have not recognized. (99)

Reading Lessing’s text through this lens, Jimmy is the ‘perfectly adapted’ bomber pilot and Lynda the delusional schizophrenic – and Jimmy, with his brain-destroying machines, is far more dangerous than Lynda will ever be. But in The Politics of Experience Laing is more interested in the potential that ‘schizophrenic alienation from the alienation of society’ might hold. In this sense, Lynda does pose a more significant threat – she contains the potential to disrupt the civilised social order that determines what is ‘normal’ and therefore acceptable and what is ‘mad’ and must therefore be excluded. In The Politics of Experience Laing does cover some similar ground to that examined in The Divided Self (in terms of the ‘experience’ of schizophrenia) and Sanity, Madness and the Family (in terms of the causes of schizophrenia), but here the focus shifts from the experiences and causes of schizophrenia to the potential of states of (supposed) madness – states which ‘crack open’ the self and allow one to explore one’s ‘inner space’ (50).

Significantly, Laing associates this potential with the biological, or the ‘sociobiological’, and therefore implies that the potential of madness is something connected to the body as organism and, like Lessing, to human evolution, particularly in relation to humankind’s adaption to society. In the
modern world, Laing writes, ‘humanity is estranged from its authentic possibilities’ (11). In The Four-Gated City Lessing specifically connects madness to suppressed ‘authentic possibilities’ which she reveals to be superhuman psychic abilities – abilities that once liberated will signal a new stage in human evolution or, in Julian Huxley’s terms, will succeed in achieving ‘transhumanism’. This process of liberation is, for Laing and Lessing, closely tied to the destruction of old social orders. It is only at the end of the novel, when the old order has been destroyed in the wake of a nuclear disaster, that these abilities are not immediately suppressed but rather nurtured. Once humanity is no-longer bound by established structures and discourses, including gendered psychiatric discourses, the ‘sociobiological’ potential of humanity (in Lessing’s novel this means a new phase of human development characterised by extra-sensory perception), can be realised. And structures and discourses of madness are not the only ones to be critiqued and re-imagined in this process. It is significant that Martha and Lynda, who both act as forerunners and initiators of this new human race, are madwomen and also ‘bad’ biological mothers. Discourses of reproduction and, specifically, the connections between the female body, childbearing and mothering, are also important in this novel. The text demonstrates how structures and discourses of madness and mothering have served to hold back humanity’s evolution and even cause humankind (at least in the West) to become degenerate. These two structures/discourses are particularly important because of their fundamental role in maintaining and perpetuating the social order. Other contemporary pressures, including ‘advances’ in technology and science (particularly nuclear power), the impact of the Second World War, and the shadow of the Cold War, are implicated but it is how discourses of mothering and madness work to figure these horrors of the modern age as acceptable, perhaps even desirable, that both Lessing’s and Laing’s texts tackle. This is because discourses of mothering are concerned with the social inheritance of ways of being (that is, ways of ensuring adequate adaption to and acceptance of this ‘mad’, violent world), whilst discourses of madness are concerned with regulating and policing intelligible ways of being (that is, excluding or reabsorbing those who have failed to adapt and accept this ‘mad’, violent world). To a much greater extent than The Golden Notebook, The
“Four-Gated City” represents madness and mothering as intimately bound up with one another and the text radically reassesses the ‘nature’ of both. In doing so, the novel seeks to imagine an alternate future for humanity within which the gendered discourses that continue to bind Anna Wulf might finally be overcome.

**The Four-Gated City**

In *The Four-Gated City*, Martha Quest, now Hesse, arrives in London from Rhodesia, where the previous four novels have been set, and quickly becomes established within the Coldridge household. In this house Martha is encapsulated in an atmosphere of severe mental illness, an atmosphere that Martha will eventually succumb to. However, unlike Anna, whose breakdown is in many ways an almost passive experience of dissolution into chaos alongside her lover, Martha is not simply ‘going mad’ in *The Four-Gated City*; her ‘breakdown’ is far more critically observed than Anna’s. Towards the end of the novel, Martha actively pursues a state of madness in order to both examine and challenge the limitations of that experience. Her experiments begin to push her into realms where time and space crack open and construct new places from which to imagine the nature of embodied selfhood and humankind. In *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz writes that ‘bodies are always understood within a spatial and temporal context, and space and time remain conceivable only insofar as corporeality provides the basis for our perception and representation of them’.

Therefore, as Grosz continues, ‘if bodies are to be reconceived, not only must their *matter and form* be rethought, but so too must their environment and spatio-temporal location’ (84). Lessing, by moving her realist novel into the science fiction genre and into a post-apocalyptic future landscape, is able not only to destroy old social structures but also to play with the boundaries of time and space and the perceived limitations of embodied existence. Thus, Lessing’s heroine can escape dominant social structures that reinforce individualism and also escape corporeally bound constructs of human subjectivity. This allows Martha to imagine new ways of being-in-the-world and new ways of being-in-the-body.
As early as *Martha Quest*, the eponymous heroine experiences a brief moment in which she becomes acutely and desperately aware of the ways in which space and time control her body, fix it in position, and how she, despite her own ‘ideas’, is trapped within a particular cultural structure and mind-frame. To escape, Martha realises, like Anna, that ‘something new’, something she can barely articulate, is required. Martha is seeking something that will allow her to re-imagine her ‘idea of herself’. In the passage taken from *Martha Quest* for the epigraph to this chapter, Martha experiences a brief glimpse of this ‘something new’ and her own part in its conception: ‘what was demanded of her was that she should accept something quite different; it was as if something new was demanding conception, with her flesh as host; as if it were a necessity, which she must bring herself to accept, that she should allow herself to dissolve and be formed by that necessity’ (75). Martha articulates a Modernist ‘moment of being’ – a fleeting but powerful glimpse of a sense of one’s self that exists far beyond the prosaic self of one’s day to day life. In this moment Martha’s body and sense of self merges with the landscape: ‘he felt the rivers under the ground forcing themselves painfully along her veins, swelling them out in an unbearable pressure; her flesh was the earth, and suffered growth like a ferment’ (75). In one sense, she expands – she is the rivers, the earth, the sun – while in another she shrinks – she, and all of humanity, are ‘small’ and ‘unimportant’ (75). Her brief sense of the enormity of the universe – of time and space – exposes her own self, and all of humanity, as insignificant matter. *The Golden Notebook* concerns itself primarily with constructions of self, but *Children of Violence* exposes the futility of all such constructions in the context of the vastness of a chaotic universe. This is a material world, a ‘chaos of matter’, that is indifferent to the metaphysical concerns humanity constructs for itself to give life meaning. The alternate ‘meaning’ Martha encounters on the veld is that she is, at her most fundamental, merely matter and eventually she will ‘dissolve’ to make way for the next stage of earth’s – and humanity’s – evolution. Yet Martha feels herself to be a part of this process – this is a process that will be ‘conceived’ within her body, ‘with her flesh as host’. The reproductive metaphor specifically links Martha’s female
reproductive body with the course of human evolution. The ‘something new’ that she must give way to is also something that she must give birth to.

It is not until the last novel of the series that Martha is finally able to ‘conceive’ the ‘something new’ she first envisages on the veld. Metaphorically, Martha will give birth to a new race of humanity, but she will not do so from ‘within’ her reproductive body. Rather, it is through Martha’s experiments with madness – recurring moments of illumination like the one on the veld – that she comes to gradually excavate her telepathic abilities and thus act as a forerunner for the next stage of human evolution. Jeannette King writes that ‘what in Martha Quest were isolated and elusive moments of extraordinary perception, unhappily disengaged from the rest of her experience, are here [in The Four-Gated City] central to that experience and to the novel – the true goal of her “quest”’. This ‘quest’ is not a straightforward one. As in the passage from Martha Quest, Martha repeatedly forgets her experiences of ‘breakthrough’, regresses, and then must begin again. The Four-Gated City reads as a series of repeated moments of illumination followed by periods of forgetting and tedious day-to-day living. The novel continually approaches moments of breakthrough and then partially retreats, but with each instance Martha gradually works towards the eventual moment of realisation. It is not until late in the novel that Martha will come to understand madness as a consequence of societal violence, and, more specifically, as a response to the suppression of telepathic abilities which is enforced by so-called psychiatric ‘care’. Martha then, like Anna, is initially a boulder-pusher. Martha’s quest is a gradual process of pushing the boulder up the mountain only to have it roll down and come to rest an inch or two above the original starting point – and so the process begins again. Martha’s mission is for the benefit of all humanity, and the discoveries she makes are likewise applicable to all people, but for much of the text that mission is frustrated by the same social and gendered discursive practices that continue to bind Anna at the end of The Golden Notebook. Martha must break free of these social structures if she is to initiate the next stage of human development.
Madness Re-imagined

The Four-Gated City goes beyond both The Golden Notebook and The Divided Self in terms of the way in which the focus shifts from personal experiences of schizophrenia to connecting madness to much larger social concerns. However, the novel still draws on Laing’s earlier work and Lessing’s reworking of his theories in The Golden Notebook. Many of Martha’s personal experiences of madness in The Four-Gated City are similar to Anna’s in The Golden Notebook. She too is a divided self struggling to forge for herself a legitimate identity within gendered discursive structures. Throughout the novel Martha searches for spaces within which she can escape the confines of these gendered social expectations. In fact, The Four-Gated City begins, in many ways, with those same strategies for survival that Laing outlines in The Divided Self and Anna unsuccessfully attempts to implement in The Golden Notebook. However, Martha’s experience is different in that she appears to be using the schizoid behaviours identified by Laing strategically. These behaviours are disembodiment and the implementation of a false-self system. In The Divided Self, Laing explains how the false-self system follows from a sustained state of disembodiment and is constructed in order to deal with the external world that the inner self has retreated from. Laing writes that

A pseudo-duality is thus experienced in the individual’s own being. Instead of the individual meeting the world with an integral selfhood, he disavows part of his own being along with a disavowal of immediate attachment to things and people in the world. This can be represented schematically as follows:

Instead of
\[(\text{self/body}) \cong \text{other}\]

the situation is
\[\text{self} \cong (\text{body-other})\]

The self, therefore, is precluded from having a direct relationship with real things and real people. (82)

According to Laing, the body becomes the site upon or through which the ‘real’ self constructs a series of ‘false selves’ that can interact with the external world in
its place. The schematic above shows how the body becomes less a part of the ‘real’ self and more a part of the external world of objects. Anna’s inability to sustain a phantasy of disembodiment means that she never fully realises a false-self system in the way that Saul appears to in ‘The Golden Notebook’. However, in The Four-Gated City Lessing disconnects disembodiment and the false-self system so that one does not necessarily rely upon or initiate the other. Martha can utilise a false-self system without having to be unembodied and she can become (temporarily) disembodied without completely rupturing her mind from her body and therefore necessitating the installation of a false-self system. Instead, Martha uses these two schizoid survival strategies selectively and consciously. She appears to be able to borrow and utilise the concepts of disembodiment and false selves without becoming ‘schizoid’ in the clinical sense.

At the beginning of the novel Martha has arrived in London but she has not yet been absorbed into the Coldridge household and the gendered discourses of madness and mothering that characterise that house, thereby presenting it as a microcosm of post-war, middle-class Britain. Instead, Martha, virtually unknown and completely unattached, wanders the streets of London and effectively exists outside of society and its discursive systems. Martha is able to revel in being ‘anonymous, unnoticed – free. Never before in her life had she known this freedom. Living in a small town anywhere means preserving one’s self behind a mask’ (14). It seems Martha begins with the very freedom from discursive systems that Anna strives for throughout The Golden Notebook. Without having to wear the ‘mask’ that conforms to the expectations of her station and her sex, Martha, alone and unknown, feels herself to be ‘invisible’ (20) and as if she is ‘without boundaries, without definition, like a balloon drifting and bobbing’ (14). This ‘freedom’ relies upon her anonymity so her current privileged position only exists while Martha remains outside of society and all the expectations and behaviours and discourses that it generates and perpetuates.

When Martha aimlessly walks the streets of London she is putting off the call she has to make to her friend’s sister, a call that will end her anonymity and force her into accepting a job, a home, friends, roles and ‘masks’. This causes a sense of conflict within Martha – she wants to maintain her state of anonymity
and remain in this space outside of social structures and yet she knows she should,
and eventually will have to, make the call, find a job, find a place to live, interact
with other people and, consequently, re-enter society. At one point in her
wanderings, while standing on a bridge looking down into the river Thames,
Martha wonders ‘what race was this that filled their river with garbage and
excrement and let it run smelling so evilly between the buildings that crystallized
their pride, their history. Except – she could not say that now, she was here, one of
them; and to stay’ (27). Martha is in a state of limbo: she is ‘here’ but not yet able
to consider herself ‘one of them’. She is, for the moment, able to talk of ‘them’ as
a race from which she stands a part but she knows that she must soon rejoin that
race and relinquish her privileged position as an outsider. Troubled by this conflict
between desire and necessity, Martha is able to momentarily escape from the
pressure to make the decision to call Phoebe by taking herself outside of her body.
Now, standing on the bridge, she feels herself become ‘lightheaded, empty,
sometimes dizzy’ (27), as she has at previous points during her wanderings, and
this simulates a state of schizoid detachment. Martha is then

able to see herself as if from a hundred yards up, a tiny coloured blob,
among other blobs, on top of a bus, or in a street. Today she could see
herself, a black blob, in Mrs Van’s coat, a small black blob beside a long
grey parapet. A tiny entity among swarms: then down, back inside
herself, to stand, arms on damp concrete. (27)

During this moment of disembodiment Martha is indeed ‘without boundaries’ and
‘like a balloon’ (14), floating high above her body which is now but a ‘blob’.
Laing writes that during disembodiment ‘the body is felt more as one object
among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual’s own being’
(69, Laing’s italics). Martha’s body is but a ‘blob’ among other ‘blobs’.
Meanwhile, Martha’s ‘self’ floats upwards and gains a higher vantage point –
literally and metaphorically. Not only is she floating high above her body but she
is also appreciating the insignificance of her existence in the world, just as she did
on the veld so many years before. She is but a ‘tiny entity among swarms’. The
brief moment of disembodiment offers Martha some perspective and enables her
to do what she knows she must – make the call.
Martha is able to achieve this momentary – and largely positive – moment of disembodiment because, unlike Anna, she is currently existing outside of social structures and therefore not bound by the gendered discourses that should fix her within her female body. Nevertheless, like Anna’s abortive attempts at disembodiment, Martha does not remain outside of her body for long and quickly goes ‘back inside herself’ and feels the sensation of ‘arms on damp concrete’ (27). Martha’s experience of disembodiment does not then produce a schizoid ‘unembodied self’ which then becomes ‘a basic orientation to life’. It is but a brief moment of disembodiment that grants Martha a little perspective on her current situation and is therefore represented as a positive and restorative experience. In terms of Laing’s understanding of disembodiment in *The Divided Self*, this is an example of a ‘temporary estrangement from the body’ which occurs, usually, when ‘normal people […] find themselves enclosed within a threatening experience from which there is no physical escape’ (78). Actually, although Martha’s disembodiment is not quite ‘schizoid’ here (because she retains control of the situation, it is temporary, and it is restorative) she is not really subject to a physically or even psychically threatening situation from which there is no escape – she simply has to make a phone call. In this sense, Martha’s experience is verging on the schizoid in that she is purposely employing this schizoid strategy for survival in a situation that need not necessitate such drastic measures. Indeed, Martha’s reliance on this strategy and the lack of boundaries it creates begins to scare her: she feels ‘like an empty space’ (28) and is losing her grasp on any ‘authentic’ sense of self: ‘What is your name? Who are you?’ (28), she asks. This sense of losing herself is further compounded by the necessity to construct a series of false selves in order to answer such questions.

Although Martha is not an ‘unembodied self’ and her moments of disembodiment are fleeting, she still employs a series of false selves in order to manage her limited dealings with others. In *The Divided Self* Laing sets out three forms of false self: the ‘normal’, the ‘hysteric’, and the ‘schizoid’ (95). Martha’s use of ‘masks’ at the beginning of the novel is of the ‘normal’ order: Laing writes that “‘A man without a mask’ is indeed very rare” (95). He goes on to say that ‘everyone in some measure wears a mask’ and that ‘in the “normal” person a good
number of his actions may be virtually mechanical’ (95). As soon as Martha is required to interact with others she is forced into a position in which she feels it necessary to don a ‘mask’. So, when Martha takes a room at Joe and Iris’s café she revives an old mask: the ‘foolish but lovable’ girl of her youth, ‘Matty’ (15). Martha uses ‘Matty’, almost automatically (mechanically), to interact with Joe, Jimmy and Iris when she arrives at their café. ‘Matty’ is but a temporary survival strategy and is adopted by Martha in order to ease her stay at the café. There is a clear division between the Martha-self who wanders the streets and is someone who is ‘invisible’ and ‘without boundaries’ and the Matty-self, who is ‘created by her as an act of survival’ (14). This suggests that Martha’s use of ‘masks’ might be more ‘schizoid’ than normal. Indeed, although the Matty-self initially (and seemingly harmlessly) enables the Martha-self to continue her wanderings she soon begins to take over: ‘For some days now Martha has been shut inside this person, it was “Martha” who intruded, walked into “Matty”, not the other way round’ (15). So, as Martha comes to utilise Matty more and more in order to retain her sense of anonymity in the city, she verges on Laing’s third form of the false self: the schizoid. Laing writes that in the case of the ‘normal’ person the false self does not encroach on every aspect of everything he does, they do not absolutely preclude the emergence of spontaneous expressions, and they are not so completely ‘against the grain’ that the individual seeks to repudiate them as foreign bodies lodged in his make-up. Moreover, they do not assume an autonomous compulsive way of their own, such that the individual feels that they are ‘living’ or rather killing him, rather than he them. […] By contrast, however, these characteristics, absent in the ‘normal’, are very much present in the schizoid false-self system. (95)

‘Matty’ emerges as a strategy to protect Martha from the prying and questioning that her lone wanderings might occasion from her new landlords. While at first Martha enjoys her anonymity and being ‘Phyllis Jones’ or ‘Alice Harris’ as the fancy takes her, she feels that she must again become responsible to her fellow human beings. Something, (a sense of self-preservation?) could not tolerate much longer her walking and riding and talking the time away under this name or that, this disguise or that; calling strange identities into being with a switch of clothes or a change of voice – until one felt like an empty space without boundaries. (28)
The false self, as Laing predicts, becomes increasingly difficult to relinquish. Martha soon realises the danger of relying on such a (schizoid) strategy: ‘and then there was the enemy “Matty” so very much stronger than she would have been prepared to believe’ (16). While the false self protects the Martha-self it also isolates and diminishes ‘Martha – well, ordinary Martha’ (48). ‘Matty’ becomes the enemy. The lack of boundaries Martha initially found so appealing quickly becomes something dangerous – something she must curb if she is to retain a firm sense of self. Like Anna, Martha must re-enter and readapt to society if she is to maintain a legitimate, intelligible sense of self.

**Cracking Open**

Before Martha relinquishes her anonymity and re-enters society she experiences two moments which reveal the potential of madness not in terms of survival strategies, such as her moment of disembodiment or her use of false selves, but rather in terms of that ‘cracking open’ of the self that Anna describes to Mrs Marks. When Martha walks around London she suffers from dizziness, light-headedness and a sense of physical ‘emptiness’ caused by lack of food and rest. In effect, this again simulates a state of madness. In *The Politics of Experience* Laing writes that

> as men of the world, we hardly know of the existence of the inner world: we barely remember our dreams, and make little sense of them when we do; as for our bodies, we retain just sufficient proprioceptive sensations to coordinate our movements and to ensure the minimal requirements for biosocial survival – to register fatigue, signals for food, sex, defaecation, sleep; beyond that, little or nothing. (22)

Martha, by taking away some of those ‘biosocial survival’ skills – eating and sleeping – further removes herself from the ‘outer world’ and this enables her to access the inner world more readily. Martha comes to realise that by manipulating her body with a lack of food and sleep she can create a mental state that is receptive to sensations and experiences not normally registered – and so glimpses that inner world. As she walks ‘the current of her ordinary thought switched off. Her body was a machine, reliable and safe for walking; her heart and daytime
mind were quiet’ (48). Now, instead of dissociating herself from the body, Martha utilises it. Unlike Anna’s experience of the machine-like ‘ticking’ brain, which echoes Laing’s description of the body as mechanised by its medicalisation, Martha’s experience of a machine-like body is a positive one. By controlling how she fuels and operates her body she is able to utilise it to reach a heightened mental state. The machine metaphor continues throughout The Four-Gated City and is used to describe both the functions of the body and the mind. Laing, in The Divided Self, writes of his ‘contention that the theory of man as person loses its way if it falls into an account of man as a machine’ but that he does not ‘object to the mechanical or biological analogies as such’ (23). Lessing also appears to use the machine analogy without trying to suggest the person is dehumanised. Although such a concept once more subordinates the body to the mind it nevertheless maintains a relationship between the two; the body is not disavowed but shown to power and ‘generate’ the higher plane of consciousness Martha is then able to access.

When Martha walks, the body is put on ‘automatic’ by the mind but this can only be achieved once the body has generated a particular state of consciousness that will allow that process. Lessing is setting up a mind/body relationship in which the capabilities of the mind are dependent upon the energies and states created through the body. Through disciplining the body, Martha is able to access a part of her self that has lain dormant, crushed beneath her ‘daytime mind’. Martha asks ‘who was she behind the banalities of the day? A young woman? No, nothing but a soft dark receptive intelligence, that was all’ (48). This ‘receptive intelligence’ allows Martha to feel as if she is actually within the time and space of her memories: ‘Walking down damp smelling pavements under the wet London sky in the summer of five years after the war, she was (but really she became, as if nothing had intervened), Martha Quest, a young girl sitting under the tree … But really, not in imagination – there she sat’ (48). This is the first moment at which Martha approaches a level of understanding about the suppressed potential of the human mind. Not only is Martha suddenly ‘sitting’ in another time and place but she is also able to tune into a wavelength of human thought that connects all of humanity. Of course, Martha does not know this yet
and is unable to understand the sounds she hears: ‘And now, into the quiet, came something she had forgotten – one always did forget. [...] It was if behind the soft space was a maniac ready to dance inwards with idiotic words and phrases. Words and phrases and fragments of music were niggling at the back of her mind somewhere’ (49). At first Martha resents this intrusion of noise and language but when she stops resisting the noise she is able to recognise it as ‘a discovery, [she had] found a new thought – rather a thought had floated in with the silly words and bits of music: that somewhere in one’s mind was a wave-length, [...] it was simply a case of tuning in and listening’ (49). The simulation of a fraught mental state combined with her momentary position outside of social structures allows Martha to connect with this wavelength which she had ‘forgotten’ (49). At this point Martha cannot ‘tune in’ to other people’s thoughts – they remain a ‘jumble’ – but she can tune into her own thoughts: that is, not what she thinks she thinks but her ‘real’ thoughts and needs. So, although Martha says that she is not worried about having no job or running out of money, the voice she hears in the wavelength tells her that she is. There is a ‘Martha’ who exists on a higher plane of consciousness and that can seemingly ‘speak’ to the Martha on the plane below. Lessing is constructing another version of a ‘divided self’ – one that is not simply a case of a schizoid split between an ‘inner’ self and a ‘false’ self, or a split between a conscious and unconscious self, but one that represents a fundamental division between a knowing self that is part of a collective body of connected beings and an unknowing self that is caught up in the day to day living of a modern, disconnected, individual existence.

The second instance of ‘cracking open’ into this alternative space in which mind and body connect and initiate a new way of being occurs when Martha has sex with Jack. In addition to starving and exhausting her body, Martha discovers that sex can be utilised to enter this ‘soft dark’ space of ‘receptive intelligence’. Again, entering this space is achieved by way of utilising the body’s energies as well as by her current position of anonymity. Jack, like Martha, is attempting to exist outside of society, working on in his ramshackle house and making love to various women who visit him for that express purpose. Martha is one of these women – and this is another activity that she can indulge in because she is not yet
‘known’ in the city and therefore not subject to society’s laws (and double standards) with regard to her gendered sexuality.

Having been injured while in service and forced to hold his body together in the sea whilst waiting to be rescued, Jack now values his body above all else: ‘He sat quiet, eyes shut, holding her hand so tight the bones hurt. He was sitting inside his living breathing body, assuring himself of it. […] What he had been left with was an awe of the flesh. The existence of his body now was a miracle: he never ceased to feel it’ (61-2). Jack is both in awe of his body and terrified by it. He is much more aware of his bodily materiality than the male characters encountered in The Golden Notebook or the rest of The Four-Gated City. In fact, his experience of self is much closer to Anna and Martha in terms of his embodiment. Laing writes that the embodied person ‘is thoroughly “in” his body, he is likely to have a sense of personal continuity in time. He will experience himself as subject to the dangers that threaten his body, the dangers of attack, mutilation, disease, decay, and death. He is implicated in bodily desire, and the gratifications and frustrations of the body’.18 This is the ‘normal’ state of being but, as Laing warns, in this state ‘although his being is not cleft into himself as “mind” and himself as body, he can, nevertheless, be divided against himself in many ways. In some ways, his position is more precarious [since he] lacks that sense of being inviolate from physical harm’ (67). Jack’s relationship with his body is not one of ‘normal’ embodiment but nor is it one of schizoid disembodiment. Jack is too precious about his body for his state of embodiment to be considered ‘normal’. He prioritises the body over the mind in a reversal not only of Laing’s notions of the mind/body relationship in madness or sanity, but also the way in which the mind/body binary maps onto the masculine and feminine binary. Jack’s identification with the body half of the mind/body binary associates him with the feminine, which may account for his need to exert a hyper-masculine identity by sleeping with numerous women and centring his life around heterosexual sex. Jack’s near death experience has made him acutely aware of his body’s vulnerability and his own mortality and this means that he is unable to assume a state of masculine transcendence. Whilst, in The Golden Notebook, Tommy’s near death experience blinds (castrates) him and elevates his sense of self so that it
transcends the body, Jack’s experience has affirmed the connection between his ‘live’ body and his continued existence. However, Jack’s sense of ‘embodiment’ is not the same as Martha’s and Anna’s because his body is not discursively constructed in the same way as theirs. Jack is not subject to the way in which women are both bound to the body and simultaneously turned against their own bodies, which are so often figured as weak, unruly, and mere vessels for childbearing. Instead, Jack is able to invest his material body with almost spiritual value. Jack thus identifies life – and self – with the body and is compelled to serve his body and its needs as if it is ‘all’ of him. Eating, physical labour and, primarily, sex all act as confirmation of his continued corporeal existence and therefore his sense of self.

Martha’s motives for having sex with Jack are more complex. Although she believes that she is putting herself ‘farthest from what she had been, walking alert and alone in the streets’ (59), actually their lovemaking is another variation on her walking experiments which result in accessing that ‘soft dark receptive’ place. Martha and Jack’s love making is highly ritualised and the success of their union depends on executing the stages of foreplay perfectly. If both Martha and Jack can complete this ritual without descending into despair and pain then they are able to proceed to penetrative sex: ‘they lay still, sensing and aware of the different rhythms at work in their bodies, the pulse of the blood – blood washing back and forth; the breath, and its movements; the two movements at first out of tune with each other, till they adjusted themselves and became one, first in each separate body and then across boundaries of separate flesh, the two bodies together’ (71). Lessing describes their lovemaking in seemingly conventional terms – two separate bodies become one flesh - and yet there is no romance here. The very need for such a rigid and ritualised process serves to puncture any romantic or conventional understanding of their sexual union. Martha and Jack are connecting not so much with one another through this matching and merging of bodily rhythms, but rather they are individually connecting with a ‘higher’ version of themselves by way of their own bodies and its energies. Barbara Hill Rigney writes that Martha and Jack’s lovemaking ‘cannot really be considered a form of communication, the participants being locked into their own purely subjective
experiences, meeting needs that are solely individual, getting from each other a compensation for personal traumas of the past'. Lessing is also rethinking the connections between sex and love so controversially mapped out in *The Golden Notebook*. Firstly, Lessing separates sex and love and disregards the importance of the emotional-self that Anna/Ella so completely connects to her ability to orgasm. Martha does not love Jack and she does not share Anna/Ella’s belief that love must accompany sex in order for it to be satisfying. Although initially Martha does retain Anna’s ‘cold, critical […] brain’ (359), as she approaches orgasm she is able to reconnect the mind to her body: ‘Sex, heart, the currents of the automatic body were one now, together: and above these, her brain, cool and alert, watching and marking. Body, a surge like sea, but the mind above not yet swung up, absorbed into the whole. And then the mind dimmed and went, and Martha was swung up and away’ (72). In effect, through sex Martha achieves phenomenology’s ideal state of being – mind and body in perfect unison, as one coherent, unified concept. Martha is seemingly able to use sex with Jack to collapse into the formlessness that Anna can only access by confronting her madness and dismantling her survival strategies. Martha, however, as a being outside of social structures, is able to access a similar state of formlessness through a sexuality that is disengaged from gendered discourses. Actually, this remains a heterosexual union and its ‘subversive’ potential is limited to Martha and Jack’s non-exclusivity and the enjoyment of sex divorced from romantic sentiment. Nonetheless, what Martha and Jack engage in here is not a conventional love affair but a highly personal, intimate and even ‘spiritual’ engagement with oneself (not one another) by way of sexual intercourse.

When Martha’s mind is ‘absorbed into the whole’ as she climaxes she discovers a ‘special place’ inside herself: ‘Her mind cleared, emptied, little thoughts like small trains darting across a vast landscape went by. An empty dark mind: pictures were flashing across her eyes, in front of her eyelids, extraordinary scenes […] all her body was in a fine high vibration like a wire at very high tension’ (72). Accessing this place, she says, has ‘nothing to do with Jack the person’ and he is merely ‘the instrument that knows how to reach it’ (72). Not only is Jack ‘the person’ disregarded here, but so is the conventional ‘goal’ of
sexual intercourse: orgasm. Martha’s ultimate goal is not orgasm (although it appears necessary) but creating the correct physical condition in order to enter this alternate psychic space. Here Martha not only has access to her buried memories, but also to visions of the beginning of humanity and even of herself in the future – for instance, she is able to see and feel the pain and sadness she will experience later in the Coldridge home. This is Martha’s first prophetic vision, though she does not know it and she will not remember it again for a long time. However, what is significant here is that it is only by way of existing outside of social structures and through manipulating and pushing at the limits of her body that Martha is able to access this alternate plane of consciousness. As Jean Pickering has pointed out, it is ‘through the medium of the flesh [that] Martha attains her first truly visionary experience’.20

When Martha awakes in Jack’s house she observes the scene: ‘He stood naked with his back to her. A tall thin man – a body. A woman lying on the bed, a body’ (74). Martha sees Jack and herself as just two bodies, separate from one another and from the self that observes. The united mind/body self that Martha experienced during sex is gone and, while not an ‘unembodied self’, she is nevertheless once more a ‘divided woman’. After her vision the night before she has come to realise that ‘normality’ is

a condition of disparateness. She had never really seen before how the separate parts of herself went on working individually, by themselves, not joining: that was the condition of being ‘normal’ as we understand it. Breath flows on, blood beats on, separately from each other; my sex lives on there, responding, or not; my heart feels this and that, and my mind up here goes working on. (74)

Once outside of the ‘high place of sex’ where ‘everything merges together’ (74) Martha views herself as a disparate collection of parts that work independently from one another. As ‘normality’ returns and Martha is forced to re-enter society by taking a job, she finds she must accept this state of division and conveniently – necessarily – ‘forget’ the alternate space that she has been able to access while existing outside of the laws and limitations of society. In finally making the phone call and accepting the job as Mark Coldridge’s live-in secretary, Martha must
leave behind her night-time wanderings and her visits to Jack and ‘re-adapt’ to the ‘mad’ world.

**Madness and the Mother**

One of the primary concerns of the *Children of Violence* series, and *The Four-Gated City* in particular, is Martha’s role as a mother and as a daughter. This is foregrounded very early on in the novel, before Martha joins the Coldridge household. In fact, it is while in bed with Jack that the significance of discourses of mothering to Martha’s sense of gendered embodiment is made clear. Part of their lovemaking ritual is to stroke their respective scars. Martha strokes Jack’s scar from the accident as well as the scars from his father’s whip. In turn, Jack strokes Martha’s stretch marks:

[He] ran his fingers along the minute marks on her groin and upper thighs made by pregnancy, tiny silver marks on white skin, and she thought of a small baby, any baby born to any woman, and its absolute perfection. That is why women cry when their children fall for the first time and scar a knee or an elbow: that perfect body, with not a mark on it, well, now it is claimed by the world. (67)

The scars on Martha’s body are linked to scars that will eventually also be inflicted upon the child’s body – the violence of reproduction upon the mother’s body is thus re-enacted in the scarring of the child’s body when she falls for the first time. More specifically, the female child will often, in turn, experience the same violence of reproduction as her mother when she has a child. Martha initially removes herself from this experience – she speaks of ‘any baby’ and ‘any woman’ – but she then shifts to her own experience of motherhood before shifting once more to her part in a much wider, in fact seemingly infinite, matrilineal line of mothers and daughters: ‘She thought of Caroline, the perfect little female body that had issued from her body which now held and always would the scars of pregnancy, and it was hard to tell whether she was Martha, or her mother who had given birth to her, or Caroline, who would give birth’ (68). The marks on Martha’s body and her experience of childbearing are not specific to her – they
are the marks of ‘any woman’, the experience of any reproductive female body – and therefore threaten her sense of her individual self: she becomes an indistinguishable cog in a successive chain of female reproductive bodies. If Martha loses control and ‘let[s] herself go’ (70) she becomes absorbed into a matrilineal line that extends right back to ‘the anonymity of an ancient femaleness, something indifferent to men, even hostile, self-sufficiently female’ (70). Martha risks being absorbed into an all encompassing, ‘ancient’ femaleness within which she cannot differentiate a sense of her individual self – if she allows herself to be enveloped by this awareness then she is no longer ‘Martha’ but assimilated into a state of collective primordial femaleness. Just as sex enables Martha to reach a plane of consciousness that reveals her future in the Coldridge home, so too does it allow her to see into the distant past in which she understands femaleness to be something unhindered by discourses of femininity, something ‘self-sufficient’, something that fundamentally binds her to all women. But this happens only when the ritual fails. Just as Jack must contain his terror of dying in order to continue so too must Martha contain that ‘ancient femaleness’ that would, she believes, turn her against him and not only connect her to her mother and her daughter, but merge her with all mothers and all daughters, and render her individual sense of ‘self’ insignificant.

Interestingly the recognising and accepting of this common femaleness is considered dangerous and, for the purposes of heterosexual sex, incongruent. Martha must not completely ‘let herself go’ if she is to proceed to have sex with Jack. Whilst exploring her body and her sexuality with Jack allows Martha to glimpse this sense of communality with her female ancestry it also demands that she remain an individual female self – not ‘hostile’, not ‘self-sufficient’ but a receptive, compliant, female body. Martha and Jack’s sexual union is therefore still bound by gendered discourses that adhere to the laws of the heterosexual matrix. Although Martha is cast within this matrix as the female reproductive body (complete with scars) she is not permitted to invest her femaleness with any value or significance beyond her own body-self. To do so would be to destabilise the sex/gender system which demands her compliance to the ‘natural’ heterosexual order. However, Martha’s refusal to be drawn into this ‘ancient
femaleness’ might also be read as a refusal to be defined by her female reproductive body and, more specifically, a refusal to be a part of this matrilineal chain temporally extending behind and in front of her. Martha’s scars are significant not only because they imprint upon her body her role within the sex/gender system but also because they serve to symbolise the violence of motherhood. To become absorbed into a sense of communal femaleness is to become implicated in a self-perpetuating system of reproduction and ‘nurturing’ which Martha, from her own experience as a daughter and mother, has deemed harmful and untenable. Lessing is suggesting and then dispelling the notion of ‘woman’ and her reproductive body as something sacred or spiritually invested. Instead she has Martha turn away from such romanticised re-conceptions of female identity and examine not the communality of all women – something which, if it ever did exist, belongs to the ancient past that Martha glimpses – but the violence and madness that women inflict upon one another from within the sex/gender system.21

From the very beginning of the novel mothering is represented as something that ‘scars’ and commits violence upon both the self and the child. Indeed, throughout the Children of Violence series conventional discourses of motherhood are represented as complex and potentially very damaging – as are conventional discourses of madness; in fact, the two are directly connected in The Four-Gated City and are both used to explore the ways in which gendered discursive practices create, manipulate and perpetuate certain ‘norms’ and intelligible ways of being. The novel presents various familial structures which begin as ‘normal’ nuclear families but which become fractured by abandonment, death, madness, institutionalisation, politics, and/or sexuality. As each nuclear family unit disintegrates it is (problematically) reformed with substitute parents/children and, in turn, also becomes a damaged and damaging structure. Like Laing in Sanity, Madness and the Family, Lessing is portraying the nuclear family as a potentially dangerous social structure in which the violence enacted upon one generation is then re-enacted upon the next. The daughters in The Four-Gated City – who are also mothers – are both subject to this violence and attempting (consciously or unconsciously) to break from the chain. Martha and Lynda, the main female
characters in the novel, are both, in conventional terms, disappointing daughters and ‘bad’ biological mothers. Lynda effectively abandons Francis when she is institutionalised and when she returns home she refuses to care for him – to be his mother. He goes to boarding school, stays with his grandmother during the holidays, and, when he returns home, is cared for by Martha. Martha comments: ‘Lynda had never been a wife, never been a mother’ (125). But of course Martha has also ‘abandoned’ a child. In book two of the Children of Violence series, A Proper Marriage, Martha separates from her first husband and leaves her daughter in his care. When she immigrates to England she goes without her daughter and, we must presume, without any intention of seeing her ever again. It is not surprising then that in stating the failings of Lynda as a wife and mother Martha also feels implicated: ‘Lynda Coldridge, who was in a very expensive mental hospital because she could not stand being Mark’s wife, and Francis’s mother, came too close to Martha. Which was why Martha had to leave this house, and soon’ (125). Martha, despite herself, identifies with Lynda, the ‘madwoman’, because she too has experienced both the desire to escape the roles of wife and mother and the ramifications of doing so. Martha links her decision not to accept and embody these roles to Lynda’s failure to do so, which, Martha believes, has led to her mental health problems. Consequently, Martha appears to fear for her own sanity while she is living within this particular, and familiar, familial structure. Martha repeatedly tells Mark that she ‘must go’ (125).

Unlike Lynda’s refusal to be a mother to Francis, Martha’s abandonment of her daughter is a conscious decision. By leaving her daughter Martha believes that she is rejecting those ‘acceptable’ forms and structures that she sees as acting out a violence upon her daughter. In Landlocked she explains that ‘when she left this child, she had actually said, and believed it, meant it, felt it to be true: one day she’ll thank me for setting her free. What on earth had she meant by it? How could she have said it, thought it, felt it? Yet, leaving the child, it had been her strongest emotion: I’m setting Caroline free’.22 Martha’s mistake is to extricate only herself – and not her daughter – from the nuclear structure. As it is, Caroline is accordingly absorbed into the very system Martha rejected in rejecting Caroline. Martha has not saved or set Caroline free by her absence – she has only
left her in the hands of those who committed violence against her: specifically, her own mother, Mrs Quest. In addition, Martha is demonised and punished for what she has done – again, primarily by her mother. In *Landlocked* Martha occasionally sees her daughter at her mother and father’s home and is referred to as ‘Auntie Matty’. Again, the nickname ‘Matty’ is associated with falsehood and a compromised version of herself that she must ‘perform’ in order not to destabilise the new family structure complete with a substitute mother. Martha adheres to this arrangement but while such a performance might maintain ‘a surface of sense, of civilised life’ she recognises that ‘underneath there was such horror’ (239). Martha is once more sucked into an inauthentic performance designed by her mother to legitimate her presence within the family home and thus adhere to the ‘correct’ family structure – a structure which cannot allow for the presence of a ‘second’ mother. So despite the good intentions behind her decision, Martha is cast as the ‘bad’ mother. Martha comments: ‘if a woman commits the crime of leaving a child, without the wailing, the weeping, the wringing of the hands that make it, almost, an act of nature (as the writers of Victorian melodrama understood very well) then everything will be unnatural, horror will remain unreleased’ (239). A woman who rationally leaves her child is ‘unnatural’, is, in effect, a ‘non-woman’ – she becomes something Other, something that does not adhere to intelligible womanhood. In Lynda’s case this non-maternal otherness is explained by way of her mental illness (and she is re-gendered by way of traditional models of madness); Martha, however, remains unintelligible. The intentions behind her decision are unfathomable to Mrs Quest. Martha’s mother therefore recasts her as ‘Auntie Matty’ in order to conceal and avoid Martha’s problematic subject-hood – as much for her sake as for Caroline’s – as well as to punish Martha for her deviant act. Martha, who is “‘behaving sensibly’, as it was her nature to do’ (239), is forced to play the role of ‘Auntie Matty’ and endure her mother’s punishment for her ‘unnatural’ crime.

Martha abandons Caroline, despite her later regret, because she believes it is in the best interests of both. By leaving her husband and child Martha is freed from the constraints of the traditional wife and mother role she finds, as a woman and as a Socialist, so untenable and which she believes, if continued, would only
end up harming both herself and Caroline. Martha’s decision is directly related to Laing’s own account of parental violence which he summarises in *The Politics of Experience*:

> From the moment of birth, when the stone-age baby confronts the twentieth-century mother, the baby is subjected to these forces of violence, called love, as its mother and father have been, and their parents and their parents before them. These forces are mainly concerned with destroying most of its potentialities. This enterprise is on the whole successful. By the time the new human being is fifteen or so, we are left with a being like ours. A half-crazed creature, more or less adjusted to a mad world. This is normality in our present age. (50)

Laing draws out a familial line of inheritance in which violence/love is acted out upon each succeeding generation, just as Lessing does when she has Martha connect her pregnancy scars to her mother and daughter and when Jack’s particular ‘madness’ is explained in terms of his abusive father. Several years before Philip Larkin’s ‘This Be The Verse’ (1971), both Laing and Lessing were expressing that post-war youth counter-culture truism ‘[t]hey fuck you up, your mum and dad’. As in Larkin’s poem, Lessing and Laing both see this ‘fucking up’ as a continual process that happens to, and is then re-enacted by, generation after generation. Although by the time Laing writes *The Politics of Experience* he has widened the parameters of his study to include larger systems and structures of power, he begins, in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, with the nuclear family and, more specifically, the mother.

**Sanity, Madness and the Mother**

In *The Politics of Experience* Laing writes that ‘the family is, in the first place, the usual instrument for what is called socialization, that is, getting each new recruit to the human race to behave and experience in substantially the same way as those who have already got here’ (57). The new child is ‘socializ[ed]’ into accepting the mad world as sane and will thus grow up to perpetuate the discursive practices that maintain the social order. However, this process is not always straightforward and can create significant disharmony within the family. For instance, the child may recognise, and become distressed by, a disjuncture between what her parents
say and what they do, as well as various inconsistencies in their character, their beliefs and their outlook. The child will notice that while these beliefs ‘fit’ within social frameworks they are not ‘authentically’ or happily performed, though her parents appear to adhere to these practices willingly. Such inconsistencies are likely to produce a troubled and, Laing argues, ‘schizophrenic’ child.

In *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, published in 1964, Laing and A. Esterson present and analyse a series of case studies. The purpose of the study is to find evidence that schizophrenia is not a ‘disease’ of the individual person; rather the schizophrenic patient is but the most overt expression of the disturbed nature of the entire family unit. *The Divided Self* is concerned primarily with the individual experience of schizophrenia and the relationship between patient and psychiatrist but in this study Laing resituates the patient in relation to the familial and social structures within which she must function. Peter Sedgwick, in ‘R. D. Laing: self, symptom and society’, writes that ‘Laing himself recognized this important shift in his thinking, and has even apologised for his earlier concentration on the individual patient’. 24 This apology is not wholly necessary – *The Divided Self*’s primary focus was on the experience of schizophrenia, not its cause. *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, however, is concerned with the causes of schizophrenia and in order to study the origins of this particular state of being Laing shifts his focus from the ‘inner’ world of the schizophrenic to her ‘outer’ circumstances.

In their study Laing and Esterson ‘reveal’ a direct connection between the degree to which the individual patient feels ‘ontologically secure’ and her immediate social network: the family unit. In doing so, Laing and Esterson, without comment or explanation, expose and perpetuate a connection between schizophrenia and a particularly female experience of family life. This is because the text is made up of eleven case studies, each of which focuses upon one schizophrenic woman and her family: mother, father, siblings and, if applicable, husband. The case study is primarily made up of transcribed interviews between Laing and Esterson and the schizophrenic woman and interviews with various family members. Family members are interviewed to a greater or lesser extent depending on whether Laing and Esterson believe that the family member in
question is ‘disturbed’ and, more significantly, ‘disturbing’. The transcribed interviews are punctuated by sections of commentary and analysis by Laing and Esterson. The variables of the project are limited by selecting the schizophrenic patient by way of specific criteria. Laing and Esterson set out these criteria in the text’s introduction: they select only physically healthy women aged between fifteen and forty who have been diagnosed by at least two doctors as schizophrenic; the women are not to have been subjected to any brain surgery; and they are to have received no more than fifty electro-shocks in the last year and no more than one hundred and fifty altogether. There is no justification for these particular criteria other than to limit the variables of the experiment; significantly, Laing and Esterson do not explain why they have decided to interview schizophrenic women and not men.

The problem with only studying schizophrenic women – and not explaining the reasoning behind this decision – is, of course, the implication that schizophrenia is therefore a female ‘disease’. Laing and Esterson are not saying this – their control sample is supposed to represent all schizophrenics – and the conclusions they draw are presented as equally applicable to female and male schizophrenics. However, gender is a variable and thus Laing and Esterson’s study is, whether they acknowledge it or not, specific to female schizophrenia and to the daughter’s position within the conventional framework of the nuclear, patriarchal family unit and her relationship to gendered discourses. An unacknowledged preoccupation with sex informs the study from its opening line: ‘Maya is a tall, dark, attractive woman of twenty-eight’ (31). Why is Maya’s ‘attractive’, youthful physical appearance of significance to her mental distress? Laing and Esterson do not say. That the authors do not acknowledge gender as any kind of contributing factor in the onset of schizophrenia is indeed odd, especially considering Laing’s conviction that schizoid behaviour is occasioned by the extent to which one feels ontologically secure and from finding oneself in an ‘untenable’ position: all of the daughters featured in the study suffer from the knowledge that they are (in Lessing’s terms) ‘second class citizens’ and that they are therefore subjected to gendered discourses that dictate a particular way of being that is contradictory in itself and often also at odds with their own desires.
Many of the women in the case studies feel themselves to be trapped within the family home until they can escape into marriage and, alas, into yet another nuclear family unit through which parental violence/love is once more replicated.

That the experiences of the female patients within their family structures are specifically gendered is clear to see in the content of the transcribed interviews, if not in Laing and Esterson’s analysis. For example: most of the daughters are unmarried and are financially dependent on their parents; many of the daughters are attempting to achieve some level of autonomy either from within or outside of a family that generally tells them what to do, where to go, who to see, and how to behave; the daughters are often intelligent but are told they do not have an aptitude for study (Hazel King’s parents do not allow her to take the eleven plus and Maya Abbot is ‘too clever’); parents complain that their daughters read too much and try to stop them (Maya Abbot is forced to stop reading and Hazel Danzig’s parents say she ‘thinks too much’); parents deny that their daughter has sexual feelings and deny that she might masturbate (Maya Abbot, Agnes Lawson); there is in some cases a past of promiscuity and there may have been miscarriages, abortions or adoptions; parents, fathers in particular, warn their daughters about other men and tell them if they go out they may be attacked or raped (Lucy Blair, for example; others, like Jean Head, are beaten by their fathers as children and in Ruby Eden’s case study there are numerous indications of sexual abuse on which, again, Laing and Esterson do not comment); the daughter’s ‘illness’ is confirmed when the daughter becomes agitated, talks back, becomes aggressive, or asserts her independence from her parents; some of the daughters have had to care for infirm brothers during their childhood and have thus become ‘little mothers’ to little boys (Claire Church); many of the daughters have been encouraged to find work – but only in retail or something similarly untaxing; the parents will be shocked by changes in their daughters’ behaviour, such as dressing ‘outrageously’; parents will often call their daughters ‘sluts’ and ‘prostitutes’ when their sexuality becomes evident, perhaps through a pregnancy out of wedlock (Lucie Blaire and Ruby Eden); the daughters are expected to marry but receive conflicting messages with regard to a desirable femininity (Agnes Lawson is told she is unlikely to ever get married and is concerned with
how sexy she should and does appear to be); lastly, the daughter’s mother is acutely aware of appearances and worries about neighbours gossiping and passes this fear onto her daughter. Elaine Showalter has credited Laing and Esterson’s ‘exposé of the assumptions of feminine dependence, passivity, chastity, dutifulness, obedience, and docility that governed the behavior of his eleven families towards their daughters’ with providing ‘important ammunition in their analysis of women’s oppression’, despite the lack of such an analysis in their study. Indeed, what Laing and Esterson ‘expose’ is not a ‘gender neutral’ generational conflict but, much more specifically, the psychical damage imposed upon the daughter by parents who consciously and unconsciously impart, enforce and regulate gendered discourses of acceptable codes of behaviour whilst simultaneously exemplifying the unhappiness, paranoia, conflict, and violence occasioned by adherence to such codes.

Although ostensibly both parents are implicated in the onset of their daughter’s schizophrenia in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, it becomes increasingly clear that it is the mother who, according to Laing and Esterson, has the most damaging and disturbing effect upon the family. Each case study includes interviews with most of the immediate family, either on their own or in various combinations. The majority of the interviews are with the daughter (the schizophrenic patient) but the second greatest number of interviews are conducted with the mother and the mother and daughter together. In some cases the male members of the family are reluctant to talk to Laing and Esterson, but in most cases it seems that Laing and Esterson have made a conscious decision to conduct more interviews with the mother – that they have deemed the mother to be the more important factor in the daughter’s sense of her ‘untenable position’ within the household. Although it is never stated explicitly, Laing and Esterson’s favouring of the mother serves to imply that she is the ‘agent’ of the daughter’s ‘illness’. There is no doubt that many of the mothers’ responses are disturbing. One of the common characteristics of this ‘schizophrenogenic mother’ seems to be her ability to say one thing, do another, and then claim she did the thing she said she would all along, not the thing she actually did. However, many of the fathers’ responses are equally disturbing, particularly with regard to sexuality, and
yet the fathers’ influence upon the daughter is not nearly so carefully examined as
the mothers’. By so clearly demonstrating a bias towards analysis of the mother
the obvious conclusion that one draws from Laing and Esterson’s study is that the
schizophrenic daughter is the product of the ‘schizophrenogenic mother’ and
hence that schizophrenia is not only primarily experienced by women but also
primarily caused by women.

Later, in The Politics of Experience, Laing writes that ‘if the patients were
disturbed their families were often very disturbing. […] At first the focus was
mainly on the mothers (who are always the first to get blamed for everything), and
a “schizophrenogenic” mother was postulated, who was supposed to generate
disturbance in the child’ (93). Laing fails to mention that he contributed to this
‘postulation’ of the schizophrenogenic mother in Sanity, Madness and the Family.
However, in this later text he goes on to say that the focus then shifted to the
husband of the schizophrenic patient (although not, it seems, to the father), and
then to the nuclear family as a whole and finally to extended networks of family
and friends. Juliet Mitchell writes that by the time he wrote The Politics of
Experience Laing had ‘relegated such notions as “schizophrenogenic” mother to
the past history of his type of theory’.29 So, while in the earlier text Laing
implicitly implicates the mother as the instigator of her daughter’s schizophrenia,
in his later work he distances himself from this charge and all but dismisses the
mother’s significance in favour of larger social networks. Laing is able to easily
distance himself from the concept of the schizophrenogenic mother (and the
feminist backlash against such a concept) because gender has never been relevant
to his theory of schizophrenia – just as the female patient is, for him, ‘gender
neutral’ so too is the female parent. Lessing, however, does gender her
patient/protagonist and therefore cannot so easily distance herself from the mother
as the instigator of schizoid behaviour – and nor, it seems, does she want to.
Lessing is less interested in avoiding the controversy that surrounds the concept of
the schizophrenogenic mother than in examining the implications of such a
concept. Laing disavows a direct connection between madness and the mother in
favour of wider social structures but Lessing retains this concept in order to
demonstrate how, for women, the mother-daughter relationship that serves to
‘pass on’ acceptable codes of gendered behaviour in fact constitutes a fundamental basis for those wider political – and gendered – structures.

Mother Quest

Since Martha Quest, Mrs Quest and Martha’s relationship has been a difficult one. The liberal Martha sees her mother as embodying everything she has always wished to escape: an unhappy and crippling conformity to society’s expectations in terms of gender, class, race and sexuality. Mrs Quest has failed to successfully ‘recruit’ and ‘socialize’ Martha by instilling in her the gendered ‘norms’ of her sex and social position and Martha goes on to defy her mother’s code by leaving her husband, abandoning her child, becoming a ‘red’, and, at the end of Landlocked, finally (if not absolutely) leaving/rejecting her mother to immigrate to England. Throughout Children of Violence Mrs Quest has been Martha’s formidable adversary but by Landlocked she has become rather piteous and when she visits Martha in The Four-Gated City she is but a frail, senile old woman. Nevertheless, Mrs Quest still holds considerable power over Martha and she can still wield that power with great fervour – her episodes of senility often take the form of vicious attacks on Martha’s character and lifestyle that while only spoken aloud to herself are overheard by Martha. It may appear then that Mrs Quest is the ‘villain’ of the piece, not only in terms of her behaviour towards Martha but also her influence upon Martha’s mental health. Roberta Rubenstein writes that ‘though objectively Martha can see her mother as a pathetic old woman, subjectively she experiences her as the perpetrator of extensive psychic damage in the past, and a heavy drain on her present inner resources’. Mrs Quest is not simply the old woman Martha now sees before her but the mother who inflicted upon her a catalogue of damaging experiences that she has since blocked from her memory. Because Martha has been preparing for her mother’s visit by attempting to confront this past through an excavation of her memories, the powerful, hurtful mother of her childhood and young adulthood is still very much ‘alive’ to Martha. Indeed, for all Mrs Quest’s faults, it is her visit that precipitates – and necessitates – Martha’s psychic return to the forgotten experiences of her past and those fleeting connections with that other plane of consciousness accessed on the veld
as a child and as the ‘outsider’ in London, before she entered the Coldridge home. At the same time the uncovering of her memories, particularly those concerning her mother, plunges Martha into such a state of depression and neurosis that she first seeks help from Lynda and then Lynda’s psychiatrist, Dr Lamb.

Both the necessity for ‘Matty’, the false self of her childhood, and now Martha’s descent into psychic despair are linked directly to her mother. Mrs Quest is the archetypal schizophrenogenic mother – she is the real ‘bad’ mother and the real ‘mad’ woman, not Martha whose ‘madness’ is in fact a strategy to cope with her mother and her adherence to those ‘mad’ discursive practices Martha is trying to reject. I will return to Martha’s strategies for coping with her mother, and their consequences, shortly but to begin with I will examine not Martha’s but Mrs Quest’s experience of their complicated relationship. This is possible because in the middle of The Four-Gated City Lessing replaces Martha as the primary focaliser/protagonist with Mrs Quest. In doing so Lessing is able to present the other side of Martha and Mrs Quest’s relationship – the mother’s side – and make clear that while Mrs Quest might indeed be a schizophrenogenic mother she too is a victim of the same violence she inflicts. In this final text in the series Lessing bestows upon the mother a narrative voice and thus challenges and complicates a straightforward reading of Mrs Quest as simply ‘schizophrenogenic’, old fashioned, bigoted, and undeserving of sympathy or complexity of character. By switching the narrative point of view to Mrs Quest, Lessing is able to demonstrate that she is also a woman who has had violence done to her and whose character has been shaped by damaging discourses of femininity and familial responsibility that she, unlike Martha, has remained bound by.

Mrs Quest’s narrative makes up the most of Part Two, Chapter Four. Mrs Quest is travelling from Cape Town to London to visit Martha. The chapter begins with Mrs Quest waiting for her boat to sail. She is staying with a young woman called Milly who is ‘really, truly kind, unlike others who – here Mrs Quest’s mind went dark briefly’ (259). Mrs Quest’s narrative and state of mind is characterised by episodes of anger towards an unspecified ‘other’ (usually Martha although also her son, Jonathan, and his wife, or more generally ‘young people’ (275)) followed by blanks and darkness. As she waits for her boat she ponders the choices she has
made – primarily her choice of husband. What becomes clear to Mrs Quest is that this was the only moment of ‘choice’ she ever had – ‘before she became a mother, and a nurse and had no choice but to sacrifice herself’ (264). Of course, even if she once did have the freedom to ‘choose’ her own husband, she still had no choice but to marry – to have children and to care for them and to ‘sacrifice herself’. Mrs Quest does not quite come to this realisation – the inevitability of her life as determined by her sex/gender – and therefore she cannot quite connect her unhappy experience of self-sacrifice with her expectations for her daughter: ‘She worried over Martha, whose letters said nothing, particularly nothing about getting married’ (267). Just as Martha approaches and retreats from her experiences of psychic enlightenment, so too does Mrs Quest. As she remembers her past experiences she approaches an understanding of the arbitrary way in which her sex/gender has determined the course of her life, but she quickly retreats from such knowledge and replaces it with a longstanding faith in the gendered systems to which she has adhered all her life – and which she will thus continue to thrust upon her daughter. At the same time she must continually censor her words and even her thoughts – she is careful not to ‘embarrass[]’ (264) herself and others with old-fashioned beliefs that are so engrained that she cannot relinquish them, although she sees that they are no longer acceptable views according to her daughter and son’s generation. In fact, it is only when Mrs Quest’s assumptions and beliefs about black Africans are challenged by her friendship with her servant boy, Steven, (something she nevertheless tries to keep a secret from her son and his wife) that she feels able to visit her modern daughter: ‘perhaps she might go to England to visit Martha. […] she would see if Martha … after all, time changed people … time had changed her, May Quest … she had been told by a black boy that she had a black heart! Let Martha put that in a pipe and smoke it!’ (271). This piece of free indirect discourse perfectly illustrates Mrs Quest’s own divided self: she both wishes to impress and distress Martha with her ‘changed’ outlook. Coupled with the sense of irony in the pride she takes at having been told she has a ‘black heart’, her conflicting motives perfectly exemplify her ‘schizophrenogenic’ tendencies – her intentions are both
honourable and yet also vindictive, loaded with an ‘awful anger that seemed beneath everything she did, like an underswell in the sea’ (262).

During her section of the narrative Mrs Quest repeatedly contrasts her own experience of youth with Martha’s: ‘of course it was different for all these flighty girls now, they did as they liked, look at Martha, it was certain she was pleasing herself, as she always had, selfish, inconsiderate, immoral… Mrs Quest’s head ached, she felt sick’ (264). Mrs Quest is constantly confronted with these affronts, real and imagined, to her ideas of decency and proper feminine behaviour. On the ship, she is witness to a young woman, Olive Prentiss, disposing of her sanitary towel over the side of the deck:

Mrs Quest was smothered with emotion. She called it, later, outrage … Mrs Quest seethed, raged, suffered. When she was a girl … but she could not, suddenly, bear to remember what now seemed a long story of humiliation and furtiveness, great soaking bloody clouts that rubbed and smelled, and which one was always secretly washing, or concealing, or trying to burn; headaches and backaches and all kinds of necessary tact with obtuse brothers and father; and then, her breasts, her first sprouting breasts, about which the family had made jokes and she had blushed. (279-280)

Like Anna Wulf, Mrs Quest is distressed by the practicalities of managing her menses but, unlike Anna, her distress is indicative of a much more fundamental abhorrence of female sexuality. Witnessing Olive Prentiss’s furtive act brings back a flood of distressing memories of an adolescence marked by a sense of ‘humiliation and furtiveness’ with regard to her body. Like Martha, Mrs Quest is being confronted with memories of the pain of her childhood, in particular, those inflicted by her immediate family. However, unlike Martha, Mrs Quest is not prepared to excavate her past – it is significant that her own mother is not mentioned. In response to the stirring up of these old memories, Mrs Quest ‘went to bed early and […] she pushed Olive Prentiss out of her mind, and with it the incident, and the memories it had stirred up’ (280). This incident and her anxiousness over her imminent meeting with Martha serve to restore her ‘old supports’ (280) so that when she finally reaches London she is not the ‘changed’ May Quest that left Cape Town but the old Mrs Quest who cannot fathom why her daughter’s ‘choices’ are not the same as her own were.
The days that Mrs Quest spends with Martha in the Coldridge home are characterised by a series of misunderstandings and miscommunications. Every time Mrs Quest or Martha attempts to make ‘contact’ (281) with the other they fail miserably – tongues ‘betray’ (284) and efforts to meet on common, honest ground only serve to give one an upper hand that they then dare not relinquish to the other. Martha’s reactions to her mother – embarrassed, hostile, despairing – serve to put Mrs Quest, already so out of place, at a disadvantage which she then compensates for by falling back on her old reactions: disappointment and criticism. Mrs Quest’s thoughts and her spoken words are incongruous – she means one things but too often says another, as if the old words of their past issue forth unbidden – once spoken they are immediately regretted but they cannot be apologised for. Indeed, when she speaks her thoughts aloud to herself they are not the conscious thoughts presented in the passages of free indirect discourse, but rather vicious rants against Martha, informed by the gendered discourses which she has so absolutely internalised.

When Mrs Quest is told Martha is ill she expresses her desire to care for her daughter by seeming offended that Martha has not asked for her help. Mrs Quest, although she does not quite acknowledge it, is in some sense aware that she is implicated in Martha’s illness: ‘As for Martha’s being ill, Mrs. Quest had unpleasant memories that went back to her adolescence. […] – she heard herself saying: That’s not true, you are always accusing me? How can I make you ill? Why should I want to make you ill? All I want is to look after you, what is my life for if it isn’t to sacrifice, it for you?’ (291). That it is Mrs Quest who is making Martha ‘ill’ is made clear in Martha’s own narrative but, even without this, much of Mrs Quest’s narrative reads like the transcribed interviews with the schizophrenogenic mothers in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Like those mothers, Mrs Quest’s thoughts/intentions and her spoken words/actions bear little relation to one another. However, Lessing, by providing a section of narrative from the perspective of Mrs Quest, demonstrates how the schizophrenogenic mother is as much a victim of her family and her sex as the daughter upon whom she inflicts the same violence. What Lessing’s text does, and what Laing’s does not, is show that the cause of madness is not the mother per se but rather the
cultural construction of femininity the mother is required to ‘pass on’ as necessitated by the nuclear familial structure and heterosexual matrix. Mrs Quest has internalised this construction to the point where she is, like Anna Wulf, turned against her own body – as well as against her own daughter who not only exists as evidence of Mrs Quest’s own sexuality but who embraces her sexuality and transgresses its boundaries by way of her ‘masculine intelligence’ (253). So while Laing initially only implicitly blames the mother for her daughter’s schizoid state and then later effectively dismisses the mother’s influence in favour of larger political structures, Lessing shows that mothering is political and is fundamental to those larger and damaging discursive structures that determine, maintain and regulate ‘mad’ ways of being.

Although the beginning of Mrs Quest’s narrative point of view is clearly marked in the text – it opens Part Two, Chapter Four – the end of her narrative is much less clearly defined. When Martha rejects Mrs Quest’s attempts to ‘help’ by acting as charwoman she breaks down into tears and Martha ‘put her arms around her mother, though Mrs Quest could feel that it was not a “real” embrace’ (294). With this final ‘declaration of war’ and a further thwarted effort to ‘connect’, Mrs Quest retires to her bed: ‘A few days in bed was what she needed, she really didn’t feel…’ (294). Mrs Quest’s thought trails off and after a paragraph break the impersonal narration continues, this time with Martha as the main focaliser. The switch back to Martha is abrupt but not clearly delineated. Mrs Quest’s narrative simply merges back into Martha’s. Although Mrs Quest remains a part of the story for the rest of the chapter (five or so pages) she is now presented from Martha’s perspective. When Martha overhears one of her mother’s rants in which she is called a ‘filthy creature[]’ and a ‘whore’ (297) she sends her mother to see Dr Lamb in order that he do what she cannot – send her mother away. After Mrs Quest launches into an hour-long tirade against Martha, Dr Lamb suggests they would be better apart. Mrs Quest agrees, leaves the next day and dies one year later, the relationship between them unresolved.

Mrs Quest’s narrative is framed by Martha’s efforts to ‘manage’ her visit – these efforts take two related but distinct forms. One is the excavation of her memories – this is related to her earlier experiences of different planes of
consciousness in which she can ‘see’ the past and the future. In these sessions she sets about uncovering the past she has buried, particularly those disturbing memories involving her mother. This is analogous to the anti-psychiatric journey into one’s ‘inner space’ – she is exploring and uncovering her past and, by doing so, mapping out her ‘self’. During one of her sessions she encounters her young self: ‘she turned her face towards Martha, a small, rather sharp face, watchful. Her smile was strained. Martha reached towards the smile, saw it dissolve in tears: Martha heard herself crying. She wept, while a small girl wept with her, mamma, mamma, why are you so cold, so unkind, why did you never love me?’ (243).

Again, Mrs Quest is implicated in her psychic trauma, but so too is Martha – the small girl could so easily be Caroline. As such, the uncovering of her past is doubly traumatic – it forces her to confront the harm she has suffered but also that which she has caused, her own potential for violence and hate (which she will later encounter as the ‘self-hater’ (550)). Although Martha has refused to continue the cycle of violence by abandoning Caroline – and thus not become her mother, another schizophrenogenic mother – she has nevertheless committed violence in leaving her. It is little wonder that this process, however ‘healing’, presents itself as a kind of illness, a madness: Martha is depressed, shut up in her room in bed, isolated from the rest of the family. Knowing she must soon physically, as well as psychically, confront her mother, Martha turns to the second method: conventional psychiatry. The ‘madness’ occasioned by the first method leads her to seek the second which, because it ‘treats’ that ‘madness’, then renders the first method impossible. Martha is so exhausted by her sessions with Dr Lamb that she is unable to continue with what she calls her real ‘work’ (247). Martha cannot resume her anti-psychiatric ‘inner journey’ while also undergoing a course of psychiatric analysis – the two are diametrically opposed, although one presents itself as the subject of the other.

Martha’s sessions with Dr Lamb represent the inadequacy of conventional psychiatry. Marion Vlastos, in ‘Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy’, writes that ‘whatever Dr. Lamb says goes, whether or not his diagnosis makes sense to his patient’ and that he ‘defines the boundaries for exploring the illness and establishes his own control over the process’. This is quite different
to Martha’s own experiments with uncovering her past in which she is master over her own experience. Here ‘healing’ is characterised by a series of violent explosions instigated by Dr Lamb’s provocative questions, by a strict hierarchy that is not only gendered but also sexualised, and by the looming threat of the doctor’s final diagnosis and treatment (he tells her she is ‘manic-depressive with schizoid tendencies’ (249)). As Vlastos points out, there is none of the ‘cozy argumentativeness of Anna’s discussions with Mother Sugar’; rather this is a ‘chilling investigation of the conventional process of therapy’ (130). Martha will eventually abandon her course of conventional therapy but its position in the narrative, as framing Mrs Quest’s visit, serves to connect the conventional discourses of madness to the conventional discourses of femininity embodied by Mrs Quest.

Martha tells Dr Lamb that ‘my mother was a woman who hated her own sexuality and she hated mine too. She wanted me to be a boy always – before I was born’ (252). Martha disappoints her mother before she is even born because of her sex. Martha says: ‘she was always making fun of me because I wasn’t good at the boy’s things’ (252). As a woman who despises her own sexuality, Mrs Quest imposes upon her daughter conflicting messages with regard to the gendered identity she should embody. The codes of gendered normality Mrs Quest is required to impart are codes that she clearly shows herself to be bound and degraded by. As such, she is ill equipped to facilitate Martha’s acquiescence to feminine codes of behaviour. She imparts to Martha a sense of the inferiority of femaleness without instilling the necessary acceptance of that social position. This causes the young Martha to reject those codes and attempt to embody a masculine gender identity. However, because she is unable to perform this masculine identity convincingly Martha comes to occupy an ambiguous position – she is the fool, the ‘clown’: ‘I clowned, and she laughed at me. It was a way of protecting myself. I know that’ (252). As a young child Martha performs a non-subversive parody of masculinity in order to protect herself from her mother’s disappointment: ‘[it] was my way of fighting her’ (252). But this is not sustainable and Martha is absorbed into the sex/gender system despite her mother: ‘When at last I became a girl, and I spent years and years longing for the moment when I would have breasts and be a
woman, I was able to defy her at last. I made myself beautiful clothes, and every man I had, for a long time, was a weapon against her. Do you suppose I don’t know that?’ (252-253). Unlike her mother, who suffered such a sense of humiliation at her ‘sprouting breasts’, Martha longs for the moment when such markers of her sexuality will act as affronts to her mother’s sense of female decency. Once ‘a woman’ Martha embraces the sexuality her mother so abhors and wields it like a weapon over the woman who has tormented her by attempting to shackle Martha with the same gendered discourses by which she is so unhappily bound. In ‘The Female Body Veiled: From Crocus to Clitoris’, Ruth Saxton writes that Lessing’s ‘young female characters discover a new power and trauma in their budding sexuality as their bodies metamorphose from those of little girls to those of young women. They flaunt their new “body power” before mothers’. Martha’s handling of this power, this ‘weapon’, is not straightforward and she is still subject to the laws of the sex/gender system (particularly in the early novels, Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage); however, the nature of Martha’s particular historical moment (the war and the political climate in Southern Africa) allows her to express her sexuality in ways Mrs Quest has been taught to believe are indecent, immoral, and ill suited to her daughter’s ‘breeding’ and social position.

But Dr Lamb suggests to Martha that her real weapon is not her female sexuality but her ‘masculine intelligence’, meaning ‘what [she] got out of books’: ‘I think you are proud of knowing – you are proud of that more than anything. It’s your intelligence you are proud of. You are still fighting your mother with that – the masculine intelligence’ (253). Dr Lamb is trying to provoke Martha into ‘s[eeing] red’ (254) by gendering the concept of intelligence and drawing upon that familiar association between the binaries male/female and mind/body. Martha’s weapons against her mother are twofold: her sexuality (the female body) and her intelligence (the male mind). Both offend her mother because both transgress the codes of gendered behaviour that Martha ought to embody. But both also offend Martha who is not satisfied with destabilising the sex/gender system (like Anna Wulf), but who is struggling to disengage herself from that system altogether and conceive of the ‘something new’ she first experienced on
the veld in *Martha Quest*. Martha’s mother, however, ties her to the system – although she has forsaken Caroline she is still fixed within the chain of female reproduction by her mother whose continued presence in her life forces her to fall back upon gendered, and thus divided, conceptions of self (female body and male mind) in order to ‘fight’ and ‘protect herself’ against her mother.

After her mother sees Dr Lamb and leaves, Martha again descends into depression, ‘into a collapse’ (299), and now cancels her appointments with Dr Lamb. She wants to work on excavating her past again; her mother’s visit has already become a blank that she must journey back to and uncover. She ends her analysis with Dr Lamb and instead she works ‘on her own mind, with her mind’ (300), re-entering her past and connecting with that ‘best part’ of her self. Although it is Mrs Quest’s arrival that occasions Martha’s journey it is, ultimately, the mother’s dismissal and death that emancipates Martha from her sex, her sexuality and the gendering of self or intelligence and which thus enables her to continue. When Martha asks Dr Lamb to see her mother she tells him ‘but if I kick her out I sign her death warrant. I know that’ (295). But in signing her mother’s death warrant Martha releases herself from her own existential death. She finally extricates herself from the matrilineal chain – both its future and its past. From outside of that chain she is now able to begin to imagine other constructions of ‘family’, of identity, and of human reproduction/development: an alternative to the patriarchal nuclear family unit that serves only to reproduce itself. In confronting and breaking with the mother Martha is able to begin to imagine a new way of being. Part of this process is also a forsaking of the weapons Martha has used against her mother: her sexuality – she ends her affair with Mark – and her ‘masculine intelligence’ – she rejects the rational external realm of ‘sanity’, empirical/scientific knowledge, and world politics for the irrational inner realm of ‘madness’, self knowledge, and human politics.

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2 *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* [1960] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 27. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 41-42. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

The series was published as follows: Martha Quest (1952), A Proper Marriage (1954), A Ripple from the Storm (1958), Landlocked (1965), and The Four-Gated City (1969).


This term is used throughout The Four-Gated City as a shorthand term for the psychiatric establishment, its treatments and institutions: ‘this great machinery of psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, psychologists, social workers, clinics, mental hospitals, which dealt with what they referred to as the mental health of the country’ (333). Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


Laing problematises the use of the term schizophrenia and its dangerous potential as a label. Likewise, the diagnosis of ‘schizophrenia’ is always implicated in The Four-Gated City. However, the term serves to differentiate the schizoid condition from other forms of madness which are not necessarily borne out of one’s ‘untenable position’ in society. Neither Laing nor Lessing argue that all types of madness can be said to be non-illnesses. As noted earlier, when I use the term ‘madness’ in this thesis I am referring specifically to those schizoid states which Laing and Lessing are examining, and not to all forms of mental illness.

Laing’s use of this term is not strictly Darwinian – he does not make any associations between animal species and the human – but rather expresses a more general relationship between the social environment and human biology.

Julian Huxley coined the term ‘transhumanism’ in New Wine for New Bottles (London: Chatteris and Windus, 1957), p. 17. He writes that ‘finally, during the last few ticks of the cosmic clock, something wholly new and revolutionary, human beings with their capacities for conceptual thought and language, for self-conscious awareness and purpose, for accumulating and pooling conscious experience. […] The exploration of human nature and its possibilities has scarcely begun. A vast New World of uncharted possibilities awaits its Columbus, […] We are already justified in the conviction that human life as we know it in history is a wretched makeshift, rooted in ignorance; and that it could be transcended by a state of existence based on the illumination of knowledge and comprehension. […] T]he most ultimate satisfaction comes from a depth and wholeness of the inner life, and therefore that we must explore and make fully available the techniques of spiritual development. […] The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself – not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature’ (14-17). Both Laing’s and Lessing’s ideas about the nature of humanity and its possibilities resonate with Huxley’s work although neither share Huxley’s emphasis on the ‘evolutionary’ benefits of science and technology, favouring the ‘irrationality’ of madness to the rationality of science.


Martha Quest [1952] (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 75. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


Laing, The Divided Self, p. 79.

Laing, The Divided Self, p. 67.


Lessing’s novel The Cleft (2007) offers a sustained imagining of the ‘nature’ of this primordial collective femaleness. This novel is also concerned with the ‘nature’ and violence of mothering.

Doris Lessing, Landlocked [1665] (Herts: Granada, 1976), p. 245. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


A breakdown of the interviews is contained in an appendix at the end of Sanity, Madness and the Family (pp. 267-278); in addition, the individual case studies, irrespective of the interview statistics, also tend to favour the transcription and analysis of those interviews that include the mother.


Beyond Madness

Peter Sedgwick distinguishes *The Divided Self* from Laing’s later works on three counts: one, that ‘there is not a hint of mysticism in it’ and that despite its use of ‘opaque existentialist’ theory it is nevertheless a quite logical, empirical piece of technical writing; two, that ‘since there is no super-reality beyond the here and now of actual people, psychotic patients are not seen as the mystics or prophets of this super-sensory world. They are not, as in the later Laing, pioneers in the exciting endeavours of exploring “inner space”’; and thirdly, schizophrenia is largely considered in terms of the individual patient, as opposed to their social situation.¹ This was a schizophrenia that was still, as Sedgwick puts it, ‘very much like a syndrome’: that is, ‘a pattern of responses manifested by individual persons’ (16). But in Laing’s later works schizophrenia is represented not simply in terms of one’s individual experience of one’s own particular ‘being-in-the-world’, but rather as part of a network of interrelated beings (in *Self and Others* and *Sanity, Madness and the Family*) and, in *The Politics of Experience*, as part of an existential journey into one’s ‘inner space’, connecting with a mystical, even primordial state of being. Sedgwick summarises this development:

Laing, in short, regards the psychotic’s experience of an alien reality as something akin to a mystical apprehension: it is not ‘the effulgence of a pathological process’ but the faithful reflection of another actuality which is concealed from us by the blinkers of our mundane civilization. […] It seems that the psychotic crisis may enable one to overcome a deep rift in the human personality, characteristic of ‘normal’ man in our type of society. Modern civilization has created a fissure between the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ layers of existence, between ‘me-here’ and ‘you-there’, between ‘mind’ and ‘body.’ (37)

The direction of Laing’s work sees schizophrenia, firstly, as a set of specific, comprehensible experiences borne out of one’s sense of ontological insecurity; secondly, as a response to one’s untenable circumstances and indicative of the madness of one’s particular social unit; and thirdly, not as illness but as *healing*: the schizophrenic state is the ‘self’ responding to, coping with, and, ultimately, seeking to heal the state of psychic fragmentation required to be ‘normal’ and
‘sane’ in the modern, ‘mad’ world. Thus, what was still ‘very much like a syndrome’ in The Divided Self is re-imagined as a dangerous but vital spiritual journey in The Politics of Experience.

In the introduction to The Politics of Experience, a work that draws on and revises essays and lectures written between 1964 and 1965, Laing explains that ‘around us are pseudo-events, to which we adjust with a false consciousness adapted to see these events as true and real, and even as beautiful’.² The existential phenomenological roots of Laing’s theory remain clear, as does his formulation of the schizophrenic experience as caught up with inauthentic ways of being, the ‘false selves’ of his first work. However, in The Politics of Experience, Laing is not simply describing and making comprehensible the schizophrenic experience or even explaining the circumstances behind its occurrence. In this work Laing is writing a polemic and issuing a call to action. Schizophrenia is no longer a way of being that afflicts the weak, those ‘unable to cope’³; rather schizophrenia – re-imaged as the journey through one’s ‘inner space’ – is a way of being that everyone should adopt in order to release them from the ‘false consciousness’ of their, and the world’s, ‘normality’. Laing writes:

What we call ‘normal’ is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience […]. It is radically estranged from the structure of being. […] The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one’s mind, is the condition of the normal man. (23-24)

To be ‘normal’ is to be ‘out of our minds’ and ‘equally out of our bodies’ (50). Estranged from both mind and body, from embodied consciousness, Laing sees the modern, Western populace as ‘bemused and crazed creatures, strangers to our true selves, to one another, and to the spiritual and material world – mad’ (12, my italics). In order to heal this madness Laing calls for a ‘thoroughly self-conscious and self-critical human account of man’ (11). To do this one is forced to remove oneself from the external world (as schizophrenics are apt to do) and connect with one’s ‘inner space’ (50) – that is, to reacquaint oneself with the ‘spiritual and material world’ from which it has since become estranged.
Laing is careful to explain his use of the terms ‘internal’ and ‘external’ and ‘inner’ and ‘outer’. Whilst sometimes they refer to the distinction between experience and behaviour (experience is ‘inner’ while one’s behaviour is ‘outer’) they are also used to refer to different modalities of experience – perception (as outer) in contrast to imagination (as inner). But Laing argues that perception and imagination, as well as ‘phantasy, reverie, dreams, [and] memory, are simply different modalities of experience, none more “inner” or “outer” than any others’ (18). Laing qualifies this with the acknowledgement that, because we have come to understand the two as separate, it does seem as if we live in two worlds – and our experience is mostly of the ‘outer rump’ (18). Laing needs to make use of this distinction for the purposes of his theory but he emphasises nevertheless that the “inner” world is not some space “inside” the body or the mind. […] The “inner”, then, is our personal idiom of experiencing our bodies, other people, the animate and inanimate world: imagination, dreams, phantasy, and beyond that to ever further reaches of experience’ (18). Therefore, one’s ‘inner space’ encompasses all modes of being that have the potential to disengage themselves from the corrupting influence of the ‘mad’ world and the inauthentic ways of being that cope with that world.

The inner world, then, is not ‘in’ the body or ‘in’ the mind; one’s ‘inner space’ is rather the unearthing of the ‘authentic possibilities’ of the self (inclusive of mind and body, inner and outer) that is uncorrupted by external forces – or the self that is salvageable once the influence of those external forces has been confronted and healed. One’s ‘inner space’ is therefore not the same as the ‘inner self’ of The Divided Self. The inner self is a sense of oneself that is divided from the body-as-object and that, cut off from the body and others, inevitably atrophies and becomes no more ‘real’ than the false body-self it constructs; ‘inner space’, however, is a place, or rather a state of being, of perceiving and experiencing, that arises out of the interactions between the mind and body. In The Politics of Experience Laing does not theorise this interaction in great detail but another phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, does. In summarising Merleau-Ponty’s argument on ‘corporeal phenomenology’ in her chapter ‘Lived Bodies: Phenomenology and the Flesh’, Elizabeth Grosz writes that:
Perception is, as it were, midway between mind and body and requires the functioning of both. [...] Merleau-Ponty locates experience midway between mind and body. Not only does he link experience to the privileged locus of consciousness; he also demonstrates that experience is always necessarily embodied, corporeally constituted, located in and as the subject’s incarnation. Experience can only be understood between mind and body – or across them – in their lived conjunction.5

Perception and experience is generated between – or ‘across’ – mind and ‘lived body’. For Laing a state of supposed ‘normality’ in the modern Western world is a state in which perception and experience are stunted, at least partly because of the way in which the relationships between mind and body, between inner and outer, have been severed from one another as well as from the self. How can one connect and feel a part of the ‘spiritual and material’ world if one is not even connected with one’s own mind and body? Real normality, or a sense of authenticity, is achieved only when this divide is healed by way of exploring the ‘inner space’ between mind and body – the spaces, we might presume, where mind and body meet. Indeed, as Lessing suggests in The Four-Gated City, one’s perception and experience can be greatly enhanced once mind and body are restored to one another through harnessing the ‘energy’ (512) that connects them. When Roberta Rubenstein summarises this process she calls it ‘developing the organs of spiritual perception’.6 Mind is body and body is mind in this alternative ‘inner space’.

In reversing the sanity/madness binary in The Politics of Experience, Laing thus reverses the mind/body relationship attendant on those states. In The Divided Self sanity (that is, a firm sense of one’s ontological security) was characterised by a self that was ‘embodied’, and madness (that is, the ontological insecurity) was characterised by a divide between mind and body in which the ‘mind’ or ‘self’ retreats from the external world within which the body becomes a mere object and the core of the false-self system. In The Politics of Experience it is the ‘normal’ and ‘sane’ person that is ‘cut off from his own mind, cut off equally from his own body – a half crazed creature in a mad world’ (46-47). The schizophrenic, however, if allowed to enter and journey through her ‘inner space’ unhindered by conventional psychiatric treatments, undergoes a ‘natural process’ (103) of healing. The relationship of ‘self’ to body so central to Laing’s understanding of
the schizophrenic experience in *The Divided Self* is not so prevalent in *The Politics of Experience* but the implication is that when the self returns from her ‘inner space’ to the ‘outer world’ mind and body will be restored to one another and one’s experience and perception of selfhood will once more be unified. But Laing does not quite articulate the process in these terms. Laing’s apparent disregard for the body might have something to do with the way in which the *implicit* gender of his ‘gender neutral’ bodies has suddenly become much more closely aligned with *male* experience than was the case in his previous two works. Indeed, the plethora of madwomen that feature in *The Divided Self* and *Sanity, Madness and the Family* are here replaced with references to the masculine ‘voyager, the explorer, the climber, the space man’ (105), as well as the specific case study on male patient Jesse Watkins and the account of the conversation between ‘Jones’ and ‘Smith’, not to mention Laing’s own narrative of the ‘inner journey’ in *The Bird of Paradise*. I will come back to the implications of this in Part Four of the thesis, but what I want to emphasise at this point is that it does appear as if the body is not quite so central to Laing’s work once he considers the schizophrenic experience (now the ‘inner journey’) from a predominantly male perspective. In *The Four-Gated City*, however, the ‘voyagers’ are women and Lessing clearly demonstrates the way in which their bodies function, first, ‘inauthentically’ as part of the false-self system and, later, as central to their experiments. For Martha the body’s recovery and presence is vital to her ability to access her ‘inner space’.

When Lynda enters a period of recovery and Martha’s ‘work’ on her memories and dreams comes to an impasse, the two women emerge from their respective experiences of ‘madness’ (one understood in terms of conventional psychiatry, one in terms of anti-psychiatry) and begin to interact once more with ‘normal’ people within ‘normal’ social situations (in the first instance, a dinner party). In doing so, they look upon their bodies as the ‘raw material’ (478) for this transformation. This means wearing clean, fashionable clothes, physical cleanliness, and a general orderliness in their dress and body: ‘Martha’s greying hair, short, blondeish, was dyed to a dull silver. […] And Lynda’s dry mass of near grey hair was transformed into a sleek bronze mane. […] Thus, though
briefly, they became fashionable women’ (478). But the hair and clothes create only a fantasy of sanity and health, as well as a fantasy of femininity. Underneath Lynda is ‘all bones and hollows’ (478) and beneath her white gloves are cracked and bleeding nails. Martha is exhausted by the charade and comments that ‘it was destructive of that part of herself she cared most about’ (486). Lynda’s and Martha’s new hair and dress is symptomatic not of health and a return to ‘normality’, but of a temporary concession and submission to the falseness of the ‘external world’, including discourses of femininity and class that demand hair and clothes are gender appropriate and ‘fashionable’. Martha realises that she is compromising the authentic experience of her ‘inner world’, just as ‘Matty’ compromised ‘Martha’, and, before long, Lynda also ‘crack[s] up again’ (489). It is at this point that Mark asks Martha to care for Lynda during her breakdown and so Martha descends into the basement. Now, in confining herself to this small, dark space, removed from the external world, Martha discovers her body’s potential for generating the kind of energy vital for accessing the alternative states of consciousness she has only so far glimpsed during her ‘work’ on her memory and dreams. The body is thus removed from the external world of objects and objectification and reabsorbed into the ‘inner space’ of perception and experience.

At the end of Part Three of the novel, when Martha finally rejects her mother, she is taking the first steps to once more freeing herself from social structures – this time in a much more ‘real’ sense than the temporary ‘dropping out’ she was able to enjoy as an anonymous newcomer to the city. Now Martha’s body is no longer bound by its reproductive function (she has extricated herself from the matrilineal line) or its sexuality (she ends her affair with Mark and has no further heterosexual relationships) and so she is able to experience her body – and its relationship to her mind – differently. Ruth Saxton writes that in order ‘to develop her inner life, Martha must discipline her body, and that includes moving beyond sex’. Although at the beginning of the book sex is something that allows Martha to access her ‘inner space’, she comes to realise that ‘“make love.” “Make sex.” “Orgasms.” “Climaxes.” It was all nonsense, words, sounds, invented by half-animals who understood nothing at all’ (510). Elizabeth Grosz writes that ‘the very terms for sex, for pleasure, for desire – “fucking,” “screwing,”"
“coming,” “orgasm,” etc. – are most appropriate for and are derived from men’s experiences of sexuality (both their own and that of women). Indeed, for Martha, love and sex and sexuality are far too saturated with the politics of the sex/gender system to ever be ‘safe’, and she relates this, in particular, to the institution of marriage. When she first begins her relationship with Mark she is wary of this very association: ‘If one is with a man, “in love”, or in the condition of loving, then there comes to life that hungry, never-to-be-fed, never-at-peace woman. […] [T]he unappeasable hungers and the cravings are part, not of the casual affair, or of friendly sex, but of marriage and the “serious” love. God forbid’ (313). In order to avoid being drawn into this system Martha forsakes her sexuality, just as she forsakes her place in the matrilineal line by rejecting her daughter and then her mother.

Because Anna Wulf never escapes these gendered constructions of self (reproductive and sexual) she is unable to achieve a relationship between mind and body that is not caught up with her sex/gender. Martha, however, does manage to largely escape these structures – although at the great price of sacrificing her mother, her daughter, her sexuality, her ‘external’ freedom (she remains confined within the Coldridge basement and later a room in Paul’s house), and her perceived ‘normality’. Unlike Anna, who has her daughter and career, Martha, without any dependents, family or career, can make this sacrifice. This is not to say that Martha is suddenly ‘unsexed’ or ‘gender neutral’. Just as Laing’s ‘gender neutral’ bodies are ‘always already’ gendered, so too is Martha – but by escaping two of the most restrictive gendered discourses she is working towards imagining an existence – a way of ‘being-in-the-world’ – outside of those structures: ‘when it’s a question of survival, sex the uncontrollable can be controlled. […] The possibilities had moved ground, were elsewhere’ (314).

Even before Martha breaks from her mother, when she is attempting to excavate her past in preparation for the visit, she is able to glimpse this ‘elsewhere’ and the potential of such ‘possibilities’:

When scents, sounds, pictures, words, went, she remained. Who? […] The sense of herself which stayed had no sex. Suppose shutting her eyes, holding that sense, that presence, she imagined herself into the body of a
man? Why not. […] Or even, letting the sense of herself go into a
different shape, a horse, a small white horse. She saw it; into it she fitted
herself, saw the world on either side of her head in two outstretched
expanses of grass, bushes. Who are you then? Why, me, of course, who
else, horse, woman, man, or tree, a glittering faceted individuality of
breathing green, here is the sense of me, nameless, recognizable only to
me. Who, what? (243)

Like Martha’s experience on the veld this is a sense of self that is fundamentally
captured with the natural world. Although here she retains a sense of
‘individuality’ and ‘me’, she is in fact imagining a self that exceeds the limitations
of the individual self and individual body to embrace her part in a much larger
structure of the ‘spiritual and material world’.11 It is not, then, an ‘immaterial’
existence – this is not a transcendence of the material body/world but rather a case
of immanence, of the mind and body merging not only with one another but with
a much larger mass of thought and organic materiality. Although initially Martha
retains a sense of individuality and an inner/outer boundary (in which the self
‘fit[s]’ into other bodies and forms, just as Anna Wulf attempts to do) the ‘sense
of me’ is, by the end, a great, ‘glittering’ expanse of ‘breathing green’. What
Martha is imagining here (or perhaps foreseeing) is the ‘journey’ she will later
take through her ‘inner space’. In fact, Martha’s glimpse of this other ‘sense of
me’ corresponds closely with Laing’s account of the ‘inner journey’:

The person who has entered this inner realm (if only he is allowed to
experience this) will find himself going, or being conducted – one clearly
cannot distinguish active from passive here – on a journey.
This journey is experienced as going further ‘in’, as going back
through one’s personal life, in and back and through and beyond into the
experience of all mankind, of the primal man, of Adam and perhaps even
further into the being of animals, vegetables and minerals. (104)

In the passage from The Four-Gated City above, this journey is still a hypothesis,
not an experience, but by the end of Part Three Martha has entered the ‘inner
realm’ and begins to define a new concept of selfhood that is not singular but part
of a much larger, collective sense of being. Martha has already begun the task of
‘going back’ through her ‘personal life’ and now she creates the conditions
through which she can go ‘back and through and beyond’. Disengaging herself
from the discourses of reproduction and sexuality is only a first step – but a
fundamental one: it allows Martha to begin to imagine alternative ways of being
that are not subject to gendered discursive structures that tie her to one side of the
mind/body binary. From outside of these structures Martha can reconnect the
body and mind and reconstruct her sense of self in new and potentially fantastic
ways: ‘why not.’

Marion Vlastos writes that ‘Laing believes it is essential to understand the
mad person as a symptom and as victim of a sick society and finally as a prophet
of a new possible world, a world governed by forces of unity rather than
separation’.12 Lessing is clearly drawing on Laing’s notion that madness might be
re-imagined as something beyond a response to the ‘mad’ world – as something
indicative of another plane of consciousness, an ‘inner space’ that one can traverse
and, through which, come to more fully understand and connect with oneself,
humanity, even the ‘mineral’. But Lessing goes further. Firstly, the text
demonstrates that, for women, the ‘inner journey’ is only possible once they have
disengaged themselves, as much as possible, from gendered discourses of being.
Secondly, the text shows that this is only possible from outside of conventional
discourses of madness, which are, of course, also gendered discourses. Thirdly,
the text not only posits madness as a valid and understandable response to one’s
untenable position within social structures and not only converts madness into
sanity and as a potentially liberating and healing experience but, in addition, it re-
imagines madness in terms of the expression (and suppression) of superhuman
abilities, in particular, extra-sensory perception.

Lessing is using Laing to open up and rethink discourses of madness but she
is also going beyond Laing in order to imagine new, fantastical ways of being.
Actually, at the time when Lessing was writing, the idea of extra-sensory
perception was really not so outlandish: rumours that both the US and USSR were
conducting experiments into such phenomena were typical of the period.13 In fact,
in an interview about The Four-Gated City, conducted shortly after its
publication, Lessing insists that ‘different forms of extrasensory perception are
being seriously researched and accepted. And have you ever really thought about
how the atmosphere’s changed about something like telepathy in ten years? Of all
places it was the Soviet Union that suddenly made the announcement that they were experimenting into the use of telepathy for space travel’.  

So, by drawing on Laing’s re-imagining of madness as well as rumours of military/scientific research into extra-sensory perception, Lessing is able to realise, and render realistic, her more fantastical and mystical ideas about the potential of humankind. Laing’s idea that madness might actually be a way to access an ‘inner space’ and the contemporary interest in telepathy allow Lessing to go further and draw on and articulate a Sufi way of understanding humanity. At its most basic, Sufism is, according to *The Way of the Sufi*, ‘the transcending of ordinary Limitations’: ‘The Sufis claim that a certain kind of mental and other activity can produce, under special conditions and with particular efforts, what is termed a higher working of the mind, leading to special perceptions whose apparatus is latent in ordinary man’. Indeed, *The Four-Gated City* gradually suggests that people are born with the innate ability to read other people’s minds by way of a communal ‘wavelength’ which, at its most powerful, connects all things, spiritual and material. Lessing uses Laing as a way to credibly reach towards and represent the more mystical and less substantiated discourses of being such as those propounded by Sufism. The text thus moves backwards and forwards between Laing’s (comparatively) more grounded/legitimate ideas about the nature of ‘madness’ and a much more mystical and spiritual conception of humanity and the world.

So it is that Lessing is able to quite reasonably and realistically construct a narrative in which her protagonist, Martha, comes to develop telepathic abilities. The novel explains that children are born with these abilities but quickly lose them and will not remember that they ever had them, just as Martha continually struggles to remember all of her psychic experiences. Certain children, however, like Lynda Coldridge, manage to retain the ability (which is heightened in Lynda’s case because of the particularly damaged/damaging nature of her nuclear family). Before these children forget or learn to hide their abilities they expose themselves as ‘different’. When the ‘symptoms’ of this difference persist the child is misdiagnosed as mad, specifically as schizophrenic, and enters the psychiatric machine in which, unless the ‘difference’ is hidden and concealed until it
disappears, they remain for the rest of their lives. As Laing writes: ‘once a “schizophrenic” […] always a “schizophrenic”’ (101). This is Lynda’s story. The ‘difference’, which was originally the child’s ability to read other people’s minds, is replaced with the ‘difference’ of the label of schizophrenia and the effects of the treatments for that ‘illness’. It is no longer a case of telepathic abilities making individuals seem ‘mad’ but rather a case of the effects of the psychiatric treatments they undergo making them mad.

**Psychics and Psychotics**

Throughout the first half of *The Four-Gated City* two discourses of madness run parallel to one another: the conventional discourse of madness (made up of the medical and psychoanalytical models of madness) and the anti-psychiatric. The anti-psychiatric discourse of madness – or of being – is apparent from the very beginning of the narrative when Martha uses schizoid strategies of behaviour, as outlined by Laing in *The Divided Self*, to manage her arrival in London. The difficult relationship Martha has sustained with her mother throughout the *Children of Violence* series is brought to a head by explaining, if not quite damning, Mrs Quest as the ‘schizophrenogenic mother’ so prevalent in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Anti-psychiatry’s later Laingian incarnation, as articulated in *The Politics of Experience*, is also evident from the opening of the text when Martha accesses a higher plane of consciousness. Later, Martha’s ‘work’ at excavating her memories is a process similar to that which Laing calls the ‘intensive discipline of un-learning necessary for *anyone* before one can begin to experience the world afresh, with innocence, truth and love’ (23). The anti-psychiatric discourse of ‘madness’ is embodied then by Martha. Although she suffers an interrupted course of analysis with Dr Lamb, for the most part Martha is able to conduct her experiments and embark upon her ‘inner journey’ from outside of the psychiatric machine.

However, like so many of the heroines of nineteenth-century novels, Martha has a ‘mad’ double who appears to suffer the negative consequences that she so fortunately avoids. The conventional discourse of madness is embodied by
Lynda Coldridge. Lynda is the archetypal madwoman: institutionalised, medicated, withdrawn, sad. She is beautiful and feminine but ‘ill’, vulnerable, weak. Just as the nineteenth-century madwoman traditionally existed only at the edges of textual representation, so Lynda, it seems, is consigned to the peripheries of The Four-Gated City. For a long time all Martha or the reader knows of Lynda is what Mark says when Martha begins working for him: “‘My wife’s in a mental hospital.’ He paused, not looking at her, while it sank in. […] ‘And my wife – when she’s well…’” A long pause. “That’s not likely to be … she’s not very … it doesn’t look as if she’ll be coming home for some time. Or if she is, she’s not …” (103). Lynda is defined by her marriage and her madness; any description of her is necessarily disjointed, fragmented and incomplete because she is something Other, something intelligible only through the conventional discourses of madness. Lynda is her madness and as such she lurks only in the background, an ominous, sad figure. Even when Lynda returns from the hospital she is quickly buried in the basement, beneath the ‘normal’ world of the upstairs rooms. For those ‘normal’ persons above, Lynda continues to be made intelligible through the conventional discourses of madness which diagnose (and therefore label) her as schizophrenic (amongst other things), treat her with psychopharmaceuticals (‘they’ have long given up on psychoanalysis), and institutionalise her periodically. Martha comments: ‘Lynda has been diagnosed by a large variety of doctors: there had been a large variety of diagnoses. She was depressed; she was manic depressive; she was paranoic; she was schizophrenic. Most frequently, the last. Also, in another division, or classification, she was neurotic; she was psychotic. Most frequently, the latter’ (204). Here Lynda is ‘diagnosed’ by way of both ‘divisions’ of psychiatry: the medical model of madness and the psychoanalytical model of madness. In presenting this information, Martha is critiquing the system to which Lynda has been submitted and by which she has been thoroughly and irretrievably ‘labelled’. According to Laing, although there is no such ‘condition’ as ‘schizophrenia’ […] the label is a social fact and the social fact a political event. This political event, occurring in the civic order of society, imposes definitions and consequences on the labelled person. It is a social prescription that rationalizes a set of social actions whereby the labelled person is annexed by others, who are legally
sanctioned, medically empowered, and morally obliged, to become responsible for the person labelled. The person labelled is inaugurated not only into a role, but into a career of patient, by the concerted action of a coalition (a ‘conspiracy’) of family, G.P., mental health officer, psychiatrists, nurses, psychiatric social workers, and often fellow patients. The ‘committed’ person labelled as patient, and specifically as ‘schizophrenic’, is degraded from full existential and legal status as human agent and responsible person, no longer in possession of his own definition of himself. (100-101)

A person who presents with schizoid behaviours, once diagnosed, becomes the ‘patient’ and begins her ‘career’ as such. The patient is initiated into the system, which Lessing calls the ‘machinery’ (333), and is thus constructed through the conventional discourses of psychiatry. Just as discourses of mothering are represented in the novel as fundamental to larger political structures, so too are discourses of madness in both Laing and Lessing. They inaugurate the patient into another world, a world set apart from the ‘normal’ and the ‘sane’. Even outside of the institution, the ‘patient’ is constructed in terms of these discourses, discourses that divide and separate the schizophrenic from the rest of the populace who can then define themselves, their ‘sanity’, against her ‘madness’.

These two discourses of madness run parallel to one another throughout much of the first half of the novel and Martha clearly differentiates between her experiences and those of the madwomen below by drawing on the conventional discourses of madness – they are ‘mad’ because they are diagnosed as such while she is sane because she is not. However, as the text progresses, Martha’s and Lynda’s experiences become more and more closely aligned. At first this is in terms of the conventional discourse of psychiatry: when Martha is seeing Dr Lamb, at her request, he inflicts upon her a psychiatric diagnosis: ‘you’re manic-depressive, with schizoid tendencies’ (249), he tells her. This is the same diagnosis Lynda was once given. The inadequacy of conventional psychiatry is once again made clear, though, when he later tells her ‘take my word for it, you’re not schizophrenic’ (338). But by this time Martha has realised that what Dr Lamb calls schizophrenia is the same thing that she now recognises in very different terms. Not long before this meeting Dorothy commits suicide and Martha believes that she foresaw this event. She now asks Dr Lamb: “supposing I insisted I had
seen Dorothy’s suicide exactly as it was, and I went on insisting, and you said no, I imagined it, and then I got angry and shouted at you, and went on shouting, and called you names, what would you call me then?” […] He was waiting, infinitely ready to be kind, to reassure, and if necessary to – give out pills’ (338). Martha is beginning to see that what Dr Lamb calls ‘schizophrenia’ might simply be something misunderstood, something unknown and frightening, and therefore something perceived and labelled as abnormal. Eventually Martha will come to understand so-called normality as inherently schizophrenic and ‘schizophrenia’, or at least her own uncorrupted version of schizophrenia (Lynda’s experience has been warped almost beyond recognition by the psychiatric machine), as the only sane response to the madness of the modern world. Thus, the second half of the novel gradually aligns Martha’s experiences of other planes of consciousness with Lynda’s madness. As Laing writes: ‘madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death’ (110). Just as Martha and Lynda initially embody two opposing discourses of madness, so their respective experiences of madness in the basement of the Coldridge house appear to exemplify these opposing outcomes: whilst Lynda remains in a state of ‘existential death’, Martha ‘breaks through’ and liberates herself from the mad world.

Martha and Lynda

At the beginning of the novel Martha exists, temporarily, on the outskirts of society and therefore largely outside of social structures. Free from the more limiting constraints of those social structures (she is, of course, never wholly free), Martha is able to break through to a higher plane of consciousness. This is achieved by way of creating a particular physical state either through the enervation created by her walking, sleeplessness and lack of food, or through the stimulation of sex. However, when she joins the Coldridge house these experiences are quickly forgotten: she is assimilated back into society and therefore must perform her particular identity: female, white, middle-class. As such, within the Coldridge home Martha occupies the traditionally gendered and subordinate role of a secretary, housekeeper, even surrogate wife to Mark and
surrogate mother to his son and Paul. The longer she remains in Mark’s employment and the house in Radlett Street the further she is absorbed back into the roles she has previously rejected and abandoned. Although she is careful not to resurrect ‘Matty’, ‘Martha’ is nevertheless buried beneath a complex system of false selves that conform to and perform the roles demanded of her. Throughout the first half of the novel, then, Martha is subject to the same gendered discourses which bind Anna Wulf as well as influenced by the same discourses of madness that cause her to so firmly discriminate between her own experiences, fears and neuroses and those suffered by the madwomen in the basement.

Martha is careful to draw a boundary line between her and the madwomen, between the upstairs and the downstairs, the sane and the mad. But actually Martha occupies an ambiguous position between the patriarchal structures of the Coleridge home in which she performs the gendered roles expected of her and the irrational and disordered space that exists below it. The upstairs is the intelligible space of ‘normality’ whilst the basement is the unintelligible space of ‘madness’. Martha, despite herself, initially relies upon the distinction between madness and sanity in order to prevent her experiences being explained by way of the same discourses that label Lynda and Dorothy as mad and abnormal. However, once her mother leaves and she ends her affair with Mark and terminates her sessions with Dr Lamb, Martha is alone. Having confirmed Lynda’s assessment of conventional psychiatry as dangerous and damaging through her own experience with Dr Lamb, Martha is drawn to Lynda by a desire for further knowledge and understanding of her own experiences, particularly when she begins to ‘overhear’ the thoughts of Mark and Paul. Gradually Martha becomes more and more acquainted with Lynda’s world and regularly descends to the basement to include Lynda in her ‘work’, which now includes the same kind of ‘tuning in’ (48) that Martha experienced walking the streets of London as well as the more conventional ‘work’ of reading and studying what might be relevant material. Although both women are ‘receptive’ (388), the ‘answer’ remains obscured, a ‘sweetness’ ‘just beyond them’ (388) and when they try to find a discourse through which to talk about their discoveries they find themselves slipping back into the old discourses of madness. Although Martha is beginning to realise that
Lynda, however damaged, is equipped with a different kind of knowledge and with experiences she has as yet only just begun to understand, she – they – are unable to go further. This is partly because of Lynda’s tortured state but also because Martha is not fully committing to the task – she is leading a ‘normal’ life during the day and only descending into the basement at night: it is still a surreptitious, potentially dangerous activity for her and it holds the very real risk of being irretrievably aligned with the ‘madwoman’. It is not then until the final part of the novel, Part Four, when Martha is asked to care for Lynda during one of her ‘bad times’ (499), that she finally gives up any sense of ‘normality’ and allows herself to fully participate in Lynda’s experience of madness/alternative states of consciousness.

To begin with Martha attempts to follow Mark’s advice to ‘be as sensible as possible’ (499) by framing Lynda’s behaviour in terms of what is ‘normal’ and ‘real’. However, even before Martha enters the basement flat she questions the effectiveness of this approach, as well as the extent to which she is willing to ‘risk’ her own sanity in managing Lynda’s madness: ‘[Mark] didn’t want, or hadn’t been able, to let go of ordinariness to sink himself into Lynda. […] But if Martha wished to let go, sink herself, then that was her business’ (499). So, for a short while Martha simply observes Lynda’s progress around the walls of the room, ‘sensibly’ pointing out that she is free to leave, but very soon she feels compelled to become party to what is happening, to ‘sink herself’:

‘If you don’t drink something, you are going to be ill,’ said Martha; at which Lynda picked up the tray and flung it on the door. […] Martha got out cleaning things and begin to clean up broken crockery, spilt eggs, milk. Lynda watched. […] Then she came from the wall to the carpet, knelt down, and lapped milk that lay in a half broken saucer. She watched Martha as she did so. Martha felt an extraordinarily strong impulse to do the same. […] Now, Martha, kneeling on the floor beside Lynda, worked out what she would do. […] Thinking: ‘This is dangerous, to me, not to Lynda,’ she nevertheless poured an inch of milk that lay in the bulge of an overturned glass jug, into a plate, held this to her mouth (she did not go down on her hands and knees to the floor to drink) and drank symbolically, not quite lapping. (504)

Though Martha sees her actions as ‘symbolic’ she is allowing herself to become absorbed into Lynda’s way of being. In doing so, Martha is an example of Laing’s
ideal therapist – she is trying to understand Lynda’s behaviour not in terms of what is ‘normal’ but in terms of Lynda’s particular sense of being-in-the-world (both an ‘inner’ world and an ‘outer’ world). Martha recognises that this is dangerous to herself because her ‘extraordinarily strong impulse’ has nothing to do with making Lynda ‘behave’ and her refusal to go down on all fours or ‘lap’ the milk from the broken crockery only slightly removes her from Lynda and thus Lynda’s ‘madness’. Martha asks herself whether she should have ‘join[ed] Lynda as she had (almost), lapping from a saucer like a cat or a dog? Almost … she hadn’t actually done it’ (505). The ‘almost’ represents Martha’s last defences against ‘abnormality’; now when she thinks about leaving the basement she knows that she has already come too far to ‘expose[] herself to a world that would judge her “sensibly”’ (505). Martha, as now ‘part of Lynda’, cannot fathom that ‘ordinary life’ above and comments that ‘it was like being under water, or shut away, or looking at ordinary life from another dimension’ (505). Just as Martha had her most vivid experiences of higher levels of consciousness as an anonymous newcomer in London, so now, ‘shut away’ in the basement, she is once more able to access those realms. Martha is now not only removed from the demands of the social order, as at the beginning of the novel, but also, by virtue of her previous sacrifices, removed from the gendered discourses of reproduction and sex. Saxton writes that ‘Lessing sees the woman/woman bond here as less vexed than that of the woman/man. […] Lessing’s woman/woman bond is not one which is informed by a fantasy of lesbian sexuality or of preoedipal jouissance. It is, rather, a post-erotic friendship which replaces the erotic with a spiritual or political energy understood as healing’ (116). In this other ‘dimension’, free of the sex/gender system but supported by a new woman/woman bond, Martha is at last free to deconstruct the ‘self’ that has been constituted by these various discourses and begin the task of re-imagining that self as ‘something new’, a ‘sense of me’ (243) that exists beyond the discursively constructed individual self.

Martha is moving tenuously towards embracing her own breakdown but it is only when she briefly returns to the upstairs world and comes face to face with Mark that she realises how far into Lynda’s world she has already gone. In meeting Mark she finds herself observing him ‘critically, from a distance where
she also observed an abstracted-looking woman’ (507). She forces herself to communicate with him by ‘finding a normal smile and the right words’ but in her current ‘alert, clear state’ she is preoccupied with the superfluous nature of human language: she realises that she can communicate and understand Mark perfectly well without these words, these ‘formalit[ies]’ (507). And yet when Mark kisses her she is no longer able to interpret this action as sexual, or romantic, or friendly, or even encouraging. The kiss is simply a matter of ‘slits’ pressed against one another, of ‘flesh’, ‘tissue’, and ‘teeth’ (507). However, just as Martha envisioned herself as part of a larger, natural order on the veld – both psychically and physically – so here she is ‘filled with a protective compassion for these two ridiculous creatures – as if invisible arms, vast, peaceful, maternal, were stretched around them both, and rocked them like water’ (507, my italics). Although the two bodies embracing seem ridiculous to Martha they are nevertheless encompassed within a much greater sense of being, both material and immaterial. Indeed, the return of the ‘maternal’ here suggests a possible re-imagining of the gendered bodily discourses Martha has been forced to reject. The existence of this ‘vast’, all encompassing presence signals the possibility of re-imagining concepts – such as the maternal – in terms of much wider, inclusive and, perhaps, non-gendered structures of nurturing. Although it is not until later in the text that this is realised, it is already clear that the body is no longer something to be considered as separate either from the mind or from other bodies and matter.

The Body and ‘Inner Space’

Although it might seem from Martha’s response to Mark that her breakthrough is something purely psychical and the body is nothing more than a disposable receptacle, just ‘flesh’ and ‘tissue’, actually the importance of the body to this process is made very clear. Just as the body’s rhythms, energies and movements aided her ability to connect to other levels of consciousness in the past, so Martha is now compelled ‘to move, to use [her] muscles’ (505). However, she comes to understand that her physical restlessness is not something to be immediately expended through an explosion of movement but rather something to be
contained. Accessing and sustaining a receptive psychic state is not achieved by expending the body’s energies but by controlling and focusing those energies:

Essentially, it was a keeping still, holding, waiting. She sat still, and instead of letting her limbs, or even her imagination – the same thing? move her around the walls, crave for movement, sway like Lynda, back and forth, and around and around, instead of spilling, or using, this energy in any way whatsoever, she let it accumulate – yes, that was it, of course, she had learned that too, and had forgotten it – you must let it build up …

Her head became very clear, very light, receptive, a softly lit bubble above the violence of a body whose limbs wanted to move, to jerk, even to dance; whose sex was alert, ready to flare up, and demand; where waves of – what? came and went, running and ebbing as from another invisible sea of power. If she sat quite still, or walked steadily up and down, the space in her head remained steady, or lightening and darkening in a pulse, like the irregular pulse of the sea. She had known this lightness and clarity before – yes, walking through London long ago. And then too, it had been the reward of not-eating, not-sleeping, using her body as an engine to get her out of the small dim prison of every day. (512)

The body’s energies are ordinarily expelled through the business of day to day living and the mind is something set wholly apart from this physical energy. Mind and body – as distinct, unconnected Cartesian categories – are not implicated in each other’s functioning. Disconnected from the mind, the body’s energy is squandered as ‘modern man’ busily directs ‘his’ energies outwards into the external world, rushing to and fro making money, making friends, making enemies, making love, making children, or else depleting those energies by gorging one’s self on food and drink and drugs, effectively ‘sleeping-walking’ through life. In order for Martha to reach alternative planes of consciousness, to be ‘receptive’ and move beyond the limits of ‘normal’ perception, she needs to harness the body’s energies and direct them not outwards, but inwards. Later, when Martha eventually leaves Lynda to push even further ‘back and through and beyond’, she regulates her sleep and food in order to focus her body’s energies so that it becomes ‘the instrument, the receiving device’ able to generate that ‘sensitive state’ (564). Martha sees her ‘body [a]s a machine for the conversion of one type of energy into another’ (566). The physical energy she harnesses is converted into the psychic energy required to access higher planes of
consciousness and push past the ‘sound barrier’ policed by the ‘self-hater’ (550). During this process ‘limbs’ and ‘imagination’, or body and mind, or the spiritual and the material, become ‘the same thing’. In Volatile Bodies, Grosz writes that ‘Merleau-Ponty begins with the postulate that we perceive and receive information of and from the world through our bodies’ (86). Merleau-Ponty writes that ‘the perceiving mind is an incarnated body’ and that he has ‘tried … to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world, going against the doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness’. Perception is only possible by way of the body, thus the body is not something to be ‘transcended’ but something through which and by which one should experience the world, the self, one’s ‘inner space’. It is by way of the body that Martha is able to go ‘beyond’ revisiting her past to connect with that ‘invisible sea of power’ that encompasses all things.

In each of the passages describing Martha’s experience/understanding of this space/presence/wavelength, Lessing uses water to help articulate its nature. In the basement Martha says ‘it was like being under water’ (505), in observing herself and Mark embracing she says that the ‘vast, peaceful, maternal’ presence ‘rocked them like water’ (507), and here we have the ‘pulse of the sea’ and the ‘sea of power’ (512). A body of water is made up of tiny droplets that converge to form a single amalgamated, amorphous mass of great power and strength. In invoking the water/sea metaphor, then, Lessing is framing Martha’s understanding of ‘inner space’ as something not individual and personal to her, but as something shared – her ‘being’ is a tiny part of, and absorbed by, a much larger being that includes all of humanity and beyond. This is not simply a matter of hearing Lynda’s thoughts or even being ‘part of Lynda’ (505) but rather being a part of a ‘wavelength’ of interconnected humanity – although most of that humanity has become ‘disconnected’. Martha comments: ‘it is not a question of “Lynda’s mind” or “Martha’s mind”; it is the human mind, or part of it, and Lynda, Martha, can choose to plug in or not’ (513). Lynda helps Martha to finally uncover and remember this great, interconnected ‘human mind’ and Martha helps Lynda to remember, if not quite recapture, her old self, unmarred and un-warped by the
years she has spent within the psychiatric ‘machine’. In doing so they both begin to imagine their experiences as something else, ‘something new’: what they are experiencing is not abnormal or medical or mad or sexual and, significantly, it is not specifically female – or gendered at all: it is something beyond these categories, something, even, beyond the human.

Beyond the Human

In the middle of Martha’s breakdown, ‘tired’ but ‘restless’, she decides to go for a walk. At first this is a wonderful experience because of her much more acute perception. When she looks up at the sky she is able to appreciate the world as ‘fresh’ and ‘newly painted’:

She stood on a pavement looking at a sky where soft white clouds were lit with sunlight. She wanted to cry because it was so beautiful. How long since she had looked, but really looked at the sky, so beautiful even if it was held up by tall buildings? She stood gazing up, up, until her eyes seemed absorbed in the crystalline substance of sky with its blocks of clouds like snow banks, she seemed to be streaming out through her eyes into the skies. (519)

When Martha looks up at the sky and trees she exclaims ‘I love you’ and even prays – prays that she will not lose this ability to appreciate the beauty of things, to really ‘see’, to be ‘awake’ (520), to feel that the sky and trees are not only ‘extensions of her’ but part of a greater presence of which she is likewise a part: ‘She walked, she walked, looking, gazing, her eyes becoming cloud, trees, sky and the warm salutation of sunlight on the flank of a high glowing wall’ (520). But when Martha looks back down and is confronted by her fellow human beings she is shocked out of her reverie. In The Politics of Experience Laing predicts the traveller’s response to the ‘normal’ world and to one’s fellow ‘normal’ human beings once ‘he’ returns from ‘his’ ‘inner space’:

When our personal worlds are rediscovered and allowed to reconstitute themselves, we first discover a shambles. Bodies half-dead; genitals dissociated from heart; heart severed from head; heads dissociated from
genitals. Without inner unity, with just enough sense of continuity to clutch at identity – the current idolatry. Torn, body, mind and spirit, by inner contradictions, pulled in different directions, Man cut off from his own mind, cut off equally from his own body – a half-crazed creature in a mad world. (46-47)

In returning from ‘inner space’, the traveller is confronted with a race of people whose bodies and minds and ‘spirits’ are ‘severed’ from one another. These ‘half-dead’ bodies are connected to the ‘self’ only in so much as they function to construct a recognisable ‘identity’. Laing uses bodily metaphors to emphasise and drive home his point – ‘genitals’ represent bodies, ‘heads’ represent minds, ‘heart’ represents spirit – but when Martha looks around her she quite literally sees bodies torn and damaged and broken. The men and women around her are disgusting, hideous ‘uncompleted creatures’ (521). Like Mark, they seem to her all flesh, slits, orifices, flaps of skin, sprouting hairs, and ‘abominable’ smells (522). Looking at these people from one of the most ‘progressive’ nations in the world she sees only ‘half-dead’, damaged, ‘defective’ bodies:

For their eyes were half-useless: many wore bits of corrective glass over these spoiled or ill-grown organs; their ears were defective; many wore machines to help them hear […] and their mouths were full of metal and foreign substances to assist teeth that were rotting, if not equipped entirely with artificial teeth; […] and their guts were full of drugs because they could not defecate normally; and their nervous systems were numbed by the drugs they took to alleviate the damage done by the din they had chosen to live in, the fear and anxiety and tension of their lives, […] But the most frightening thing about them was this: that they walked and moved and went through their lives in a condition of sleep-walking: they were not aware of themselves, of other people, of what went on around them. […] They were essentially isolated, shut in, enclosed inside their hideously defective bodies, behind their dreaming drugged eyes, above all, inside a net of wants and needs that made it impossible for them to think of anything else. (521-522)

These are the supposedly ‘sane’, ‘normal’ people but they are described in the terms normally reserved for the mad – dirty, drugged, abnormal, ill, smelly, soiled, living in filth, ‘defective’ animals, unaware of their surroundings, of others, ‘sleep-walking’ through the world.
The people Martha observes are people who are ‘shut in’ and ‘enclosed’ within their bodies. The ‘self’ is divided from the body and yet also trapped inside it - like an astronaut inside a spaceship. Indeed, these are selves encased in bodies that have been substituted, repaired, and welded together with ‘metal and foreign substances’ as well as manipulated and poisoned with drugs. These are unnatural ‘defective’ bodies and, essentially, they represent transhumanism gone wrong. When Martha looks at these bodies she sees that technology and science have not aided the evolution of the human race, but rather quickened the race’s degeneration. The human race, as Martha sees it, is actually devolving. She imagines how ‘visitors from a spaceship’ might report that the human race is a ‘planet [] inhabited thickly by defectively evolved animals’ (521). The body’s vital energy is expended on the most puerile and basic of functions. Laing writes that ‘as for our bodies, we retain just sufficient proprioceptive sensations to coordinate our movements and to ensure the minimal requirements for biosocial survival – to register fatigue, signals for food, sex, defecation, sleep; beyond that little or nothing’ (22). These are but the functions of a simple organism – they should not encompass the physical limits of the most advanced species on the planet. And this is simply a matter of ‘biosocial survival’, of sustaining existence, as opposed to pursuing the evolution of humankind. Laing writes:

Our time has been distinguished, more than by anything else, by a drive to control the external world, and by an almost forgetfulness of the internal world. If one estimates human evolution from the point of view of knowledge of the external world, then we are in many respects progressing.

If our estimate is from the point of view of the internal world, and of oneness of internal and external, then the judgement must be very different. (115)

These bodies melded together with pieces of metal and machines are indicative of a world that values science over nature. Technology has continued to advance and to progress – to evolve – but whilst this is supposed to benefit humanity, it appears that actually it has been at the expense of humankind’s natural evolution. Technology and science and medicine have substituted themselves for – and thereby stunted – human evolution. It is ironic that when Martha tries to describe
her experiences of higher planes of consciousness it is through the discourse of technology – wavelengths, radios, televisions, radars, space probes, cameras – but this only emphasises the way in which humanity has constructed machines to function in place of the human body and mind, to do what a united human mind/body should be capable of doing anyway had it been allowed to evolve without technological interference. As it is, human minds and bodies, disconnected and underused, have petrified so that humankind is but a ‘near-race of half, uncompleted creatures’ (521).

When Martha sees her reflection in a pool of water she recognises that she too looks like one of these ‘creature[s]’ (522). Martha is confronted, and implicated, in a species that has allowed – even welcomed – its own degeneration. To Martha each person she meets ‘seemed locked in an invisible cage which prevented them from experiencing their fellow’s thoughts, or lives, or needs’ (522). Although Martha has broken free from her ‘invisible cage’ she is now faced with a knowledge so ‘painful’ (521) and a race so seemingly hopeless, that she runs ‘back to the basement, fast, fast’ (524). The price of being ‘awake’ is seeing people as they really are, ‘drugged cripples’ and ‘defective half-animals’ (524). Back in the basement with Lynda, Martha finally allows herself to become hysterical as a means to escape the external world. When Martha is jerked out of her hysterics by a worried Lynda she decides that it is better to be ‘mad’ and perceptive than ‘sane’ and defective. While Lynda, damaged by years of psychiatric treatment/abuse, is unable to sustain a journey through her ‘inner space’ Martha, largely untouched by the psychiatric establishment, is potentially strong enough to complete her ‘inner journey’. In order to do this she requires another space outside of society and its structures and so she leaves Lynda, who (temporarily) returns to ‘normality’, and she moves into Paul’s house, a kind of boarding house for early 1960s counter-culture drop outs, most of whom are either involved in drugs or ‘careers’ as psychiatric patients. Martha requires this space in order not to be judged ‘sensibly’ (505). She cannot risk being identified as ‘mad’ and thus turned over to the doctors: ‘Lynda said: “You mustn’t get locked up, Martha. I can’t do it, but you can. And when you do it, you’ll do it for me too.”’ This message was perfectly intelligible to Martha. She nodded. Of course:
Those who could had a responsibility for those who could not. She would do it for Lynda’ (534).

In relating Jesse Watkins’s ‘inner journey’ in *The Politics of Experience*, Laing comments that ‘Jesse felt that this experience [of going mad] was a stage that everyone would have to go through one way or another in order to reach a higher state of evolution’ (130). Martha is not only ‘do[ing] it’ for Lynda but ‘do[ing] it’ for the future of the human race. It will be because of Martha’s ‘inner journey’ that she is able to save and support Lynda, whose abilities are so much stronger than Martha’s will ever be. In doing so, and connecting with other enlightened people (those who are ‘plugged in’ to that great ‘human mind’) Martha and Lynda are be able to save themselves and others from the major global catastrophe that occurs at the end of the novel. Some of these exceptional people are shipwrecked on a small Scottish island and there begin to establish a new social order and, in doing so, produce a new kind of human being. Here minds are not divided from bodies, selves from inner worlds, inner worlds from outer worlds. This is a community that fosters and nurtures their own extra-sensory abilities and, significantly, their children’s. They will thus usher in a new stage in human evolution.

**Evolutionary Minds**

In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna says to Mother Sugar: ‘If I said to you the H-bomb had fallen and obliterated half Europe […] you’d say, or imply, the creative aspects of destruction! Consider the creative implications of the power locked in the atom! Allow your mind to rest on those first blades of tentative green grass that will poke into the light’.28 Anna remains sceptical of the ‘creativity’ of destruction and the promise of a better, if ‘tentative’, future, but, in *The Four-Gated City*, these are the means by which Lessing can finally extricate her madwomen from the social systems and discursive practices that bind them. The appendix at the end of the novel moves Martha’s story into the twenty-first century and narrates, by way of letters and official documents, the events leading up to the Catastrophe as well as the fate of its few survivors. This is not a ‘natural’ disaster but a ‘manmade’ disaster – a disaster borne out of the very same sciences
that have rendered the human race technologically ‘evolved’ but physically and mentally and evolutionarily stunted. The exact circumstance of the actual event remains untold but it appears that the world has been poisoned by radiation and its population largely wiped out: Britain is a ‘Destroyed Area’ (611). From Francis’s account, it seems that whatever form the final disaster took it was always inevitable; Britain had already become a polluted, toxic environment being controlled by a Big Brother style fascist government that incited great fear and anger and violence, culminating in large scale riots and – significantly – madness. This widespread madness is linked to radiation and toxic nerve gases leaking into the atmosphere. During this period the characters of the novel split up: Francis (with Paul’s help) sets up a commune in Wiltshire, away from much of the madness; Paul is a wealthy and fashionable man about London; Phoebe and Margaret remain political and opposed; Mark and Rita are involved in charity institutions and relocate to Africa; Lynda continues her cycle of breakdown and institutionalisation and recovery, but eventually finds a doctor (of, it seems, anti-psychiatry) who is ‘on the edge of the truth’ (636); and Martha stays close to Lynda – together they continue with their ‘work’ and it is Lynda who first foresees the future global disaster. Martha and Lynda secretly contact and establish a body of people with similar abilities to warn the world. The most gifted are allocated groups to guide to safety once the disaster occurs. It is this work which results in a good number of those with extraordinary abilities being saved – although, as the time of the disaster approaches and the groups try to warn people, many ‘seers’ are imprisoned in a mental hospitals, including Lynda.

After the Catastrophe, those groups of survivors in official areas are gathered under governments and the old order is quickly re-established to manage the population, the habitable spaces, and the uncontaminated resources that remain. Wars, espionage, corruption, radiation poisoning, famine, poverty, homelessness, starvation, and disease ensue. At the same time communities ‘with names like “Little England”, “Newest England”, “England Again”’ (632) spring up around the world re-establishing an idealised and romanticised version of England which was ‘more English than England ever was’ (632). But they too, though in a different way, are falling back on old social orders, old ways of being,
old discursive structures. In the wake of the Catastrophe these structures can quickly re-establish order and a sense of familiarity and security. Francis writes that ‘[n]ow everything is so stratified and codified and hard – necessary of course, when the world is a waste land. […] The administration is privileged and comparatively free. The hordes of human refuse have nothing but what charity can do for them. But we do all know more or less where we are’ (643). People know who they are, how to act, where they stand in the order of things. A hierarchy is established so that while ‘millions of the homeless, contaminated, and hungry’ (643) suffer, ‘Administrators’, like Mark, play chess and drink cognac that is ‘[c]leared by the Commission for Pure Foodstuffs’ (665). But while these old ways of being might provide order, familiarity and charity, they also resurrect and begin again the cycle of oppression, violence and exclusion that led to humanity’s downfall and devolution. The masses are already a ‘horde[] of human refuse’.

Martha, however, remains outside of this process. Where small pockets of people have gathered in isolated areas or on small islands, as Martha does, they find themselves free not only from the technology and modern conveniences and ways of living that characterised the ‘Golden Age’ but also free from the very social fabric of the modern world. For these small communities, with the destruction of much of the world’s surface and population comes the opportunity to likewise destroy the old social orders and discursive practices that have historically constituted legitimate subjectivities. Focused only on survival, without technology, books, money, politics or even ideologies, these communities have the opportunity to discard and redraw the old structures of living and being that govern their existence. This is not, of course, straightforward – many of the survivors are people who understand themselves and their world only through these discourses. But the presence of Martha and other ‘seers’ who have already begun to dismantle and reject these discourses and structures, and who have already dared to imagine that humanity might evolve into ‘something new’, means that this community does not wholly fall back on old ways of being. So long as the community can remain outside of the reach of officialdom and its resurrecting of the old order, it has a chance to gradually extricate itself from the limitations and violence of discourses that create divisions between sanity and madness,
intelligibility and unintelligibility, mind and body and even perhaps, eventually, masculine and feminine. In Martha’s letter to Francis she tells him that ‘we put aside thoughts of being rescued. We knew that there wasn’t much prospect of it, but now we actively did not want it. […] [W]e have decided to bring our children up away from what is going on in the world’ (658, my italics). From outside of the old social structures this small community of people hold the potential to not only re-imagine ways of existing and living and functioning as a group (children are not ‘theirs’ but ‘ours’), but also, by doing so, to re-imagine the future and potential of humanity: ‘we held on to our belief in a future for our race’ (658), writes Martha.

At the beginning the small island community suffers from the aftermath of the Catastrophe and many die of afflictions that Martha suspects are related to the radiation. Some go mad and whilst this too is linked to radiation poisoning the very idea of ‘madness’, its causes and its expression and its potential, can no longer be understood in conventional terms. Whilst they tie up those who might be of harm to themselves or others Martha acknowledges that ‘our experience did not make it easy for us to say that anyone was mad’ (655). There is no psychiatry here and the conventional discourses of madness have been undermined by the extraordinary abilities of some of the community. As it is, this madness and the physical diseases and illnesses suffered by some of the community appear to be but residual effects of the old world. As the first generation of survivors gives way to the next and those to the next, the concept of ‘madness’ will become redundant. However, in the meantime, when the next generation of children is born without physical deformities but unable to speak they are considered ‘idiots’ and ‘sub-normal’ by the first but, as Martha writes, ‘who can tell?’ (659). Martha speculates that it is not that these children are unable to speak, but that they have no need for speech. It is now many years since Martha emerged from the basement and, forced to converse with Mark, realised the ridiculousness of human speech when they could communicate with one another perfectly without it. With this new generation the need for speech has been replaced by telepathy and, beyond that, a sense of common understanding and intuition between the children who are all ‘plugged in’. More children are born, and with each new group of
children there are further differences – some speak, some ‘see’, some ‘hear’, some do both – but all, save perhaps the first children, appear to represent a significant leap in psychic abilities and, it seems, evolution.

In *The Politics of Experience*, Laing writes: ‘Yet if nothing else, each time a new baby is born there is a possibility of reprieve. Each child is a new being, a potential prophet, a new spiritual prince, a new spark of light, precipitated into the outer darkness’ (26). The children within the community are not subject to the ‘darkness’ and the ‘corrupt[ion]’29 of the old order and so their abilities are fostered rather than suppressed. From their island the community is able to nurture the potential of these children and accept them as ‘prophets’ of a new race of humanity. When the third generation of children are born they are recognised as truly ‘superior’, as ‘super-normal’ (662). This new race are not only all able to ‘see and hear’ as well as speak but are also born with adult comprehension. They are not frightened of the pain they see/hear when they are ‘plugged into’ the past. Martha writes that ‘it is as if – can I put it like this? – they are beings who include that history in themselves and who have transcended it. They include us in a comprehension we can’t begin to imagine … they are our guardians. They guard us’ (662). In fact, these children are guardians not only of the old generation on the island, but of all of humanity. Joseph, the son of the black child Martha rescued during the Catastrophe, tells her that ‘more like them are being born now in hidden places in the world, and one day all the human race will be like them’ (663) and Martha tells Francis that ‘[p]eople like you and me are a sort of experimental model and Nature has had enough of us’ (663). They really are, in a sense, ‘human refuse’ – an old stage of evolution that will die out and be superseded by the new race emerging in ‘hidden places’. But Martha and Lynda are, of course, much more than this. They, the ‘madwomen’ of the mid-twentieth century, are the evolutionary forerunners, the precursors of this new stage of human development. By the end of the novel the two women have not only nurtured their own extra-sensory abilities but given rise to – given birth to – a superior race of human beings. Through the sacrifices they have made and their ‘work’, Martha and Lynda have helped to secure the continuation and development of the human race.
Rigney writes that ‘Martha’s nurturing instincts finally permit her to assume the mother role to hundreds of special children who survive the earth’s devastation at the end of the novel. […] Hysteria, after all, is literally a suffering in the womb’ (88-89). Rigney argues that Martha’s ultimate ‘knowledge’ and ‘vision’ has ‘help[ed] to give birth to a potentially better world’ (89). But the point is that the new children are ‘born’ out of Martha’s efforts at dismantling and re-imagining ‘hysteria’ as something not connected to the womb/reproductive body. Instead they are ‘born’ out of the unification of mind and body and other – a unification that conventional discourses of hysteria/madness and gender withhold from women as they tie them to the body half of that binary and figure her as Other. It is only from outside of these discourses that this new race can be imagined and nurtured. Moreover, this new, advanced communal-being cannot be said to be the product of one female body or one nuclear family or one race or nation: while it owes its existence at least in part to Martha and Lynda’s ‘work’ and their pre-catastrophe preparations, it is also, the text suggests, born out of the worldwide radioactive holocaust that, it seems, has helped to accelerate their evolution. The children are black, brown and white, female and male, and raised by an egalitarian, apolitical community that shares responsibility for the ‘mothering’ of the children. At the end of the novel Martha is not, therefore, a mother figure in any kind of traditional sense – there is no mention of her ‘mothering’ or adopting or individually raising Joseph or any of the other children. Martha cares for and raises these children as part of a different conception of childrearing, one based on, as Rigney writes, a ‘disinterested, nonpossessive maternal love’ (87). This is a mothering that is part of a more extensive nexus that nurtures the young communally and is invested not in the power structures of individual family units but in humanity’s material and spiritual evolution.

In The Four-Gated City, Lessing uses Laing’s The Politics of Experience to subvert discourses of madness and this allows her to imagine a new, different, and better future for humanity, drawing too on the discourses of evolution and Sufism. But what the text reveals over and over again is that the ‘something new’ that Martha first imagines on the veld is not something that can be realised from
within existing social structures. The potential of humanity is repeatedly shown to be realised only when the social order is evaded. Martha’s first experience of other levels of consciousness occurs when she is an anonymous newcomer to London and existing outside of social structures; Lynda and Martha’s experiments are conducted in the basement of the Coldridge home away from the ‘normality’ of ‘everyday life’; later, Martha continues her ‘inner journey’ by posing as a counter-culture ‘drop out’ in Paul’s house; and Francis’s commune in the Wiltshire countryside offers a haven for the psychiatrically damaged because it is isolated from the rest of the country. Vlastos writes that ‘[d]espite the implications of evolution and divinity in the novel, the question of the survival of the world rests on the very dubious nature of the present human race’ (134-135). While the anonymous streets of London, Martha and Lynda’s basement, Paul’s house and Francis’s commune all provide spaces to ‘opt out’ of the present system they ultimately do not alter that system. When Martha leaves the basement and finds herself confronted with the degeneracy of the world, she scuttles back, and so Francis, when he ventures to London, quickly returns to his retreat in the country. Neither Lynda and Martha’s basement nor Francis’s commune, as tiny spaces barricaded against the rest of the world, present a lasting solution. They only provide an escape, a temporary refuge, a small, subversive but isolated space that exists only at the fringes of the dominant established order.

It is only when the existing social order is completely removed, as it is on Martha’s island, that the discursive structures that divide and differentiate humanity can be re-imagined. Even then this is only possible for small ‘hidden’ communities out of reach of officialdom. The ‘super-human’ children born to Martha’s community are only able to evolve because they are separated from the old social orders that are quickly being re-established in other parts of the recovering world.30 There is a suggestion here that evolution, in Lessing’s novel, is a matter of ‘accidental’ eugenics: that is, the ‘fortuitous’ destruction of most of the present race that allows humankind to start over again from a pool of already more advanced, ‘gifted’ humans. However, I would argue that this is not exactly the case. Firstly, the text does not specify that the biological parents of the new generation of children have any extra-sensory abilities. Secondly, the first
generation of new children are accessing the same innate/latent abilities uncovered by Lynda and Martha but, because they are in an environment that fosters rather than suppresses those abilities, they are much more advanced and their abilities more easily sustained into young adulthood. With each new set of births the children appear to be advancing further but it is important to note that they are not the offspring of the first generation of new children (they are only teenagers, just beginning to pair off, at the time of Martha’s writing) but still the offspring of the original survivors. It appears then that this is not a matter of ‘selective breeding’ from more and more advanced stock (nature) but rather a matter of an environment that does not seek to suppress difference (nurture) allowing for latent superhuman abilities to finally emerge and evolve. Joseph’s prophecy suggests that the old human race will be superseded by this new race and there is a promise here that it will not be by the violence of ‘natural selection’ because, potentially, all humans will be subsequently born ‘super’-humans.

Whilst, in time, the new children will breed and, presumably, produce ever more advanced generations of the human race, Lessing’s text still emphasises the significance of more accepting and inclusive social and discursive structures to aid human evolution. It is only by a process of dismantling and abandoning and re-imagining humankind’s oppressive social structures and discourses of intelligibility that new ways of being can be fully realised for all.

On the island Martha sees birds and fish that appear mutated, what she calls ‘abnormal’ but ‘the young ones look at it differently: that kind of bird is sometimes like this and sometimes like that’ (656). Difference, for them, is outside of the normal/abnormal binary so that, potentially, anything can be ‘sometimes like this and sometimes like that’. Likewise, the new race of children ‘grow more and more diverse’ (659) but they still ‘connect’ to one another as part of a much larger body of humanity. On Martha’s death Joseph, as he has foreseen, is sent to Francis in Nairobi. Once there Joseph’s abilities are misrecognised by this world and he is immediately absorbed into the old social order and defined in terms of an arbitrary system of ‘normality’: ‘Dr. Kalinde has examined him. He classes him as subnormal to the 7th, and unfit for academic education. But fit for 3rd grade work. Perhaps you could find work on the vegetable farm’ (664).
Although there is far more hope for humanity at the end of *The Four-Gated City* than there is at the end of *The Golden Notebook*, it is still a fragile hope. The novel does end with Joseph, as a representative of the new race, sent out into the wider world – to ‘inspect parks and gardens’ and ‘attend courses on gardening’ (669). There is hope for humanity at the end of *The Four-Gated City* but, as Martha realises before her death, it is a tentative hope: ‘It is possible that everything I say about these children is true only for this time on this island’ (660).

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In *The Politics of Experience*, Laing attempts to deconstruct the sanity/madness binary; but, as Juliet Mitchell writes, ‘in establishing the patient’s ‘normality’ Laing is forced, despite his intentions, *by his own methodology* to say someone else is abnormal’.31 Essentially, Laing – and Lessing – only invert the sanity/madness binary. In Laing’s text those who were normal and intelligible as ‘human’ are now something degenerate, ‘inhuman’, and those who once were ‘mad’ and unintelligible are now the highest and purest form of humanity and, in Lessing, even *superhuman*. In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz writes:

> Difference, alterity, otherness are difficult concepts to incorporate into the humanist and phenomenological paradigm of oppression, which seeks to recognize all subjects (or, more commonly, *most* subjects) on the model of a bare or general humanity. Such a conception of humanity has no choice but to cast those different enough from the definition of humanity into the arena of the pre, proto- or non-human. Otherness can enter, at best, as a secondary modification of this basic human nature, a minor detail, but not a fundamental dimension or defining characteristic which alters all the other general capacities attributed to ‘human’ existence. (211)

In Laing difference remains central to his thesis – what was ‘abnormal’ is now normal so what was ‘normal’ is now abnormal. Lessing attempts to avoid this by effectively destroying what was ‘basic human nature’ in order to make way for a new human race. Joseph tells Martha that ‘one day all the human race will be like them’ (663). This not only means that ‘all the human race’ will have extra-sensory
abilities; more importantly it points to a time when old differences (race, sex, class) will no longer signify because they will be absorbed within a notion of a unified humanity. The ending of *The Four-Gated City* looks forwards to a time when all of humanity exists within the ‘invisible arms, vast, peaceful, maternal’ (507) of an all encompassing, greater spiritual and material presence. This presence or ‘wavelength’ or ‘sea of power’ (512) connects and consists of all things and is not subject to the spatial and temporal limits by which individual human perception has been historically bound. But all of this is only achievable through the very practical and pragmatic removal of the binds of certain discursive practices, starting with those specific to madness and to women, including the psychiatric, the reproductive and sexual. When Laing inverts the sanity/madness binary he disregards other differences, including race and class and sexuality and, most specifically, considering the gendered history of madness and the gendered discourses of psychiatry, sex/gender. But in *The Golden Notebook* Lessing has already demonstrated the impossibility of such sex/gender blindness and, in fact, the very content of Laing’s own case studies betrays any such gender-neutral aspirations.

In *The Golden Notebook* Anna reconciles herself to life as a boulder-pusher making but small changes from inside of those discursive structures which inscribe her body in terms of its sex/gender and thus grant her a legitimate subjectivity. In *The Four-Gated City* Lessing looks for other methods, beginning with the sacrifice of the most limiting of gendered discourses: reproduction and sexuality. But in the end Lessing is only able to conceive of a new way of being – that is, an inclusive and connected humanity characterised by a unified relationship between mind and body and the material and spiritual – by all but destroying the old orders through which the human individual has been discursively constructed. Throughout the novel, Lessing articulates the necessity of escaping old social orders and discursive structures in order to realise the potential of Laing’s re-imagining of madness, particularly for women. Ultimately, Lessing can only re-imagine and realise that potential when she divorces her heroine from the social order that perpetuates conventional gendered discourses of madness. Attempts to dismantle and re-construct notions of female embodiment
from within those orders, as Anna Wulf discovers, is largely futile. In order for Martha to reconnect mind and body she must remove herself from the discourses that inscribe that body in terms of socio-political systems based on discursive structures that divide, differentiate and exclude. The ‘inscriptive’ conceptualisation of the body must, in effect, give way to the ‘lived body’.  

As Martha extricates her body from those systems that inscribe it in terms of the feminine/maternal/sexual, she re-inscribes her body in terms of her psychic interiority. The surface of the body that was, at the beginning of the novel, inscribed by gendered discourses of reproduction and sexuality, those ‘minute marks on her groin and upper thighs made by pregnancy’ (67) that Jack strokes as part of their lovemaking ritual. As Martha experiments with moving in and out of her ‘inner space’ she imagines re-inscribing the body as ‘man’, ‘tree’, ‘white horse’, all imbued with ‘the sense of herself [that] had no sex’ (243). This is looking forward towards a time when she will re-inscribe the body psychically, as a (Laingian) ‘gender neutral’ ‘lived body’, erasing the present surface as inscribed by gendered socio-political discourses. By the end of the novel she achieves this but, instead of a ‘man’ or ‘tree’ or ‘white horse’ (masculine/organic/animal), she psychically inscribes her body as machine. As her body generates the energy that fuels her psychic experiences so those experiences are inscribed back on the body as it becomes re-imagined as the ‘machine’ that ‘converts one kind of energy into another’ (566). This is not a ‘machine’ in a cold, inorganic sense or as an expression of petrification or depersonalisation, as in The Divided Self. Rather the ‘machine’ here links to a process of de-individualisation (in the sense of ‘plugging into’ (568) and being part of a much larger machine of humanity and materiality) and, more importantly, in terms of energy, electricity, currents, light and power – this is a power that connects mind to body, exterior to interior. Martha’s body thus becomes inscribed by her own psychic enlightenment – she is the machine that humanity has substituted for its evolution.

In Space, Time and Perversion Grosz writes that

if bodies are traversed and infiltrated by knowledges, meanings, and power, they can also, under certain circumstances, become sites of struggle and resistance, actively inscribing themselves on social
practices. The activity of desiring, inscribing bodies that, though marked by law, make their own inscriptions on the bodies of others, themselves, and the law in turn, must be counterposed against the passivity of the inscribed body. (35-36)

Martha’s re-inscription of her body, then, has the potential to connect her psychic ‘inner space’ to external systems of social order in the external world which might ‘in turn’ be challenged and, perhaps, re-inscribed themselves. However, despite Martha’s ability to re-inscribe her own body in terms of her ‘lived’ experience, her ‘desiring, inscribing body’ cannot, it seems, ‘mark’ ‘the law in turn’.

Because Lessing can only re-imagine Martha’s body from largely outside of the social order/law that inscribes her body as reproductive, sexual, and hysterical she is, because removed from those systems, unable to, in turn, re-inscribe/trouble them. Martha’s achievement, then, relies upon Joseph’s prophecy that ‘one day all the human race will be like them’ (663). It is the children, who will go out into the wider world, who will have this task. Joseph, the gardener, is Anna’s blade of grass, tentatively pushing up through the debris.


4 Laing, p. 11.

5 Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 94. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


9 Jack is a victim of this system. When Martha seeks out Jack later in the novel he is a pimp, abusing girls and grooming them for prostitution.

10 Grosz, Space, Time and Perversion, p. 36.

11 Laing, p. 12.


16 This thesis is not primarily concerned with the influences of Sufism on Lessing’s novels. For further insight into this facet of her work see Ann Scott’s essay (above) and Nancy Shields Hardin, ‘Doris Lessing and the Sufi Way’, in *Doris Lessing: Critical Studies*, ed. by Annis Pratt and L. S. Denbo (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), pp. 148-164. For a book length study of Sufism in Lessing’s novels see Müge Galın’s *Between East and West: Sufism in the Novels of Doris Lessing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).

17 I say comparatively because Laing’s *The Politics of Experience* is also, of course, rather mystical in tone and content. As I have mentioned previously, the work was much criticized for this.

18 See Barbara Hill Rigney’s *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Brontë, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood* [1978] (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), pp. 78-80, for a detailed account of the associations between Lynda in *The Four-Gated City* and Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

19 Rigney argues that Martha is already realising this re-imagining of the maternal through her relationships with Mark and Lynda. However, the two examples she takes from the text are out of context: for Mark she cites the passage I have just quoted but clearly this is a sense of maternal feeling that is not confined to Martha’s feelings towards Mark but her perception of a larger presence’s encompassing of them both and, indeed, all humanity. For Lynda she cites an earlier passage in which, according to Rigney, Martha says she ‘adored Lynda, worshipped her, wished to wrap her long soft hair around her hands, said, Poor little child, poor little girl, why don’t you let me look after you?’ (383, my edition). But actually this is Martha overhearing Mark’s thoughts. I am arguing that it is not until the end of the novel, when the social order has been destroyed, that Martha is able to fully realise a re-imagined concept of mothering. Even her relationships with Francis and Paul are still informed by a sense of resentment towards conventional discourses of mothering rather than a new way of imagining mothering.

20 Laing’s term: p. 62 and p. 115.

21 Lessing, p. 522.

22 Laing, p. 104.

23 I do not analyse Martha’s encounters with the ‘self-hater’ (also called ‘the enemy’, ‘the devil’ and the ‘self-punisher’) in detail in this thesis but this too is drawn from Laing’s *The Politics of Experience*. Laing quotes from an account of the ‘inner journey’ in Karl Jaspers’s *General Psychopathology*: ‘In my attempt to penetrate the other world I met its natural guardians, the embodiment of my own weakness and faults. I first thought these were demons, […] [l]ater I thought they were split-off parts of my own mind (passions). […] I fasted and so penetrated into the nature of my seducers. […] I saw this earlier personality could never enter transcendental realms. I felt as a result a terrible pain, like an annihilating blow, but I was rescued, the demons shrivelled, vanished and perished. A new life began for me and from now on I felt different from other people’ (110-111). Martha’s understanding of the ‘self-hater’ and her battle against it is figured in very similar terms: see *The Four-Gated City*, pp. 551-572. For a Jungian interpretation of the ‘self-hater’/’enemy’ as an archetype of the collective unconscious in *The Four-Gated City* (as well as *The Golden Notebook*) see Roberta Rubenstein’s *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing*, (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 125-271. Or, writing

Merleau-Ponty quoted in Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 86.

There are also numerous references to the sea and seafaring in *The Politics of Experience*. See Part Four of the thesis.


Martha avoids suspicion by allowing her fellow housemates to assume she is experimenting with drugs (something ‘acceptable’ to them) rather than experimenting with the limits of her mind unaided. Madness, despite the tolerance and open-mindedness of this environment, is still understood as breakdown rather than breakthrough, as attested by the presence of Bob Parrinder and Rose and Molly: ‘both had breakdowns from time to time, when they looked after each other, under the care of a doctor who kept them supplied with sedatives’ (544).

As one group of housemates take LSD and mescalin in order to heighten and enlarge their sense of perception another group takes sedatives to limit that perception and dull the senses. Martha, (for the most part) unmedicated, exists in between these two groups – she is, like the first group, seeking to widen her consciousness but, like the second group, she is also, ostensibly, having a breakdown.


If, therefore, the extra-sensory abilities of the new race have been accelerated by the radioactive contamination those abilities are it seems still able to be suppressed by the old social order, as before.


The Politics of Experience: The Sexual Politics of Madness

And so it is in periods when there flourishes a vitalist romanticism that desires the triumph of Life over Spirit then the magical fertility of the land, of woman, seems to be more wonderful than the contrived operations of the male [...] But more often man is in revolt against his carnal state; he sees himself as a fallen god: his curse is to be fallen from a bright and ordered heaven into the chaotic shadows of his mother’s womb. This fire, this pure and active exhalation in which he likes to recognize himself, is imprisoned by woman in the mud of the earth. He would be inevitable, like a pure Idea, like the One, the All, the absolute Spirit; and he finds himself shut up in a body of limited powers, in a place and time he never chose, where he was not called for, useless, cumbersome, absurd. [...] He aspires to the sky, to the light, to the sunny summits, to the pure and crystalline frigidity of the blue sky; and under his feet there is a moist, warm, and darkling gulf ready to draw him down; in many a legend do we see the hero lost for ever as he falls back into the maternal shadows – cave, abyss, hell. [...] In all civilizations and still in our day woman inspires man with horror; it is the horror of his own carnal contingence, which he projects upon her. […] But] when men feel the need to plunge again into the midst of plant and animal life – as Antaeus touched the earth to renew his strength – they make appeal to woman.

Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex
Both Anna’s and Martha’s entrances into ‘inner space’ are characterised by a series of confrontations and illuminations which culminate in a new vision of ‘being-in-the-world’. For Anna this is a vision glimpsed but not realised, but in The Four-Gated City Martha is forerunner to a new race of human beings for whom inner and outer worlds are at last united. But both heroines are able to access their ‘inner space’, whether by accident or design, and eventually overcome the obstacles they find there: primarily, their encounters with the hate that resides in themselves and the collective unconscious: the ‘ancient enemy’\(^1\) in The Golden Notebook and the ‘self-hater’\(^2\) in The Four-Gated City. That said, the protagonists’ perceptions of their ‘inner space’ differ significantly. For Martha accessing her ‘inner space’, or ‘tun[ing] into’ the ‘wavelength’ (70), is achieved by a process of harnessing and directing her body’s energies inwards to create a receptive state. In this state she experiences the sights and sounds of different aspects of her self as well as other people, places and times. Her ‘inner space’ is not, however, traversed – it is, for the most part, not a ‘space’ that one moves through but to which one connects. Martha’s experience is a long process of gradually improving her ‘receptive[ness]’ (512), strengthening her connection to the ‘wavelength’, and a pushing at the limitations of her mind/body. Although Martha’s ‘inner space’ moves spatially and temporally – she sees and hears other places and times, past and future – she remains quite static, psychically focused and physically still, harnessing and directing her energies inwards. Anna’s ‘inner space’, on the other hand, accessed involuntarily in her dreams and in her madness, is often described in terms of vast landscapes which she flies over and lands within. Anna’s ‘inner space’, then, is figured as a kind of psychic land/dreamscape which she can/must traverse.\(^3\) While it is in The Four-Gated City that the ‘mad’ heroine finally arrives at a point of psychic and evolutionary breakthrough, it is The Golden Notebook that represents this process as a psychic journey. This journeying through one’s ‘inner space’ corresponds to the way in which Laing presents the re-imagined schizophrenic experience in The Politics of Experience, five years later. It is this conception of ‘inner space’, the
land/dreamscape through which one must journey, that Lessing returns to in her third ‘madness novel’, Briefing for a Descent into Hell.4

As in The Golden Notebook, in Laing’s The Politics of Experience one’s ‘inner space’ is not usually something that one can shift in and out of at will, as Martha does, but is rather a space one finds one’s self in (through madness, but also dreams, fantasies, imagination, even hallucinogenic drugs) and then must journey through in order to once more return to the ‘external world’. This ‘inner journey’, Laing argues, is not only the process by which the schizophrenic can heal herself but also the process by which humanity can save itself: ‘This process may be one that all of us need, in one form or another. This process could have a central function in a truly sane society. […] Can we not see that this voyage is not what we need to be cured of, but that it is itself a natural way of healing our own appalling state of alienation called normality?’5 This is the closest Laing comes to formulating a ‘treatment’ for the schizoid condition, now re-imagined as the ‘normal’ self-division of all of Western humanity. If the ‘mad world’ cannot be magically righted (for example, by destroying the old social order as Lessing does in The Four-Gated City) then it remains for the schizophrenic to transcend the world’s madness – that is, journey into ‘inner space’ – in order that she might emerge with a psychic clarity better able to cope with the external world’s divisions and contradictions without, once more, internalising them. This ‘transcendental experience’ is figured as the answer to modern humanity’s ‘false consciousness’ and as the route to its ‘authentic possibilities’.6

From Schizophrenic Experience to Transcendental Experience

The schizophrenic experience, Laing writes, begins ‘again [with] the split of experience into what seems to be two worlds, inner and outer. The normal state of affairs is that we know little of either and are alienated from both. […] [An] historically-conditioned split has occurred, so that the inner is already bereft of substance as the outer is bereft of meaning’ (103). The ontologically insecure individual retreats ever further from the little knowledge they have of the outer world and finds herself suddenly confronted with the unchartered territory of ‘inner space’. Laing explains that without a guide this inner world can be
confusing and frightening and it is likely that the ontologically insecure person will ‘lose their capacity to function competently in ordinary relations’ and thus their behaviour will be ‘be regarded as anti-social withdrawal, a deviancy, invalid, pathological per se, in some sense discreditable’ (103). This presents itself as the schizophrenic condition. If, however, this ‘condition’ remains untreated – that is, remains unhindered by conventional psychiatry – the ‘process of entering into the other world from this world, and returning to this world from the other world, is as natural as death and giving birth or being born’ (103). And, much like ‘giving birth’, this ‘natural’ process is both terrifying and painful whilst also potentially joyful and life changing. As an example of the ‘inner journey’ Laing borrows from Gregory Bateson’s introduction to John Perceval’s ‘Narrative of the Treatment Experienced by a Gentleman During a State of Mental Derangement’ (1840):

It would appear that once more precipitated into psychosis the patient has a course to run. He is, as it were, embarked upon a voyage of discovery which is only completed by his return to the normal world, to which he comes back with insights different from those of the inhabitants who never embarked on such a voyage. Once begun, a schizophrenic episode would appear to have a definite course as an initiation ceremony – a death and rebirth – into which the novice may have been precipitated by his family life or by adventitious circumstances, but which in its course is largely steered by endogenous process.

In terms of this picture, spontaneous remission is no problem. This is only the final and natural outcome of the total process. What needs to be explained is the failure of so many who embark upon this journey to return from it. Do these encounter circumstances either in family life or in institutional care so grossly maladaptive that even the richest and best organized hallucinatory experience cannot save them? (97-98, Laing’s italics)

Bateson clearly articulates an anti-psychiatric view not only of the cause of psychosis (family life) but equally its potential to heal once experienced outside of conventional psychiatric care. Laing views this understanding of schizophrenia as the much needed ‘revolution’ that will rethink the relationship between ‘sanity and madness, both inside and outside psychiatry’ (98). In The Politics of Experience then, Laing is not simply trying to describe or account for schizophrenia but to advocate the (unhindered) schizophrenic experience as the
cure for humanity’s modern fragmented condition: ‘We are far more out of touch with even the nearest approaches of the infinite reaches of inner space than we now are with the reaches of outer space. […] It makes far more sense to me as a valid project – indeed, as a desperately urgently required project for our time, to explore the inner space and time of consciousness’ (105). Those schizophrenics who present as catatonic are residing in their ‘inner world’, confused and lost without a map or a guide. The new role of the psychiatrist then is not to try to drag the patient back into the ‘external world’, or even now a matter of simply being prepared to understand that patient’s particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’; now the psychiatrist must act as a guide to assist their patient in the journey through their ‘inner world’:

Instead of the mental hospital, a sort of re-servicing factory for human breakdowns, we need a place where people who have travelled further […] can find their way further into inner space and time, and back again. Instead of the degradation ceremonial of psychiatric examination, diagnosis and prognostication, we need, for those who are ready for it (in psychiatric terminology often those who are about to go into a schizophrenic breakdown), an initiation ceremonial, through which the person will be guided with full social encouragement and sanction into inner space and time, by people who have been there and back again. […]

What is entailed then is:

(i) a voyage from outer to inner,
(ii) from life to a kind of death,
(iii) from going forward to a going back,
(iv) from temporal movement to temporal standstill,
(v) from mundane time to aeonic time,
(vi) from the ego to the self,
(vii) from being outside (post-birth) back into the womb of all things (pre-birth),

and then subsequently a return voyage from

(1) inner to outer,
(2) from death to life,
(3) from the movement back to a movement once more forward,
(4) from immortality back to mortality,
(5) from eternity back to time,
(6) from self to a new ego,
(7) from a cosmic foetalization to an existential rebirth. (106)
Laing sees the modern Western world as living in a kind of dark age waiting for existential enlightenment in which the ‘schizophrenics’ or explorers of the inner realm will thus become heroes of a new Golden Age. Schizophrenia is no longer a disease – or even a clinical condition, as in The Divided Self – but rather a way of combating the violent divisions within the self, between self and body, between self and other, and between inner and outer worlds. The ‘treatment’ for schizophrenia then is schizophrenia but it is a schizophrenia refigured as a transcendental journey into ‘inner space’, a voyage ‘back into the womb of all things’ to be reborn into a higher state of consciousness and self knowledge.

Laing writes that ‘the experience that a person may be absorbed in while to others he appears simply ill-mad, may be for him veritable manna from heaven. The person’s whole life may be changed’ (114). However, Laing gives little guidance on how to interpret these fourteen stages and in fact writes that he will ‘leave it to those who wish to translate the above elements of this perfectly natural and necessary process into the jargon of psychopathology and clinical psychiatry’ (106). Instead, he offers an account of one man’s particular journey through ‘inner space’ as an example of how those stages above might translate into lived experience.

The final chapter of The Politics of Experience is the testimony of Jesse Watkins’s journey into ‘inner space’, entitled ‘A Ten Day Voyage’. Following the same format as the case studies featured in Sanity, Madness and the Family this chapter is a combination of Jesse’s transcribed recording of his experience and a commentary by Laing. The chapter is introduced as ‘an account of his voyage into inner space and time’ (120) which was largely uninterrupted by psychiatric intervention although he was taken into an observation ward and occasionally put in a padded cell. He was, however, only ‘sedated comparatively lightly’ (133). There are striking resemblances between Jesse’s journey and Martha’s experience of her ‘inner space’. To begin with Jesse, like Martha, travels back through the memories of his past. He then goes further, experiencing a ‘real feeling of regression in time’ (123). He appears to revert to an animal state: ‘At one time I actually seemed to be wandering in a kind of landscape with – um – desert landscape – as if I were an animal’ (123). He continues to regress until he ‘had no
brain at all’ and then ‘struggling for my own existence […] I felt as if I were a baby’ (124). On the hospital ward he begins to believe he can heal himself and that he has the ability to make others do his bidding with only the power of his mind. On receiving a letter from his wife he says ‘she was in a quite different world’ (125). Consciousness becomes divided up into different planes/layers of existence and there is a ‘higher sphere’ (127). He says: ‘I had this feeling all the time of – er – moving back – even backwards and forwards in time, that I was not just living in the present moment’ (118). Jesse goes through the Stations of the Cross; Martha is likewise ‘conducted through the Stations of the Cross by the Devil’ during her battle with the ‘self-hater’. 8 Jesse also has ‘feelings’ of gods and feels that ‘at the end of it, everybody had to take on the job at the top’ (129). He (Jesse/Jesus) identifies with a God he sees as a ‘madman’ (129). Laing supplements the narrative to explain that ‘Jesse felt that this experience was a stage that everyone would have to go through one way or another in order to reach a higher evolution’ (130). This, seemingly, is humanity’s evolution into divine beings. Laing writes: ‘Eventually he felt he couldn’t “take” it any more. He decided to come back’ (130, Laing’s italics). Once returned to the ‘external world’ Watkins observes that ‘the grass was greener, the sun was shining brighter, and people were more alive, I could see them clearer. I could see the bad things and the good things and all that. I was much more aware’ (136). It is clear that there are parallels between Jesse’s account of facing the external world anew and Martha’s experience when she emerges from the basement of the Coldridge house/’inner space’.  

Despite Laing’s assertion that ‘the material speaks for itself’ (120), he frequently interrupts Watkins’s narrative to situate the experiences recounted within his theoretical framework (above). So, Watkins’s feeling that he has died in an observation ward is, Laing explains, not simply a phantasy of physical death but a ‘loss of ego [that] may be confused with physical death’ (123) and when Watkins believes he can influence others with just his mind Laing warns us to ‘not too readily discount these possibilities’ (126). The chapter concludes with an appeal from Laing to ‘demystify ourselves’ and ‘see “treatment” (electro-shocks, tranquillizers, deep-freezing – sometimes even psychoanalysis) as ways of
stopping this sequence from occurring’ (136). Jesse’s experience of his ‘inner space’ is thus figured as a successful and rewarding journey into a higher state of consciousness through reintegrating the inner world with the self. The shroud of clinical psychiatry has hidden and distorted what is a ‘natural’ and ancient process of spiritual enlightenment. Laing writes: ‘In other times people intentionally embarked upon this voyage. Or if they found themselves already embarked, willy-nilly, they gave thanks, as for a special grace’ (136).

An interesting facet of Jesse Watkins’s narrative of his ‘inner journey’ is the way in which both he and Laing frame the narrative by using metaphors of a very literal journey, specifically, a sea voyage. This is perhaps unsurprising: Jesse used to be a seaman and, because his doctor on the observation ward was a naval officer, he is actively discussing his seafaring past while in hospital. Towards the end of the narrative he says that ‘it’s just as if you were going to sea in a boat that was not really capable of dealing with the storms that can arise’ (130). At the end of the interview Jesse extends this analogy of being unequipped on a ‘vessel in [a] storm’ (134) in a description that is two pages long. Laing’s commentary is littered with references to sea voyages: he uses such terms and phrases as ‘old moorings’, ‘embarked’, ‘voyage’ (122), ‘safe harbour’, ‘anchored’ (125), ‘no map’ (129). The sea voyage metaphor is so insistent that Jesse’s ‘inner journey’ almost seems as if it did take the form of a sea voyage. Actually, Jesse’s journey through ‘inner space’ closely resembles Martha’s more temporal journey into the past and the future, although there is also a desert landscape here as in Anna’s more spatially conceived ‘inner journey’. While The Four-Gated City appears to draw upon the actual experiences, events and even quite specific details (for instance, passing through the Stations of the Cross) of Jesse’s journey, Lessing’s next ‘madness novel’, and her most Laingian, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, figures the ‘inner journey’ in terms of a much more literal journey. It draws heavily on the spatial land/dreamscape of ‘The Ten Day Voyage’ and quite specifically on the sea voyage metaphors it contains. Charles Watkins’s ‘inner journey’ in fact begins with a sea voyage and when he is admitted to ‘Central Intake Hospital’ he ‘attempted several times to lie down on the desk. He seemed to think it was a boat or a raft’. Charles’s experience of ‘inner space’ is figured as
both a ‘journey’ in the metaphysical sense of journeying into a higher state of consciousness (as per Laing’s schema and Jesse’s actual experience) and in the much more literal sense of traversing spatial and temporal planes resembling more closely the metaphors that Laing and Jesse employ to frame and explain that experience: Lessing’s protagonist will embark upon a sea voyage by boat and later by raft; he will journey inland from the coastline where he is shipwrecked, explore the city, walk through the ‘paradisiacal forest’ (91) and even fly over land and sea on the back of a bird; he will also move backwards through time; finally he will move upwards into the cosmos before descending back to Earth (hell) to be reborn.

All three accounts then – Laing’s, Jesse’s and Lessing’s – draw on spatial metaphors to articulate the nature and trajectory of the ‘inner journey’ and all appear to favour the sea voyage metaphor. The use of the nautical metaphor serves to emphasise the danger and difficulties of the ‘voyage’ as well as complement the more mythical and mystical elements of Laing’s vision of the ‘transcendental experience’. The voyager must charter rough seas, face monsters from the deep, battle ‘terrors, spirits, demons’ (104), manoeuvre through storms, overcome ‘mother nature’, and finally navigate his way to safety. The voyager must be strong, brave and heroic as he faces the elements. In doing so, to extend the metaphor even further, the voyager will enter new worlds (planes of consciousness), unearth buried treasure (memories and a ‘higher’ self), and reconnect with ‘mother-nature’ (reunite the material (body) and spiritual (mind) self). Eventually the voyager will emerge from the sea mists of ‘false consciousness’ and disembark into a greater sense of self. As these metaphors suggest, however, there is a fundamental problem with Laing’s imagining of the ‘inner journey’: that of the implicit gendering of Laing’s brave voyager.

From Madwomen to Male Heroes

Although The Politics of Experience covers some familiar theoretical ground it represents a clear movement away from the theoretical tone of The Divided Self and Sanity, Madness and the Family with their careful explanations of divided selves and experiences of disembodiment and their extensive case studies.
detailing untenable familial and social structures. The rather ‘technical and remote’ tone of these works is here replaced by a much more mythical and mystical tone. There is, for instance, a much greater emphasis on inner and outer worlds as spiritual and material ‘realm[s]’ (104), there is more discussion of religion and the ‘divine’ (108), and what was once a case of schizoid disembodiment/withdrawal from the world here appears to become a ‘transcendental experience’ (112). To some extent, Laing seems to be reinstating the sense of mystery around madness that *The Divided Self* sought to dispel by making madness ‘comprehensible’ – though here he replaces the clinical ‘mystery’ of madness with a more mystical and classically mythic ‘mystery’ of madness. In *The Divided Self* Laing did, just once, hint at the positive possibilities of madness with one early aside: ‘the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may let in light’, he writes, and ‘Ezekiel, in Jaspers’s opinion, was a schizophrenic’ (27). Laing’s allusion to the enlightening, spiritual and divine potential of madness is fleeting and certainly not borne out in the rest of the text; however, in *The Politics of Experience* Laing is much more confident about the schizophrenic’s ability to access ‘the inner light’ and become a ‘potential prophet, a new spiritual prince, a new spark of light’ (26) guided by the ‘true physician-priest’ (133). The mystical, it seems, has now truly supplanted the medical, and the anti-psychiatrist is not only clinician but guide and ‘priest’.

What becomes increasingly clear in *The Politics of Experience* is that Laing’s focus has not only shifted in terms of the potential he sees in madness but also in terms of the implicit gendering of the patient: the ‘psychotic’ female suddenly, and inexplicably, gives way to the ‘psychedelic’ male. Gone are the schizophrenic daughters and schizophrenogenic mothers of *The Divided Self* and *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. The madwoman appears in *The Politics of Experience* only as the sad, tortured patient of Emil Kraepelin whose account of a psychiatric examination Laing draws upon in order to reiterate his original arguments: that madness can be made comprehensible if we try to see the world from the patient’s particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’ and that conventional psychiatry is inadequate, harmful and its methods crazier than the patient. The madwoman appears then only as the victim of the old system. She *does not*
feature as the hero of the ‘inner journey’; indeed, if anything she is a stage or
station on that journey, the ‘womb’ to which ‘man’ returns in order to be reborn.

In her place appears the Odyssean/Hegelian heroic figure of the adventurer who is
likened to ‘the explorer, the climber, the space man’ (105) and, of course, the sea
voyager. In *The Politics of Experience* such hero-figures include: Jesse Watkins,
John Perceval, ‘Smith’ and ‘Jones’, the ‘brilliant[]’ conversationalists of chapter
five, and the male patient whose account of his ‘inner journey’ is narrated in Karl
Jasper’s *General Psychopathology*. The experiences of these male patients are
represented as the ‘passionate outcry of outraged humanity’, an expression against
humankind’s ‘alienation’, which ‘unites men as diverse as Marx, Kierkegaard,
Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Tillich and Sartre’ (12). And, of course, there is
Laing himself. As well as fellow adventurer, Laing is the doctor-prophet who
leads the way and guides the uninitiated.

A significant shift in Laing’s clientele parallels the evolution of his
understanding of madness from *The Divided Self* to *The Politics of Experience*.
This shift suggests that the ‘inner journey’ and its mystical reward is something
reserved for brave, heroic, *male* adventurers, as opposed to Laing’s former female
patients. When madness becomes re-imagined as a perilous and exciting journey,
the ‘ancient quest, with its pitfalls and dangers’, it becomes something that
Laing much more readily associates with *male* experience. Once madness is
refigured as enlightenment and the mad person refigured as a Christ-like saviour
of humanity, the female schizophrenic experience is appropriated by the male
adventurer as a gateway to what is rebranded as the ‘transcendental experience’. It
appears that once the schizophrenic becomes not simply comprehensible but
*intelligible* ‘she’ is re-gendered as masculine. Peter Sedgwick writes that

> [t]he analogy between the psychotic and the psychedelic states, between
the mystic’s other-worldliness and the schizophrenic’s withdrawal, was
an inevitable move in his campaign to upgrade the status of the
apparently abnormal and insane. It is a crucial move, because if we
refuse to follow Laing this far we are left with the position that the
schizophrenic is a disabled victim […] whose basic perceptions and
reactions can only to a limited degree be understood in the terms of
‘intelligibility’.

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In ‘upgrading’ the mad person, however, Laing abandons the female ‘disabled victim[s]’ of his previous texts. The shift in the gendering of the schizophrenic, from implicitly female in *The Divided Self* and explicitly female in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* to implicitly male in *The Politics of Experience*, serves to demonstrate that actually Laing’s work maintains a very clear division between ‘the psychotic and the psychedelic states’. In *The Politics of Experience*, Laing does differentiate between a ‘withdrawal’ or ‘retreat’ into ‘inner space’ where one is lost, ‘shipwreck[ed]’17 (schizophrenic experience) and a voyage through one’s ‘inner space’ (transcendental experience). I want to argue that this division serves to consolidate the gender politics involved in Laing’s body of work and that consequently ‘intelligibility’ continues to elude the embodied female schizophrenic, the ‘disabled victim’.

Laing repeatedly acknowledges that the journey through ‘inner space’ is not to be taken lightly by the uninitiated and unguided. Continuing with the nautical metaphor, Laing writes that ‘in this journey there are many occasions to lose one’s way, for confusion, partial failure, even final shipwreck: many terrors, spirits, demons to be encountered, that may or may not be overcome’ (104). The voyage through ‘inner space’ has the potential, Laing argues, to change a ‘person’s whole life [but] not everyone comes back to us again’ (114). Although schizophrenia is refigured in *The Politics of Experience* as a positive and necessary healing process through which to access existential enlightenment, its more clinical incarnation is not completely eradicated but remains in the sense that those ‘lost’ in ‘inner space’ are still subject to the schizophrenic experience as set out in *The Divided Self*. These are the madwomen of Laing’s previous texts: divided selves still trapped in the untenable familial structures of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. ‘He’ is the traveller who confronts and conquers his inner ‘demons’ and completes the ‘inner journey’ in *The Politics of Experience*. ‘She’ is the schizophrenic, lost in her ‘inner space’ and ‘disabled victim’ of *The Divided Self* and *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, comprehensible, perhaps, but not ‘intelligible’.

In *The Politics of Experience* Laing writes:
Once a ‘schizophrenic’ there is a tendency to be regarded as always a ‘schizophrenic’. Now why and how does this happen? And what functions does this procedure serve for the maintenance of the civic order? […] Questions and answers have so far been focused on the family as a social sub-system. Socially, this work must now move to further understanding, not only of the internal disturbed and disturbing patterns of communications within families, of the double-binding procedures, the pseudo-mutability, of what I have called the mystifications and the untenable positions, but also to the meaning of all this within the larger context of the civic order of society – that is, of the political order, of the ways persons exercise control and power over one another. (101, Laing’s italics)

Laing’s aim in *The Politics of Experience*, then, is to go far beyond * Sanity, Madness and the Family* – to move outward from the family unit into the ‘larger context of the civic order of society’. Laing’s claim to examine the ways in which ‘persons exercise control and power over one another’ seems an opportunity to finally consider the schizophrenic experience as a gendered experience as well as the gender politics inherent within conventional discourses of madness. In fact, the epigraph to *The Bird of Paradise*, taken from ‘The Gospel According to Thomas’, points towards the potential for moving beyond sex/gender differences by way of connecting the ‘outer’ and ‘inner spaces’ through the ‘inner journey’:

Jesus said to them:
When you make the two one, and
when you make the inner as the outer
and the outer as the inner and the above
as you below, and when
you make the male and female into a single one,
so that the male will not be male and
the female will not be female, when you make
eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand
in the place of a hand, and a foot in the place
of a foot, and an image in the place of an image,
then shall you enter the Kingdom. (140, my italics)

Finally it seems as if the breaking down of the sanity/madness binary might have the potential to also trouble the male/female binary and its parallel associations with the mind/body opposition. But, actually, in expanding his field from the family unit and to the ‘larger […] political order’, Laing abandons the
schizophrenic daughters of his previous texts and turns his attention to the fathers who, as patriarchs, are the true ‘subjects’ and potential revolutionaries of that ‘civic’ and ‘political order’.

In The Politics of Experience Laing advocates the ‘transcendental journey’ in order to salvage mankind but the madwomen of his previous works is conspicuously absent. The same might be said for Lessing’s own account of the ‘inner journey’ in Briefing. Problematically, Lessing too appears to have abandoned the Annas, Lyndas and Marthas of her previous texts and replaced them with her own male adventurer, Charles Watkins. However, I want to argue that in doing so Lessing’s text brings to the fore the gender politics present throughout Laing’s formulation of the anti-psychiatric understanding of schizophrenia. In particular, the text explores the implications of Laing’s implicit distinction between the ‘psychedelic’ male hero and ‘psychotic’ female schizophrenic by way of Charles Watkins’s encounter with the young, ‘pretty girl’ (235), Violet Stoke.

**Briefing for a Descent into Hell**

The title page of Briefing makes Lessing’s intentions for her novel clear:

Briefing for a Descent into Hell

*Category:*

Inner-space fiction

For there is never anywhere to go but in.

(9)

This novel signals an ‘inward turn’ to the ‘inner world’. She categorises the novel as ‘inner-space fiction’ drawing on both Laing’s understanding of the term ‘inner space’ and the conventions of a particular subgenre of science fiction exemplified most prominently by J. G. Ballard’s ‘catastrophe’ fiction of the 1960s. Lessing’s and Ballard’s works – and lives – have many interesting parallels, not least their interest in the potential of science fiction to explore contemporary anxieties in a serious and ‘literary’ way. Both novelists draw on the idea of the existence of an ‘inner space’ in terms of both its Jungian and Laingian incarnations. Roger
Luckhurst, in *The Angle Between Two Walls*, writes that when considering Ballard’s essay ‘Which Way to Inner Space?’ and Laing’s *The Politics of Experience* ‘the consonance between the two is remarkable’. He argues that ‘Ballard’s insane characters […] are more difficult to contain within the holistic Jungian version of “inner space” than the more disclosive state of schizophrenia as shaman, celebrated by Laing’ (50). The same might be said of Lessing’s *Briefing* which, while clearly still influenced by Jung’s work, is very obviously Laingian in its conceptual framework. The epigraph, ‘For there is never anywhere to go but in’, echoes Laing’s final call for humanity to travel ‘back and in, because it was way back that we started to go down and out’ (137). Interestingly, as Mona Knapp points out, the maxim disappears from later editions of the novel; this perhaps points to Lessing’s desire to disentangle her works from Laing’s later in her career. Indeed, although the parallels between Lessing’s novel and Laing’s *The Politics of Experience* are striking, Lessing has refuted the claim that she was influenced by this text at all. In an oft quoted letter to Roberta Rubenstein she writes:

> I had not taken Laing as my starting point. I had not read the piece in question by him, or the book *Politics of Experience*.  
> My book was written out of my own thoughts, not other people’s.  
> … It seems almost impossible for people to grasp that people can write from their own experience.  
> As for the name Watkins, being used: I took the name out of the telephone book, which is my usual practice … [because of British libel laws]. I always use the commonest name I can find.

Lessing is perhaps right to be wary of the association and the kind of attention it may draw. For instance, Douglas Bolling, in his essay ‘Structure and Theme in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*’ writes in a note that ‘Laing’s outline of inner space voyaging is followed virtually step by step in *Briefing*’ and later suggests that ‘some may find the appropriation of the concepts from R. D. Laing and others raising questions of the writer’s originality’. But Lessing’s later desire to claim independence from Laingian thinking cannot erase the overwhelming similarities between the two texts and Lessing’s critics all tend to read Charles Watkins’s
‘transcendental experience’ through the lens of Laing’s, or more specifically Jesse Watkins’s, formulation of the ‘inner journey’ in *The Politics of Experience*.

The significance of *Briefing* to Lessing’s body of work is threefold: firstly, it is the transitional text that, stemming from the end of *The Four-Gated City*, moves Lessing’s primary generic mode from realism to science fiction, or more specifically, ‘inner space fiction’ and establishes the cosmic themes that will go on to inform the *Canopus in Argos* sequence of novels; secondly, despite Lessing’s claims to the contrary, it is the most explicitly Laingian of her ‘madness novels’ and therefore most fully examines the potential of Laing’s theories for her own understanding of madness and the limits of human consciousness/knowledge; thirdly, *Briefing* is the first of Lessing’s novels to feature a male main protagonist.

I want to address all three of these points in this chapter, but will begin with Lessing’s decision to, like Laing, switch genders.

### Madness and the Male Body

It is generally accepted that Lessing’s choice of a male protagonist for *Briefing* is *not* politically motivated. Knapp writes that, although Lessing’s critics all observed her sudden switch to the male hero, ‘this fact is probably unimportant to the author, who has never claimed to limit her scrutiny of human behavior to one sex’ (105). On the one hand, featuring a male protagonist may have been a way of circumnavigating the prominence critics tended to give the theme of the ‘sex war’ in her novels. *Briefing*, of course, was published in the same year that Lessing wrote her preface to *The Golden Notebook* which so vehemently attacked her critics’ tendency to read the book only or primarily in terms of the ‘sex war’ debate.25 On the other hand, it may have been a strategic choice in terms of her subject matter: madness. Knapp argues that ‘Lessing’s choice of a male protagonist contributes to the book’s force, since society often stamps hysteria and irrationality as intrinsically female traits. When males go over the edge, their condition cannot be dismissed as “the housewives’ disease,” a cathartic vacation from humdrum routine’ (106). Likewise, Lynn Sukenick, in ‘Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing’s Fiction’, writes that
Lessing’s decision, then, may have arisen out of a desire for her novel, which was already pushing at the limits of literary merit by moving into the mystical and science fiction genre, to be taken seriously as a commentary on the current methods and practices of Britain’s psychiatric establishment. By shedding the ‘hysterical’ women of her previous texts and constructing her narrative through the perspective of the mad but male hero (white, middle-class and a university professor to boot), Lessing might indeed be attempting to increase the credibility of her critique of conventional discourses of madness and her/Laing’s re-imagining of that madness as a journey to cosmic/spiritual enlightenment.

Sukenick goes so far as to suggest that

[i]n both Briefing for a Descent into Hell and The Four-Gated City, sexuality and gender begin to fade into a transcendent condition and are greatly reduced in stature under pressure of a higher androgynous knowledge. Things in general are too dire and sorrowful for the ‘sex war’ to be important, and women can abandon their caution as their centre shifts from men, their reason no longer hostage to the chemistry of attraction. (116)

In order to overcome the limitations of female embodiment as encountered in The Golden Notebook (that is, a schizophrenic-body that refuses to be transcended because of the psychiatric and gendered discourses that figure woman as body), in The Four-Gated City Lessing is forced to continually find ways by which to remove Martha from the social systems that perpetuate such discourses in order to achieve the synthesis of mind/body, inner/outer, as well as overcome the sanity/madness binary. Over the course of the novel she deprives her of maternal links, sexuality, intelligibility, the external-social world, and, finally, virtually the rest of humankind and its attendant social order by strandng her on a remote island with a handful of survivors and a new race of superhuman children. In doing so Lessing is finally able to separate Martha not from ‘the body’, but from
her sex/gender and thus allow her to access the realm of ‘androgynous knowledge’: that is, to become a ‘neutral knower’, to use Elizabeth Grosz’s term. It is perhaps little wonder then that Lessing decides to adopt a male protagonist in order to further explore the nature of ‘inner space’.

This is not to suggest, however, that issues of gendered embodiment are not relevant in terms of male embodiment. Grosz writes that ‘instead of seeing man as the active creator of discursive and epistemic values, the male body must be seen as an inscribed product of the intervention of meanings into the way men live their bodies’ (39). The way in which most of Lessing’s male characters have ‘live[d] their bodies’ is, like her heroines, through the discourses of madness. Although not examined in such great detail as the ‘mad’ bodies of Anna, Martha and Lynda, the male bodies that featured in The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City – primarily, Tommy, Saul and Jack – are represented in the text in quite explicit ways. Each male body has been inscribed with the character’s particular experience of madness and this manifests itself on the body in specifically material ways: Tommy, who transcends the body, is blind (he is metaphorically castrated and thus disavows his material body); Saul, who is schizoid and composed of a myriad of false selves, is emaciated (his inner self is disappearing), and Jack, who by the end of the novel is a sadist, is the mortal body (he experiences himself as inescapably embodied). The way in which each of these male bodies is inscribed fits the ‘lived body’ approach of conceptualising bodies, as defined by Grosz (33). Their madness (psychic interiority) constructs the surface/materiality of the body as a projection of that interiority but these are also bodies that are dissociated from selves. So, for Tommy and Saul the body reflects their sense of disembodiment – that is, Tommy’s masculine transcendence of the body and Saul’s Laingian dissociation of mind from body. Jack is the exception – he is thoroughly embodied but it is at once an awe inspiring and terrifying embodiment that positions him on the abject threshold of life/death and drives him to constantly reaffirm his existence through the body, primarily by promiscuous (a ‘feminine’ word), heterosexual sex. In some sense Jack is, then, also at the threshold of the masculine/feminine binary. His embodiment aligns him with the feminine but his sexuality, particularly in its later incarnation (he is paid to
‘br[ea]k in girls’ (442) for a brothel) resists that association. Dagmar Barnouw writes that ‘his body has been taken over by hatred, by a degraded mind that needs to possess the other completely by degrading her morally’.\textsuperscript{28} Jack’s ‘degraded’ mind inscribes itself as degradation upon his body (he is also ‘sick’ later in the novel – he goes to a sanatorium because he is frightened of his thinness) as well as other (female) bodies.

The conceptualising and inscribing of Lessing’s previous male bodies, then, is much closer to Laing’s ‘lived bodies’ approach in his works than it is to Lessing’s ‘inscriptive’ approach\textsuperscript{29} to the \textit{female} body in her novels. Her heroines are always inscribed by socio-political forces as per the ‘inscriptive’ approach.\textsuperscript{30} By the end of \textit{The Four-Gated City} Martha is able to re-inscribe her body by way of the ‘lived body’ approach because she has largely escaped the socio-political forces that inscribe her body in terms of sex/gender. However, at the end of the text she remains outside of society and dies on the island – she is only a challenge to the old order (that has quickly been re-established elsewhere in the world) through her psychic legacy – the new race of children. When Lessing returns to the subject of ‘inner space’ and the ‘inner journey’ then – this time from in the present moment and before any large scale catastrophe has upset the social order (a catastrophe is foretold in the novel, as is the evolution of the human race, but it has not yet occurred) – she chooses to do so from the perspective of a male protagonist who is already more readily associated with Laing’s ‘lived bodies’ than are her previous heroines.

However, the male body that Lessing constructs in \textit{Briefing} is not represented in the same way as the male, ‘\textit{always, already sex[ed]}’\textsuperscript{31} ‘lived bodies’ of her previous novels but is more akin to one of Laing’s male but apparently ‘gender neutral’ ‘lived bodies’. Thus Charles Watkins’s body does not function in this novel in terms of bodily inscriptions of sex/gender or madness, as Tommy, Saul and Jack do in the earlier novels. In fact, although the text reveals that Charles is drugged throughout his hospitalisation and undergoes electro-convulsive shock therapy before he is discharged, these experiences – which are both psychic (affect his perception) and discursive (part of the regulation of normative/intelligible subjectivity) – are neither narrated nor seemingly
‘inscribed’ upon a ‘universal’ body that remains largely unrepresented. In fact, the only mention of the Professor’s body (in ‘external space’) is at the very end of the novel when he is described as the handsome, older man: ‘into the public room came a tall good-looking man of about fifty. He has wavy dark grey hair that had been black, he had blue eyes, he had a good smile’ (230). This description, which might come from a romance novel, is, however, only offered in response to the female body (Violet). It is this female body that, while confined to the peripheries of the text, calls attention to itself and figures in the text as a foil to Charles’s supposed sex/gender neutrality and his claim/access to the ‘transcendental experience’.

Both Sydney Janet Kaplan and Elaine Showalter have dismissed the significance of sex/gender for readings of the schizophrenic experience in Briefing. Kaplan writes that ‘the issue of sexuality seems to have been eliminated from Briefing’ and Showalter argues that ‘Briefing for a Descent into Hell, [...] the most Laingian of Lessing’s novels, does not make connections between female powerlessness and schizophrenia. [...] By this point, however, Lessing’s novels were no longer concerned with the schizophrenic journey as a woman’s exploration of self’. Showalter quickly moves on. But this too readily discounts the sex/gender politics that do remain at play in this novel and do remain of significance to understanding the relationship between Laing’s radical revision of madness in The Politics of Experience and gendered embodiment in Lessing’s novels.

**Sex/Gender and the Hospital**

Like Jesse Watkins, Charles is hospitalised during his ‘inner journey’ and so while one half of the narrative is written as a first person anti-psychiatric account of ‘inner space’, the other half of the narrative accounts for, and tries to make sense of, his presence and his behaviour in the external world. It does so by interpreting Charles’s madness in terms of conventional psychiatry, which, in this hospital, is largely based on the medical model of madness rather than on psychoanalysis. This part of the narrative takes the form documents: admission forms; nurses’ and doctors’ notes; interviews between patient and doctor, patient
and nurse, patient and wife; and correspondence, usually between the doctors and Charles’s wife, his mistress, colleague, old school friend and Rosemary Baines, as well as old letters written by and to Charles. The framing narrative is, in criticism on the novel, often considered extraneous to the much more interesting and rich inner narrative of mythic and cosmic proportions; however, this more pedestrian narrative demonstrates the ways in which the conventional discourses of madness which anti-psychiatry opposes, construct the patient and their mental illness in terms of the body and, in particular, its sex/gender.

That Briefing is concerned with issues of sex/gender is evident from the very first page of the novel which, as part of the external, framing narrative, takes the form of a hospital admission sheet. It states:

**CENTRAL INTAKE HOSPITAL**

*Admittance Sheet*  
*Friday, August 15th, 1969*

Name… Unknown  
Sex… Male  
Age… Unknown  
Address… Unknown  

General Remarks  
... At midnight the police found Patient wandering on the embankment near Waterloo Bridge. They took him into the station thinking he was drunk or drugged. They describe him as Rambling, Confused and Amenable. Brought him to us at 3 a.m. by ambulance. During admittance Patient attempted several times to lie down on the desk. He seemed to think it was a boat or a raft. Police are checking ports, ships, etc. [...] He was wearing trousers and a sweater, but he had no papers or wallet or money or marks of identity. [...] He is an educated man. (11)

The list of questions on the admission sheet are designed to identify the patient – by virtue of being admitted onto the ward the ‘person’ is already transformed into a ‘patient’ and thus, as Laing argues in *The Divided Self*, an ‘organism’.34 Fittingly then, two of the questions are about defining the body in terms of its most fundamental (and defining) characteristics: sex and age. All four questions – name, sex, age and address – are asked not only in order to match the attendance sheet to the correct patient (using the usual markers of identification: name and address), but also in order to identify those bodily markers that might be
significant to the patient’s particular madness, in this case sex and age. Race, class, and occupation are not on the list. Neither is sexuality which, of course, might not simply be a marker of identity but also a ‘diagnosis’: homosexuality was listed as a mental disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* until 1973.\(^{35}\) Phyllis Chesler, in *Women and Madness* (1972), writes that

> [h]omosexuals [are] psychiatrically ‘labelled’ and legally persecuted. […]

Men who act out the male role – but who are too young, too poor, or too black – are usually incarcerated as ‘criminals’ or as ‘sociopaths,’ rather than as ‘schizophrenics’ or ‘neurotics.’ In order to be ‘men,’ less powerful men in our society have to ‘steal’ what more powerful men can ‘buy.’ (And they are punished for doing so.) The kinds of behaviors that are considered ‘criminal’ and ‘mentally ill’ are sex-typed. They are also typed by race and class, and each sex is conditioned accordingly. Psychiatric categories themselves are sex-typed. […] It is important to know what type of clinical treatment these psychiatric patients receive; how many clinicians there are, the theories on which the clinicians draw, and how these psychiatrists and psychologists view their patients.\(^{36}\)

According to the admission sheet, the only thing ‘known’ about Charles is his sex but this is not, of course, *really* the only corporeal marker of his identity. Charles is, for instance, obviously white (precisely because we are not told otherwise). Likewise, his maturity, his accent, his physical ‘healthiness’ – these are also bodily markers that are ‘read’ and his madness is thus constructed in those terms too. So, he is not a criminal (‘too young, too poor, or too black’) or homosexual (his sexuality is never questioned) and, even in his ‘madness’, he is ‘an educated man’ (11). That said, it is the marker of sex that largely determines the way in which one is positioned within so many socio-political discursive systems, including the psychiatric one. Following Chesler’s comments then, we might ask in what ways Charles and his madness are interpreted by the police officers and the staff at Central Intake Hospital, how he is ‘treated’ and diagnosed once admitted, and how his doctors and their opinions/theories/efforts are represented; at the same time, according to Chesler, we need to be attentive to how these various readings of, and dealings with, the patient are caught up with issues of sex/gender identity.
Joan Busfield writes that ‘age, like gender, is seen as closely associated with certain categories of mental disorder and is, in effect, part of their construction’. Indeed, Charles’s age and sex determines his initial (if mistaken) ‘diagnosis’. Charles is found ‘Rambling, Confused and Amenable’ (11) by the police. Although Charles’s age is listed as ‘unknown’ he is not so old as to be mistaken by the police, who pick him up from the Embankment, as senile or even pre-senile (that is, under sixty-five – we are told later in the novel that he is fifty) so this diagnosis, for instance, would not ‘fit’. However, his age and sex do suggest that he could be ‘drunk or drugged’ (11). Busfield writes: ‘Numerically more significant [in the twentieth] century as mental disorders more commonly diagnosed in men, are the “substance use disorders” of alcoholism and drug addiction’ (18). Charles’s sexed body therefore influences how his particular ‘madness’ is read: the police make an assumption based on his sex/gender and instead of taking him to the hospital they take him to the station to, presumably, sleep it off. Likewise, on the psychiatric ward his behaviour is ‘read’ in terms of his sex/gender – so his attempts to lie down on the table are interpreted as the (masculine) pursuit of sailing as if he ‘is on some sort of voyage’ (11) and, despite his not being young, poor or black his doctors speculate that he might have committed a crime and his madness is his expression of guilt (19); again, a much more ‘masculine’ diagnosis than, say, schizophrenia.

Chesler reads madness as a violation of one’s prescribed sex/gender role and draws on studies that show that female schizophrenics exhibit more masculine traits in their madness and male schizophrenics more feminine ones: but this is, she argues, much more pronounced – and less accepted – in the former than the latter. She writes that ‘what we consider “madness,” whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex-role stereotype’ (93, Chesler’s italics). Charles’s sea-faring delusions (as they are interpreted by the staff in terms of his sex/gender) do not violate sex/gender roles and are even (because of the pursuit’s concordance with his sex/gender) translated quite literally into the possibility of his being ‘an amateur or a yachtsman’ (11). Had his behaviour, however, suggested a pursuit that was unmistakably feminine/female – say, sewing or
perhaps pretending to suckle a baby – then his delusion would not be translated literally but rather confirm his ‘madness’ and thus render him ‘unintelligible’. As it is, Charles’s behaviour, both in terms of his belief that he is on a sea voyage and his ‘religious delusions’ (138) remains intelligible in terms of his male sex that makes claim to space and the occupation/traversing of space as well as to a ‘masculine transcendence’.

Charles, as a male body that is read as masculine and as ‘an educated man’ – that is, as the archetypal possessor of power and knowledge – resists the conventional discourses of madness that construct the body as a site of abnormality and degeneracy and, of course, as feminine. Indeed, despite his long episode of being ‘distressed, fatigued, anxious, deluded, hallucinated’ (16) and exhibiting ‘religious delusions’ and ‘paranoi[a]’ (138), his diagnosis is not schizophrenia but simply amnesia: when Charles asks ‘am I ill then?’, Doctor Y replies: ‘not physically. [...] Professor Watkins, you lost your memory’ (134). This is not a ‘madness’ of the body nor is it a case of ‘losing one’s mind’, only one’s memories. His ‘madness’ does not violate sex/gender roles and therefore his madness is not read in terms of a disruptive (feminine) body. It is barely madness at all and this makes translating Charles’s experience into the ‘inner journey’ a simple matter of falling back on that familiar conceptualisation of ‘man’ as the transcendent ‘universal’ subject. Charles is, as Rubenstein and others have observed, the ‘everyman, rediscovering (remembering) through the exploration of the microcosm of his own consciousness the experience of the human race’ (178). But his experience – the experience of the human race – like Laing’s *The Politics of Experience*, is conditioned by the experience of a male body concealed behind a claim to universality; in *Briefing*, the female body calls attention to that disavowed male body from the fringes of the narrative.

**Gendering the Inner Journey**

If in the external world of the psychiatric hospital Charles is figured as the archetypal male who resists the conventional discourses of madness in the very intelligibility of his sexed body, how then does he figure within the world of his
own ‘inner space’? In the second narrative thread Charles’s ‘madness’ is told from his own perspective as a voyager through ‘inner space’. The narrative is divided into two main stories which each have several stages/destinations: the first narrative is mythic and includes Charles’s sea voyage, shipwreck, exploits in the ruined city, and ascent into the crystal; the second narrative is cosmic and begins with the Ancient Gods and moves into a future cosmic ‘conference’ in which delegates from each of the planets are ‘briefed’ for their descent to earth (hell) to save humanity from self-destruction (Charles, Rosemary Baines, and Frederick Lawson, the text suggests, are these cosmic representatives on earth). Jeanette King writes that ‘in his dreams in hospital, Watkins undertakes a mythical journey which presents a continual challenge to the nature and values of the “real” world of the hospital’. This narrative thread, like the first, does not escape sex/gender discourses, but here the narrative provides a challenge to the construction of the ‘transcendent male’ that is missing from much of the first narrative thread (the challenge will appear in the ‘real’ world at the end of the novel, by way of the relationship between Charles and Violet). The women who appear throughout his journey call attention to themselves, their bodies, and the way in which his ‘transcendental experience’ relies upon their continued embodiment. It is in this way that the ‘nature and values’ of the ‘real’ world are challenged by Charles’s ‘inner journey’.

To begin with, as mentioned above, Charles’s ‘inner journey’ takes the form of a literal sea voyage, drawing on the metaphors that frame Jesse Watkins’s journey in The Politics of Experience. Charles is, like the numerous voyagers in Laing’s work, the heroic male adventurer bravely embarking on a perilous journey into ‘inner space’. Charles is ‘Jonah’ and ‘Jason’ (14), ‘Sinbad’ (17), ‘Odysseus’ (29), and the Ancient ‘[M]ariner’ (53). When he sets sail on his journey with his fellow (male) seaman they wave to the women they leave behind. Already then, before Charles has even ventured out to sea, this inner world is characterised by a familiar narrative genre and a familiar sex/gender divide – the male Odyssean explorer/adventurer embarks upon his journey of discovery while his women are left behind to patiently await his return. According to Charles’s narrative these women are imprisoned on the island and their release depends on his journey (21).
Charles’s ‘inner journey’ to enlightenment, then, begins with the decidedly unenlightened sex/gender divide between those who can brave the journey (men) and those who are imprisoned on their island (women). We might draw parallels here between Martha on her island and the way in which her ability to access ‘inner space’ is dependent upon disentangling herself from sex/gender discourses and remaining outside of the social structures which would try to re-inscribe her body in those terms. These women are, then, perhaps not simply trapped on an island (earth-bound) but trapped in their female bodies as constructed through discourses that associate the female body with nature/reproduction. Charles’s ‘woman’, who is named ‘Conchita’ – meaning ‘the conception’ and, more specifically, the immaculate conception⁴¹ – is the ideal of feminine/female embodiment: a reproductive but chaste body that is able to fulfil its ‘biological function’ without soiling itself with the sin of sexuality (‘Conchita’ is, in the ‘real’ world, Constance, his mistress, who has indeed had a baby by Charles). If the island is a metaphor for the body then the women remain ‘prisoners’ (21) of that body while Charles and his crew are able to dissociate themselves from that materiality (land/earth) for the sea and a journey that will eventually take them up into the cosmos.

The journey promises not only to deliver Charles to ‘Them’ (21), those cosmic beings who will deliver ‘aid’, ‘explanation’, ‘a heightening of our selves and of our thoughts’ (22), but also, in doing so, enables Charles and his crew to return and ‘save’ the women. This, as translated into the later cosmic narrative, is the descent of the one hundred cosmic representatives who arrive on earth (hell) to save the world from its own destruction. Charles is, as the later cosmic narrative confirms, one of the hundred. If Charles is one of the hundred then the women he leaves behind on the island (the earth-bound) translate to the human masses on earth. Not only is Charles the heroic adventurer of the mythic narrative he is also the cosmic god-like saviour of the world. Likewise, not only are the women left behind (trapped in their bodies) to await the transcendent voyager’s return, but they also represent the earth-bound ‘mad’ masses who, in the cosmic narrative, are driving themselves to destruction. The beginning of the ‘inner space’ narrative confirms that Laing’s ‘inner journey’, like his original understanding of the
schizophrenic experience, is a matter of achieving a state of disembodiment, or, as he only tentatively suggested in The Divided Self, a state of ‘discarnate spirituality’. However, as The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City have demonstrated, this is almost impossible for women to attain from within the current social order with its reliance on, and perpetuation of, gendered discourses that tie women to the body.

Briefing, it appears, reinstates the same mind-male, body-female binary associations that characterised Anna’s inability to achieve a state of disembodiment and which Martha sought so painfully to escape and radically revise in The Four-Gated City. Grosz, summarising the thoughts of Luce Irigaray, describes the binaries in this way:

If men have in part rationalized their domination of the production of knowledges by claiming their interests are universal or sexually neutral, this in only because they rely upon a culturally inscribed correlation of men with the category of the mind and of women with the category of the body. Men are able to dominate knowledge paradigms because women take on the function of representing the body, the irrational, the natural, or other epistemologically devalued binary terms. By positioning women as the body, they can project themselves and their products as disembodied, pure, and uncontaminated. (42, Grosz’s italics)

Laing, as a male producer of knowledges that are intimately bound up with the gendered constructions of mind and body, not only fails to account for women’s embodiment in his understanding of female schizophrenic experience, but now excludes her from the re-imagining of that experience as healing and potentially spiritually enlightening, even as he makes claim to the universality and gender ‘neutrality’ of the voyager. Briefing emphasises, however, the disavowed ‘masculine interests’ behind his claim to neutrality. The beginning of the mythic narrative returns us then to ‘the devalued binary terms’: mind/body, active/passive, free/imprisoned, transcendent/embodied, spiritual/material, sea/earth; and later: human/animal, sun/moon, cosmos/earth, cosmic/earth-bound, god/human. The effect of this is not to reinforce those oppositions but to draw attention to their presence in the ancient narrative of the male adventurer and his pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, a narrative that Laing uses to articulate the ‘gender neutral’ ‘inner journey’ he so ardently advocates as the solution to
humanity’s current woeful state. ‘Irigaray’s project’, Grosz explains, ‘consists in part in returning the male body to its products’ (42). That is, in exposing the male body behind the ‘neutral’ knowledges ‘he’ produces. This, I want to argue, is Briefing’s project too.

Jeanette King is one of the few critics to offer a sustained analysis of the workings of sex/gender discourses in Briefing. Throughout her book-length study of Lessing’s more experimental works, King argues that Lessing’s texts articulate an ‘implicit feminism’ that ‘challenges the “humanity” of a culture which ascribes values to what has been traditionally defined as “male” and remains male dominated in so many of its central assumptions and power-structures’ (ix). According to King, Lessing achieves this by way of the ‘marginal perspective’ from which she writes, a perspective that is both within and at the margins of ‘Western European literature’ (ix). We might even extend this to a ‘marginal perspective’ on, more broadly, Western dominant discourses. In regard to Briefing, King writes that ‘the marginal perspective of women is implicitly explored through a male subject whose own experience is marginalized by the label “mental illness” on account of characteristics identifiable with those labelled “female”’ (55). As I have argued above, Charles in fact resists that ‘label’ and its feminine associations by the very way in which his sexed body constructs his madness as something appropriately ‘gender neutral’, unembodied (the ‘neutral’ masculine), and therefore largely impervious to those more damaging discourses of madness: he is diagnosed with amnesia. However, I do agree with King that it is ‘through [the] male protagonist […] that Lessing projects that “marginal” feminist view’ (68). It is through Charles’s interactions and confrontations with the female body while in his ‘inner space’ that the text produces an ‘implicitly feminist’ critique of the male/‘inner journey’ narrative. From within Charles’s ‘disembodied, pure and uncontaminated’ anti-psychiatric ‘inner space’, the female body asserts itself as the embodied, impure, and contaminated matter he has disavowed and inscribed onto her ‘imaginary’ body. The female bodies expose themselves and their necessity to this narrative of ‘transcendental experience’; in doing so they implicate his materiality in their construction and, thus, they draw
attention to the presence of the concealed male body behind the ‘neutral’ knowledges of Laing’s *The Politics of Experience*.

King does not read Charles’s journey in terms of Laing’s *The Politics of Experience*; instead, she provides a footnote to say that other critics have found ‘obvious links’ (56) between the texts and points the reader to Showalter. And yet, as I pointed out earlier, Showalter offers little support for a feminist reading of *Briefing* and only touches upon the text in its relevance to Laing, arguing against any ‘obvious links’ to women’s schizophrenic experience. However, by placing King’s argument for Lessing’s ‘implicit feminism’ *alongside* a reading of *Briefing* that takes into account Laing’s *The Politics of Experience*, the text comes to function as not only ‘implicitly feminist’ but, in addition, as an implicit feminist critique of the sex/gender politics of anti-psychiatry.

**Sex/Gender and ‘Inner Space’**

Charles’s sea voyage and shipwreck accounts for the first stages of the ‘inner journey’ as set out by Laing in *The Politics of Experience*: he voyages from outer (the body/land) to inner (the spiritual/sea), from a life to a kind of death (the shipwreck), and from going forward to going back (he lands on a primitive, ancient island). After Charles is shipwrecked, his journey continues by land. Following the logic of my earlier argument, which reads the island the women are imprisoned on as a metaphor for the body/materiality, Charles’s shipwreck might then be read as a return to ‘the’ (if not ‘his’) material body. Yet this is not the corrupt body of the modern world but a veritable ‘paradise’ (41) in which ‘there was no feeling of hostility’:

> On the contrary, I felt welcome there, it was as if this was a country where hostility or dislike had not yet been born. […] It was a paradise for birds and for monkeys, and as I stood to rest to relieve my eyes for a while of the sun’s glitter here, under trees, I saw on the opposite bank, on a white stretch of sand, some little deer step down to drink. I decided to rest. I found a grassy slope where the sunlight fell through layers of lightly moving leaves, and fell asleep in a dapple of light. (40-41)
This peaceful, beautiful landscape is safe, offers sustenance (‘purply-orange fruit’ (41)), and a warm, restorative environment in which to rest and gain strength. In *The Politics of Experience* Laing identifies the return ‘into the womb of all things’ (106) as one of the milestones, if not the essential turning point, of the anti-psychiatric voyage through ‘inner space’. Lessing’s representation of Charles’s return to the ‘womb’, or to a ‘pre-birth’ state, is figured both in terms of the Christian myth – the garden of Eden before the Fall – and the maternal body – the womb-like space of the forest: ‘The dark lay heavily, but it was not cold at all, there was a moist warmth in the air that I took into my lungs, which were slowly giving up the salt that had impregnated them so much that only now breath was again becoming an earth – rather than a sea-creature’s function’ (42). Charles is thus returned not simply to the land/material-body but to the maternal body.

Unlike Jesse, who ‘felt as if [he] were like a baby’ (124), Charles does not regress to a pre-birth state but rather his environment signals the psychic shift from post-birth to pre-birth. The forest then is figured in terms of a ‘natural’ female, reproductive body that sustains and nurtures Charles until he is ready to continue on his journey – this time ‘from inner to outer’, ‘from death to life’ (106). So, as Charles begins to move further inland he encounters a cliff face which he ‘pull[s]’ himself ‘up and up’ until he encounters a ‘cleft’ that bars his way to the top:

For it was now evident that ahead of me was a narrow cleft. [...] There seemed no way around the cleft. [...] So I went up into it. The morning sunlight was a glitter in the blue sky far above my head, for I was enclosed in a half-dark, smelling of bats. Now I had to squirm my way up, my feet on one wall, my back and shoulders against the other. It was a slow, painful process, but at last I scrambled up on to a narrow ledge against the final glassy wall. [...] Up here all the air was filled with the sharp spray and the flowering scents from the forest below. The evil-smelling cleft I had come through now seemed to have had no real part in my journey, for its dark and constriction seemed foreign to the vast clear space of the way I had been – but that had not been so, and I made myself remember it. Without the painful climb through the cleft I would not be standing where I was. (44-45)

Charles’s ‘delivery’ from the forest below (the womb) to the vast clear space (the wider world) signals the voyager’s move now from ‘inner to the outer’, from the ‘womb of all things’ back towards ‘mortality’, as he begins his return journey that
will culminate in his ‘existential rebirth’. As per Laing’s schema, the move from the ‘womb’ to the ‘outer’ is only the first ‘rebirth’, the bodily one at the turning point of the journey; it will be followed by a second ‘existential rebirth’ at the very end of the journey which, in the novel, takes the form of being absorbed into the light/crystal: that is, into a state of enlightenment or, as Laing writes, ‘cosmic foetalization’ (106). Most critics observe the similarities between Jesse’s and Charles’s ‘inner journeys’ but, although Lessing initially draws heavily on the nautical metaphors that frame Jesse’s narrative, her account of Charles’s journey is clearly derived from Laing’s rather more spare ‘itinerary’ of the ‘inner journey’. In fact, she represents the stages of the journey quite explicitly and also quite literally in her text: there is little subtlety in her depictions of the forest as both Eden-like and as a womb-space and her description of Charles’s ‘rebirth’ as ‘squirm[ing]’ through the ‘evil-smelling cleft’ in the ‘half-dark’ pressed in on all sides by the walls of the cleft and making ‘slow, painful’ progress to reach the ‘blue sky’ far above his head, barely qualifies as a metaphor it is so literal in its representation. And yet this is not simply a case of heavy handedness: this is a description of ‘rebirth’ that draws attention to the construction of the female, reproductive body as not only ‘of nature’ but as ‘evil-smelling’, as something ‘dark’, ‘constrict[ing]’, and ‘foreign’ (45). Although Charles tries to make ‘[him]self remember it’ because ‘without the painful climb through the cleft [he] would not be standing where [he] was’, as soon as he recognises his image in the glassy face of the rock – and enters the Symbolic – he is able to separate himself from the cleft (the mother’s body), forget it, and continue on his journey: ‘I had to go up’ (45). Shortly afterwards he enters ‘civilisation’ in the form of the ruined city.

Lessing’s representation of the return to the womb and subsequent rebirth, then, is founded on that most basic of binary associations: women-nature and, by extension, male-culture. Lessing makes painfully clear the associations between not only the ‘natural’ and the female reproductive body, but also that reproductive body as foreign Other and tomb-like space, ‘evil’, ‘dark’ and ‘constrict[ing]’. It is this construction of the female body that Charles’s journey from ‘post-birth’ to ‘pre-birth’ to ‘rebirth’ is predicated upon. Her description draws attention to the
status of the female body as not ‘subject’ – she is not the voyager journeying into spiritual enlightenment – but as the condition by which he can journey into spiritual enlightenment: that is, the body through which he can erase and re-imagine his old corrupt self (through rebirth) whilst at the same time defining himself against that Other body, its ‘nature’, its organic ‘matter’. There is a tension here between conceptualisations of the female body as life giving and restorative and conceptualisations of that same body as Other and threatening – that which will mark ‘him’ with ‘her’ materiality. Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, as quoted in the epigraph of this section, that the female body is both ‘magical fertility of the land’ within which man ‘dreams of losing himself anew […] that he may find there again the true sources of his being’, but she is also that ‘carnal’ being into whose ‘chaotic’ womb he is cast ‘from a bright and ordered heaven’.\(^4\) This is quite literally the case for Charles Watkins, as the later cosmic narrative explains. He is a god-like cosmic representative cast down to earth and into the body of the earth-woman. Charles’s pulling of himself back out of the cleft towards the ‘blue sky’ that is ‘glitter[ing]’ with ‘morning sunlight’ foresees not only his ascent into the crystal but echoes Beauvoir’s reading of man’s aspirations to be ‘pure Idea, the One, the All, the absolute spirit’ (177):

He aspires to the sky, to the light, to the sunny summits, to the pure and crystalline frigidity of the blue sky; and under his feet there is a moist, warm, and darkling gulf ready to draw him down; in many a legend do we see the hero lost for ever as he falls back into the maternal shadows – cave, abyss, hell. […] In all civilizations and still in our day woman inspires man with horror; it is the horror of his own carnal contingency, which he projects upon her. […] [But] [w]hen men feel the need to plunge again into the midst of plant and animal life – as Antaeus touched the earth to renew his strength – they make appeal to woman. (179-183)

Beauvoir encompasses all ages and ‘all civilizations’ in a sweeping account of man’s transcendence and woman’s immanence. Butler writes that

[f]or Beauvoir, the ‘subject’ within the existential analytic of misogyny is always already masculine, conflated with the universal, differentiating itself from a feminine ‘Other’ outside the universalizing norms of personhood, hopelessly ‘particular,’ embodied, condemned to immanence. Although Beauvoir is often understood to be calling for the
right of women, in effect, to become existential subjects and, hence, for inclusion within the terms of an abstract universality, her position also implies a fundamental critique of the very disembodiment of the abstract masculine epistemological subject. That subject is abstract to the extent that it disavows its socially marked embodiment on to the feminine sphere, effectively renaming the body as female. This association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom. (16)

Butler has accused Beauvoir of ‘maintain[ing] the mind/body dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms’ and argues that ‘the preservation of that very distinction can be read as symptomatic of the very phallogocentrism that Beauvoir underestimates’.46 Lessing might be similarly accused but actually her own articulation of the female body as ‘nature’ and Other and the male transcendent subject as ‘free’ and ‘neutral’ is drawing attention to the phallogocentrism that underlies the sweeping, ‘universalising’ anti-psychiatric narrative of the ‘inner journey’. Briefing through its own sweeping, ancient, male adventure-narrative, and by emphasising the female body’s traditional function within such a narrative, is implicitly critiquing anti-psychiatry’s claim to be a ‘universal’ knowledge while being suffused with the phallogocentrism of the mind/body dualism it, again, claims to synthesise into a unified, phenomenological self that is ‘in-the-world’. But, as Charles observes, while

[t]here is nothing on Earth, or near it, that does not have its own consciousness, Stone, or Tree, or Dog, or Man […] the consciousness that sees that face, that body, those hands, feet, is not inside the same scale of time. A creature looking at its image, as an ape or a leopard leaning over a pool to drink, sees its face and body, sees a dance of matter in time. But what sees this dance has memory and expectation, and memory itself is on another plane of time. (58)

For all the supposed harmony of mind/body unity in the phenomenological roots of Laing’s ‘knowledge’ there remains a consciousness that ‘is on another plane of time’ and what Briefing makes clear is that this consciousness, removed from the ‘shapes of flesh, flesh in time’ (58), is the consciousness of a male body.
The tension in the text between a womb space that is restorative, the gateway to life, that which must be ‘remember[ed]’, and the horror associated with that dark, ‘evil-smelling’ place, exposes the sex/gender assumptions which underlie the supposedly ‘neutral/universal’ stage of ‘pre-birth’ and ‘rebirth’ in the ‘inner journey’: that is, the tension between a claim to universality and a reliance upon the female body as a something ‘through’ which he passes on his journey as well as something against which ‘his’ ‘transcendental experience’ is figured. So, when Charles returns to the ‘womb of all things’ he is not returning to something he already embodies but he is returning to confront a materiality he has disavowed and which, in being reborn, he once more defines himself in opposition to. The construction of the maternal body as ‘natural’ and as simultaneously Other is then, as Briefing exposes, a condition upon which the male voyager’s ‘inner journey’ depends. He appropriates her body as a means to re-connect with his beginnings and, through entering in and out of that womb-space, to begin again, thus preparing himself for the later ‘existential rebirth’ that takes place this time not from within the female body, but from within the disembodied ‘light’ of the cosmos/crystal. While Laing writes ‘I shall leave it to those who wish to translate the above elements of this perfectly natural and necessary process into the jargon of psychopathology and clinical psychiatry’ (106, my italics), Lessing translates it into a narrative that exposes the misogynistic sex/gender constructions behind that ‘perfectly natural’ and ‘necessary process’.

The second encounter with the female body is particularly pertinent because it links the female body to madness. In the forest, under a full moon, Charles stumbles upon three women familiar to him. They are not immediately identified as women – they are just ‘a group of people’ – but their ‘singing and shrieking and laughing’ suggests their sex/gender even before Charles approaches and sees ‘their three faces, women’s faces, all the same, or rather, all variations on the same face […] and blood was smeared around their stretched mouths, and ran trickling off their chins’ (63). The three women – the ‘sisters’ (63), the ‘witches’ (65) (or ‘weird sisters’), the ‘murderesses’ (65), the madwomen – that Charles encounters function as evil-Eves who lure the ‘pure’ and ‘uncontaminated’ Charles into their orgy of gobbling ‘raw and bloody’ (63) meat. King reads this as
another version of the Fall and how ‘mankind’s sin is revealed through the relationship of male and female, with the further implication that what is wrong with man is woman’ (56). In addition, this ‘sin’ is entangled with particularly gendered discourses of madness. As King writes, ‘he is “moonstruck”, “mooncrazed”, “lunatic”. His sudden consciousness of a smell of blood implicitly connects the moon’s phases with the female menstrual cycle, underlining the traditional association between the moon, female sexuality, and insanity’ (56). The witches seduce Charles into a madness and a carnality which are both particularly female. These women are contrasted against the women he has left behind, Conchita and Nancy, but they too are implicated in the carnality and madness of the witches: ‘three women, all intimately connected with me, alike, sisters’ (65). If he is the ‘everyman’ then they are ‘everywoman’ and this ‘everywoman’ is carnal, mad, a reproductive body but a monstrous mother (the baby is killed in the chaos and thrown onto the pile of raw, bloody meat ready for the next night’s feast), ruled by the moon and their bloody bodies. Like the female rat-dog that kills her own young as she frantically tries to escape the male rat-dogs who are attacking her, this is a primitive, violent and sordid portrayal of woman as crazed and monstrous. The female mad (m)Other is here portrayed in stark contrast to the (male) ‘madness’ of the anti-psychiatric ‘inner journey’ and clearly differentiates between two types of madness: that which is carnal, chaotic, earthly and bodily (female) and that which is comprehensible, linear, spiritual and transcendent (the ‘neutral’ ‘madness’ of the ‘inner journey’).

But this first madness, the ‘female’ madness, like the return to the ‘womb’, is nevertheless a destination on the ‘inner journey’ to enlightenment – something to be confronted and then, as Charles does, to move beyond. Charles is initially seduced by the moon/the women/the female body: ‘[t]o see her full face I sped off in imagination till I lay out in space as in a sea, and with my back to the Sun, I gazed in on her, the Moon. […] I began to think the moon knew me, that subtle lines of sympathy ran back and forth between us. I began to think the moon’s thoughts. […] Bodily eyes see bodies, see flesh’ (57). The ‘Sun’, who in the cosmic narrative is the all-powerful creator that radiates light and has no physical form (as the planets do), is what Charles aspires to and he must resist the lure of
the Moon/woman if he is to ascend into the light/crystal and into higher consciousness. King argues that ‘he cannot resist the moon’s forces because he is himself split, operating according to different laws, according to whether the moon (female) or sun (male) is dominant’ (57), but the text makes clear that he must face and then conquer and relinquish the moon (his femaleness) if he is to ascend into the crystal and achieve (masculine) transcendence. When he rises above the forest in the crystal he is able to look down and remember his nights with the witches and understand that experience as ‘a page in my passport for this stage of the journey’ (91).

Just as his experience of the return to the womb and subsequent rebirth is a stage of his journey which he must pass through so too is his identification with the female and the earthy and the corporeal. Although, like the experience of rebirth, this is something he feels he must remember, must accept as part of human experience, as ‘faceted in [his] new mind like cells in a honeycomb’ and contained within the light of the crystal so that ‘altogether we made a whole’, the confrontations with the female body nevertheless remain but ‘a key and an opening’ (92). Likewise, although Charles claims that within the crystal there is a ‘pulsing swirl of all being’ that locks together ‘the inner pattern in light with the outer world of stone, leaf, flesh, and ordinary light’ (93), the ‘passport’ to that crystal depends upon not the acknowledgement, acceptance, and reconciliation of mind/body, male/female, cosmos/nature, spiritual/material, but rather the necessity of confronting one’s earth-bound/human complicity in the inferior term in order to then access the realm of the superior. The crystal ascends from the earth to the cosmos and this ‘humanity’ (earthy, fleshy and female) is transcended as Charles discovers himself to be a god-like cosmic being: ‘my new body was now a shape in light’ (89). Charles’s ‘new body’ is the ‘neutral’, the ‘universal’, the non-gendered body of the ‘pure Idea, the One, the All, the absolute spirit’. 49

From Male Heroes back to Madwomen

It is surprising that King’s feminist reading of Briefing barely mentions Violet Stoke. It is true that Violet appears for only a handful of pages in the far less interesting ‘real world’ narrative thread, but her absence in almost all discussions
of the novel is odd. It is through Violet, I want to argue, that the ‘marginal feminist view’ that critiques the implicit sex/gender politics of the anti-psychiatric ‘inner journey’ is linked to the ‘real world’ and thus exposes the male body that lies behind Charles’s claim to ‘universalism’ as archetypal ‘everyman’ as well as Laing’s claim that anti-psychiatry is a ‘universal’ knowledge, one that ‘all of us’ should undergo and therefore, presumably, that ‘all of us’ has access to.

Violet Stoke appears at the very end of the novel as the young schizophrenic woman Charles has befriended during his stay at Central Intake Hospital. She is, in effect, Watkins’s female equivalent – they both distance themselves from the other patients and Charles observes that he ‘can get Violet to understand everything [he] says’ (238). If Charles is the ‘everyman’ (archetypal transcendent male) she is the ‘every-schizo-woman’ (archetypal embodied female). Violet is introduced as the ‘young girl, all by herself’ in a day room full of ‘forty or fifty people’ who are ‘of any age, size, type and of both sexes. But the middle-aged pre-dominated, and particularly middle-aged women’ (226). Anyone can be mad, the text says, but you are more likely to be a middle-aged woman if you are. Charles and Violet – as older man and younger woman – stand outside of this bracket and could be said to represent two poles of madness: one which is not really madness and therefore readily translates to Laing’s re-imagining of madness as enlightenment (Charles), and one which is the embodiment of female madness, and which is not only constructed through the conventional discourses of madness but through socio-political gendered discourses that render her unfit for a Laingian ‘gender neutral’ ‘inner journey’ (Violet). Before anything else is said about Violet – her name, her ‘illness’, her relationship to Charles, even – there is a lengthy description of her appearance:

She was a brunette, of a Mediterranean type. She had smooth dark hair, large black eyes, olive skin. She was slender, but rounded, but not excessively the latter, thus conforming both to our current ideas about beauty in women, and that moment’s fashion. She wore a black crepe dress, that fitted her smoothly over breasts and hips. The sleeves were long and tight. The neck was high and close. The dress had simple white linen cuffs and a round white collar. These were slightly grubby. This dress would have been appropriate for a housekeeper, a perfect secretary, or a Victorian young lady spending a morning with her accounts, if it had
not ended four inches below the top of the thigh. In other words, it was a particularly lopped mini-dress. It would be hard to imagine a type of dress more startling as a mini-dress. The contrast between its severity, its formality, and the long naked legs was particularly shocking: it shocked. The girl’s legs were not quite bare. She wore extremely fine, pale-grey tights. But she did not wear any panties. She sat with her legs sprawled apart in a way that suggested that she had forgotten about them, or that she had enough to do to control and manage the top half of her, without all the trouble of remembering her legs and her sex as well. Her private parts were evident as a moist dark fuzzy patch. (226-227)

Violet is a troubling figure because she is too female. She attempts to embody both sides of the binary that has traditionally divided women into two opposing versions of womanhood: virgin and whore. The upper half of Violet is beautiful, slightly exotic, fashionable, and ‘proper’ too. This upper half is the ideal of chaste femininity. The lower half of Violet, however, is highly sexualised and exposed, flaunting her sex and her indifference to that sex. The disjuncture between the top half of Violet and the bottom half is ‘startling […] shocking: it shocked’. Violet, instead of trying to escape or re-imagine or revise the binary, as Anna Wulf does in her attempts to be a ‘free woman’, tries instead to encompass both and in doing so becomes uncanny and disturbing: mad. She is, quite literally, the divided woman with that divide drawn across her midsection, separating her reproductive organs from the rest of her ‘self’. Violet’s madness then, is a madness that reveals itself to be quite literally a case of being caught between these two poles of womanhood. Chesler writes that ‘[w]omen who fully act out the conditioned female role are clinically viewed as “neurotic” or “psychotic”’ (93). Chesler argues that madness is understood either in terms of one’s gender failing to correspond to the sexed body (female bodies exhibiting masculine behaviours, for instance) or simply being too female. Chesler’s understanding of madness looks ahead then to Judith Butler’s central thesis in Gender Trouble: that is, when ‘gender does not follow from sex’, or when the gender performance goes so far as to parody its ‘natural’ sex, the person then becomes a ‘developmental failure’ with the potential to ‘expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility’. But Chesler’s bodies are bodies very much bound by the regulatory disciplines of power that govern intelligibility and thus, as she writes, ‘neither genuinely mad women, nor women who are hospitalized for conditioned
female behaviour, are powerful revolutionaries’ (93). Neither, ostensibly, is Violet, but her presence at the end of the text does seek to challenge the apparent revolutionary power and claim to universality of the anti-psychiatric re-imagining of madness as gateway to ‘inner space’ and spiritual enlightenment ‘for all of us’. Violet is not on an ‘inner journey’ – she is, if anything, lost in her ‘inner space’, ‘shipwrecked’, unable to achieve the ‘transcendence’ necessary to ascend to a higher plane of consciousness because she is her body and is caught not between mind and body but between one construction of the female body and another. She, all external surfaces, exposed and ‘naïve’ (227), stands at the opposite pole of madness to Charles, transcendent and enlightened, whose body only signifies its sex in order to conceal that sexed body under the guise of a universal (male) intelligence and intelligibility. Just as the female body calls attention to itself from the fringes of Charles’s ‘inner space’, so Violet’s body calls attention to itself and contrasts against the ‘neutral’ male body of Charles – his claim to transcendence is troubled by her so obvious immanence. Likewise, anti-psychiatry’s claim to be for ‘all of us’ is troubled by her lack of access to her ‘inner journey’ despite being far ‘madder’ than Charles the amnesiac.

Although Laing is advocating this ‘inner journey’ not only for the mentally ill but for ‘all of us’, that ‘all’ does not appear to include the female schizophrenic. In The Politics of Experience Laing acknowledges that often one finds themselves in ‘inner space’ not through free will but through being ‘forced out of the “normal” world by being placed in an untenable position in it’ (136). Although this seemingly returns us to the madwomen Laing has left behind, still imprisoned (like Violet) in the untenable familial structures of Sanity, Madness and the Family, his closing comments in Politics of Experience are far from optimistic or prescriptive for the schizophrenic and he can only hope that those ‘treatments’ designed to cure will, in some cases, fail – this is, of course, not the case for Charles Watkins who, at the end of the book, assents to electro-convulsion shock therapy and is thus ‘shocked’ back to ‘normality’. Neither is it the case for Violet Stoke who, it appears, remains institutionalised: her experience firmly in the order of the ‘schizophrenic’ and not the ‘transcendental’. Briefing demonstrates that while conventional psychiatric discourses serve to maintain and perpetuate a
normative sex/gender system, anti-psychiatry, despite its claim to be a ‘gender neutral’, ‘universal’, ‘perfectly natural’ process for all, likewise relies upon normative constructions of sex/gender and in doing so bars the madwomen so central to its original formulations of the experience of madness from the rewards of the journey through ‘inner space’ to psychic enlightenment.

Both of the narrative threads in Briefing (the journey through ‘inner space’ and the ‘real’ world narrative) emphasise how anti-psychiatry’s re-imagining of madness relies upon an ability to transcend the limitations of the corporeal body, despite the phenomenological mind/body unity it ostensibly upholds. Indeed, Laing’s use of the male, adventure-narrative serves to deny the importance of the mind/body unity that he stressed so forcefully in The Divided Self. I mentioned in Part Three the lack of attention the body is afforded in The Politics of Experience and there supplemented Laing’s text with Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the ‘lived body’ to help frame the very clear (if difficult to achieve) mind/body unity presented in The Four-Gated City. In Briefing, however, there appears to be a greater awareness of – and critique of – this shift in Laing’s focus: that is, from the body as central to achieving a higher plane of consciousness to the ‘transcendental experience’. Although Briefing does include a gesture towards this sense of unity and connectedness between all humanity, most explicitly expressed in terms of the crystal sphere that finally accepts and envelopes Charles, it is not expressed specifically in terms of a mind/body unity as it is in The Four-Gated City. The novel reflects (on) Laing’s suggestion in The Politics of Experience that the achievement of enlightenment if predicated on transcending the body by foregrounding the material, female body that The Politics of Experience disregards. At the end of the novel it is Violet – the female schizophrenic body – who stands out from the picture/text:

This person who refuses to conform to the conventions of the picture the artist has set him in, questions and in fact destroys the convention. It is as if the artist said to himself: I suppose I’ve got to paint this kind of picture, it is expected of me – but I’ll show them. As you stand and gaze in, all the rest of the picture fades away, the charmers in their smiles and flounces, the young heroes, the civilization, all those dissolve away because of that long straight gaze from the one who looks back out of the
Violet then, with her ‘long straight gaze’, appears at the end of the narrative to stare out from the pages of the book. At the end of the novel Charles, the ‘young[ish] hero[]’, and the civilizations and places he has seen in his ‘inner space’ (the ancient city of his ‘inner space’ and the cosmic realm of gods) ‘fade[]’ away. Watkins does not fulfil Laing’s journey or his ‘cosmic’ mission. His Laingian journey fails and with it the grand narratives that informed his inner voyage are never realised. Charles returns to his wife and his children and his career. At the same time, Violet remains where she, it seems, belongs – institutionalised, neither able to access the ‘inner journey’ to enlightenment nor adapt herself to a coherent, legitimate gender identity. And yet she stares out from the canvas/page, destabilising the rest of the painting/narrative, calling attention to herself and, in ‘refus[ing] to conform […] questions and in fact destroys the convention’. Violet, like the other female bodies in the text, raise questions about Charles’s claim to transcendence as well as anti-psychiatry’s claim to gender neutrality. This adds a further dimension to King’s argument that Briefing contains an ‘implicit feminism’: I argue that it also offers a powerful critique of the gender bias inherent in Laing’s theory of the ‘inner journey’ as the saving grace for all.

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Briefing is, on the surface, the most straightforwardly anti-psychiatric of all Lessing’s novel. It follows, almost to the letter, the experience of journeying into one’s inner space as mapped out in The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise. However, the text also foregrounds the female bodies that seemingly have no recourse to Laing’s transcendental journey through ‘inner space’. Through Charles’s encounters with the female (metaphorical and real) the text exposes and unravels the bases upon which the male adventurer can access this ‘inner space’. These women not only call attention to the ways in which their own
bodies are constructed but, in doing so, expose how the construction of the male transcendent self is intricately bound up with her exclusion from spiritual enlightenment. In revealing the sex/gender assumptions underlying this narrative of the transcendental experience, *Briefing* poses a challenge to the supposed universality of the ‘inner journey’ and its ability to include women’s experience. Anti-psychiatry’s seeming unwillingness to risk structures of gender and sexuality means that in order to re-imagine madness as healing, as in fact *sanity* – the ‘inner journey’ that will salvage mankind – Laing must abandon the madwomen of his previous case studies with her troublesome gendered embodiment and replace her with the transcendent universal *male* hero.

Although it may seem as if the novel is anti-psychiatric not only in spirit (as *The Four-Gated City* is) but also in the minuteness of its content which is so strikingly similar to Laing’s and Jesse’s respective accounts of the ‘inner journey’, this is, in fact, the text that expresses the *least* amount of hope and confidence in the ability for anti-psychiatry to change the way women experience madness. Whilst in *The Golden Notebook* Anna is left still pushing her boulder, inching her way up the mountain, however little progress she makes, and while in *The Four-Gated City* Lessing offers an alternative vision of the future, however tentative, in *Briefing* she ends with a journey only half realised and a man returning to his patriarchal and professional sphere of knowledge and power, while a young girl stares out mournfully, if potentially disturbingly, from the confines of the institution. If there is hope in this novel it is not in the madness of Charles or in the schizophrenia of Violet, but in the methodical *remembering* of Rosemary Baines and Frederick Lawson – that is, in the recognition of self in other, in patterns of being, in a shared history – all of which occurs outside of madness. Despite Lessing’s long and detailed examination of the potential of madness/anti-psychiatry over three novels and nine years, *Briefing* ends with the suggestion that, without attending to the ‘matter’ of sex/gender constructions, ‘it is all a load of old socks’.  

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3 From herein referred to as Briefing.


6 Laing, p. 108 and p. 11.

7 Bert Kaplan’s The Inner World of Mental Illness (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) also includes extracts from John Perceval’s Narrative of the Treatment Experienced by a Gentleman During a State of Mental Derangement. See pp. 235-253.

8 Lessing, The Four-Gated City, p. 566.

9 Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell [1971] (Herts and London: Granada, 1982), p. 11. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

10 The Politics of Experience is in part composed from lectures and essays from the early 1960s and therefore summarises much of the two earlier texts. See Laing’s ‘Acknowledgements’, pp. 9-10, for further details on the origins of each chapter. Chapter Seven, ‘A Ten Day Voyage’, is the case study on Jesse Watkins’s ‘inner journey’ and was first published in Views, 8 (1965) (10).


14 Karl Jaspers’s patient’s gender is not specified in the account or in Laing’s discussion but reference to Jaspers’s General Psychopathology: Volume I, trans. by J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997) confirms that this is a male patient: see p. 417.

15 Laing, The Politics of Experience, p. 112.


18 These are: The Wind from Nowhere (1962, later disowned by Ballard), The Drowned World (Ballard’s first ‘major’ novel, 1962), The Drought (1965), and The Crystal World (1966).

19 The Angle Between Two Walls (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p. 50. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

20 Most obviously in the use of the mandala at the centre of the ruined city in Watkins’s ‘inner space’. See Jung’s Man and His Symbols, pp. 228-278.


22 It is, however, included in the most recent edition of the novel: Briefing for a Descent into Hell (New York: First Vintage International, 2009).


29 Grosz, p. 33.

30 Grosz, p. 33.

31 Grosz, p. 36.


34 Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 22.


37 *Men, Women and Madness: Understanding Gender and Mental Disorder* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1996), p. 22. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

38 Busfield writes that ‘dementia is categorised as senile for those aged 65 and over and as pre-senile for persons under 65’ (22).

39 Chesler, pp. 87-94.

40 *Doris Lessing* (London and New York: Edward Arnold, 1989), p. 56. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


42 Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 66.

43 Grosz, p. 42.


45 *The Second Sex*, trans. by H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 177. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.


47 They are later identified as Felicity, his wife; Constance/Conchita/Konstantina, his mistress/lover; and Vera, a peripheral character in the Konstantina/war narrative which he writes while he is hospitalized – he later tells Violet he might have married Vera.


49 Beauvoir, p. 177.


52 Lessing, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, p. 230.
Conclusion

The future was not going to be a continuation of the immediate past, with this summer seeming in retrospect like an unimportant hiatus. No, the future would continue from where she had left off as a child. For it was seeming to her more and more (because of this sexuality, something displaced, like an organ lifted out of her body and laid by her side to look at, like a deformed child without function or future or purpose) as if she were just coming round from a spell of madness.

Doris Lessing, *The Summer before the Dark* (1973)

I have known more than once what it is to accept the failure, final and irreversible, of an effort or experiment to do with creatures who have within themselves the potential for development dreamed of, planned for … and then – Finis! The end! The drum pattering out into silence…

Doris Lessing, *Shikasta* (1979)

‘Finis! The end!’ begins Lessing’s 1979 science fiction novel *Shikasta*.¹ This novel marks Lessing’s break with the ‘inner space fiction’ of her ‘madness novels’ as they give way to the ‘outer space’ fiction of her *Canopus in Argos* series (1979-1983). However, even here, madness remains a recurring theme and many of the rebellious women who appear in the latter half of *Shikasta* are ensnared within discourses of madness – Lynda Coldridge even reappears, still ‘mad’ but still surviving.² Between *Briefing* and *Shikasta* there are two other ‘madness novels’, *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), and although these texts explore the idea of different levels of consciousness they are very different from the three ‘madness novels’ that so explicitly, and initially so hopefully, engage with Laing’s radical ideas about the ‘nature’ of madness. *The Summer Before the Dark*, in many ways, revisits the feminine, domestic (and Jungian) madness of ‘To Room Nineteen’ (1963) but, like the more Laingian novels, does advocate the confrontation of one’s madness...
from outside of the nuclear family structure, which both Lessing and Laing have
demed so damaging, as well as from outside of the psychiatric establishment. In
*The Memoirs of a Survivor* the unnamed narrator’s sliding in and out of different
levels of consciousness is fascinating, but it is not ‘madness’ as such and not the
novel’s primary theme which is already looking towards the *Canopus in Argos*
series and the narrative of humanity’s destructive past and future. Although
Lessing’s particular understanding of madness, influenced by Laing but not
determined by him, does not disappear from her work, its prevalence and
significance to her radical humanist project appears to diminish. Lessing’s period
of sustained engagement with madness and, in particular, the potential of madness
as suggested in Laing’s anti-psychiatric texts, begins hopefully with *The Golden
Notebook* and largely ends with the much more pessimistic *Briefing*. At the
beginning of *Shikasta*, Johor ‘reports’ that he knows what it is to ‘accept failure,
final and irreversible, of an effort or experiment’ (13). This could easily refer to
Lessing’s efforts to translate Laing’s ‘gender neutral’ theories into women’s
experience over the course of her ‘madness novels’. However, while ultimately
Lessing is unable to fully reconcile his theories and her heroines’ embodied
experience, by so closely and thoroughly engaging with Laing’s three core texts
her novels do not simply chart the rise and fall of the anti-psychiatry movement,
but may actually account for and explain its failure.

In *Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness* (1991), Jane Ussher
writes that to read the work of Laing and his fellow anti-psychiatrists ‘one would
imagine that the mad person was gender-neutral, when we know that women
make up a large percentage of those who are positioned within the discourses of
madness’. Ussher writes that this ‘blindspot’ only served to perpetuate the
oppression that madwomen suffered from within psychiatric/psychoanalytical
discourses and argues that ‘it was the feminist critics who redressed the balance’
(157). I would argue that it was Lessing, more so than Juliet Mitchell or Phyllis
Chesler or even Ussher herself, who most effectively served to ‘redress[] the
balance’: by ‘fleshing out’ the madwomen Laing so easily ‘neutralised’ in his case
studies and exposing the sex/gender bias underlying his assumptions about the
body, Lessing not only disseminated the ideas behind anti-psychiatry but also
exposed its limitations for the madwomen it proposed to save. Throughout her ‘madness novels’, Lessing repeatedly confronts the difficulties of translating anti-psychiatric theories into female experience and it becomes clear that the site of resistance is the female body, a body which is never ‘gender neutral’ and which is always troubled by discourses of sex/gender. In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz writes that ‘far from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles’. Between Laing’s theories and Lessing’s fiction one encounters the body – female and male – as a ‘site of contestation’ in their ‘intellectual struggles’ to make madness not only comprehensible but to re-imagine madness as not ‘illness’ but as ‘healing’ and as a gateway to another way of seeing, of being, and, ultimately, of evolving. The body, according to Butler, cannot ever be known outside of discourse and its sex materializes out of the reiteration of the norms prescribed to it by the sex/gender system. Whether the body is conceptualised by way of the ‘lived body’ or the ‘inscriptive’ approach (that is, a body inscribed by the psychic imaginary or by current socio-political discursive systems and practices) it is, as Grosz writes, ‘always already sexually coded’ (36). Thus, any claim to ‘supposedly neutral, sexually indifferent or universal […] knowledges or truths’ about the body must be interrogated to reveal the ways in which female bodies are un-represented or mis-represented, while the male body is taken as the paradigm for all bodies. This is, intentionally or not, Lessing’s project in her ‘madness novels’.

Initially anti-psychiatric ideas seemed to open up new ways to think not only about madness but about the very nature of constructions of selfhood. By dissociating madness from the biological and attending to an individual’s particular sense of ‘being-in-the-world’, including the socio-political structures that make up the world (beginning with the nuclear family), Laing thus opened up new ways to consider not only the prevalence of schizophrenia but also the ways in which madness intersects with constructions of sex/gender. While Laing’s work remained silent on this subject, however, feminist critics sought to extricate the sex/gender politics from the case studies and the narratives he included in his books, particularly those narratives in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Likewise,
Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* ‘fleshed out’ these madwomen in the figures of Anna Wulf and Ella, and through them explored the potential of Laing’s theories for women.

In *The Golden Notebook* the conventional discourses of madness – medical and psychoanalytical – are gradually disentangled from the way in which Anna perceives her ‘madness’. As they reveal themselves to be inadequate she reconceptualises her experiences in terms similar to those articulated in Laing’s *The Divided Self*. However, Anna’s inability to sustain a state of schizoid disembodiment and the difficulties of her relationship with Saul reveal the ways in which Laing’s ‘gender neutral’ theories struggle to account for women’s embodied experience. By using anti-psychiatric discourses of madness to examine the ‘nature’ of the madwoman’s divided self, the novel must also go beyond Laing and contest his theories, recognising the ways in which ‘woman’ as a discursive construct has been thoroughly bound to the body half of the Cartesian mind/body division. As the text closes, Anna has her moment of illumination but she does not suddenly become ‘sane’ just as she does not suddenly become a ‘free woman’. Rather, from within her sense of division and from within the sex/gender system, she negotiates, compromises and continues to push against those gendered discourses that inscribe upon her body a gendered subjectivity that she wishes to resist.

In *The Four-Gated City*, Lessing again confronts the problem of the female body but this time she seeks ways to extricate her heroine from the discourses that bind her to the body and which hinder Anna’s attempts to fully realise the potential of her breakdown. Just as Anna disentangles herself from the conventional discourses of madness, so Martha disentangles herself from the conventional discourses of womanhood, including the maternal and the sexual. She does this not by trying to change those discourses of womanhood, as Anna does in her attempts to become a ‘free woman’, but in removing herself from the structures that perpetuate those discourses: the nuclear family, the mother-daughter relationship, heterosexual relationships – even society as a whole. In particular, Lessing sees women’s madness as closely bound up with the nuclear family structure and expresses the need to rethink the kinds of social structures
and discursive practices which cause individuals to commit violence against each other and on each succeeding generation: a violence that, as Martha demonstrates, inscribes itself upon the body and the psyche.

By the end of *The Four-Gated City* Martha is able to re-inscribe her body so that it no longer signifies in terms of her sex/gender but in terms of her psychic potential – as energy, as power – and in terms of an inclusive and united materiality and spirituality. But, ultimately, Lessing can only realise this re-inscription by isolating Martha from all present social structures and the violence they propagate. While Anna remains pushing her boulder slowly up the mountain from within those structures, Martha’s mountain is eradicated in a catastrophe that largely wipes out those structures. In bringing down the mountain, *The Four-Gated City*, if tentatively, allows humanity to begin again and imagine itself as ‘something new’. In doing so, the novel suggests that humanity’s future rests not simply on re-imagining madness and embarking upon ‘mad’ ‘inner journeys’, but equally on the dismantling – or complete destruction – of a social order predicated on discourses of difference and exclusion and notions of ‘legitimate’ intelligibility.

In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Lessing looks forward to the same post-apocalyptic/evolutionary narrative as that featured in *The Four-Gated City* but this narrative remains in the future – foretold (by the cosmic representative, Merc Ury) but not yet realised. And so, Charles Watkins’s journey into his ‘inner space’ is told, once more, from within current socio-political structures, including current (conventional) psychiatric models of madness, specifically the medical. As a male body, Charles’s madness is figured in very different ways to Anna’s and Lynda’s, both from within the conventional discourses of madness and within the ‘inner space’ they can access only with such difficulty. In *The Politics of Experience*, Laing re-imagines madness as the transcendent ‘inner journey’ that can salvage mankind and in doing so replaces the ‘gender neutral’ schizophrenics (madwomen) of his previous texts with a new ‘gender neutral’ brave voyager (madman). Lessing, by employing the same male, adventure-narrative that Laing uses to articulate his new imagining of madness, exposes the ‘male body’ behind Laing’s ‘gender neutral’ voyager and draws attention to those pervasive
constructions of the reproductive and ‘(un)natural’ female body upon which his ‘masculine transcendence’ depends. In doing so she also exposes the male body-paradigms that underpin anti-psychiatric ‘knowledges and truths’ – those supposedly ‘universal’ conceptions of madness, subjectivity and embodiment (including, crucially, mind/body unity) – and her texts suggest that Laing’s sex/gender indifference conceals a phallogocentrism that maintains his own male interests through the mind/body divide and its gendered associations.

Anti-psychiatry’s promise of liberation and freedom for the madwomen of The Divided Self and Sanity, Madness and the Family is therefore never fully realised either in the psychiatric establishment Laing was working to reform/replace or, it seems, in Lessing’s novels. Once Lessing translates his ‘gender neutral’ theories into embodied experience, gendered discourses reassert themselves and re-entangle the female schizophrenic within the ‘madness’ of the sex/gender system that inscribes itself upon her body. Lessing’s ‘madness novels’ emphasise the futility of attempting to deconstruct the sanity/madness binary while refusing to trouble those sex/gender systems inextricably entwined with it through the associative binary mind/body. In the end, Laing’s re-imagining of madness – and its rewards – appears to be applicable only to those who can attempt to claim ‘gender neutrality’: the archetypal transcendent masculine intelligence. The Cartesian mind/body division that was so crippling in The Divided Self, once more comes into play as the ‘schizophrenic experience’ gives way to the ‘transcendental experience’. In engaging with the evolution of his theories from divided selves and madwomen to transcendent selves and male voyagers, Lessing’s texts expose and interrogate the sex/gender assumptions upon which anti-psychiatry founds its ‘knowledges’.

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In 1975, as Lessing moved away from the ‘theme’ of madness, Marguerite Duras spoke out about women and madness:

And that madness – talking to animals, trees, that part of themselves which suffocates and explodes, that transference – you find it in all
women. [...] Of course women express this neurosis differently in our day. They no longer talk to animals or trees. [...] Madness has found other expressions, but it is still there. It is still the same madness.8

Schizophrenia is not as prevalent today as it was in the 1960s – in the cultural imagination it has been replaced with other types of ‘female’ madness of which the most common are, tellingly, caught up with the body: anorexia nervosa and bulimia.9 In fact, these are barely seen as ‘madness’ they have become so prevalent. As Susie Orbach writes in Bodies (2009), ‘eating problems and body distress now constitute an ordinary part of everyday life for many people’10 – particularly for women (although not exclusively). But however common, it is still madness, and if it is ‘the same madness’ just in ‘other expressions’, then Lessing’s indictment of the sex/gender politics underlying constructions of ‘madness’, through her engagement with Laing, might still be relevant to current debates about the ‘nature’ of women’s madness. In The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change, one of the most rigorous and unflinching accounts of contemporary feminism published this century, Angela McRobbie writes:

As the British Medical Establishment put it, ‘today’s young woman is expected to strive for perfection in all spheres’ but, the report continues, ‘achieving and maintaining a feminine identity doubly compromises the mental health of females’ (BMA 2000). Thus it is acknowledged that seeking to achieve a feminine identity makes women and girls ill. Being, as Butler would have it, ‘culturally intelligible’ as a girl makes one ill. But by today’s standards, that is almost acceptable. The forces of social regulation operate in this context to normalise the post-feminist scenario, so as to avert the possibility of questions being asked of the sort associated with second wave feminism and certainly questions like those asked by Butler.11

Almost fifty years after the publication of The Golden Notebook and Laing’s The Divided Self, and women are still divided, still striving to be ‘culturally intelligible’, still striving to embody a legitimate gender identity – and it is still making them ‘ill’. And that ‘illness’ is ‘almost acceptable’, almost normal; it has become part of the construct of female identity. Although Lessing was, ultimately, unable to reconcile Laing’s anti-psychiatric theories with women’s
embodied experience in her novels, her attempts to do so constitute a thorough examination into the ways in which constructions of madness and constructions of sex/gender intersect and complicate one another. As such, Lessing’s ‘madness novels’ might yet provide a valuable contribution to continuing contemporary debates about the ‘nature’ of women’s madness. The potential in Lessing’s engagement with Laing is perhaps still to be realised: it is not yet ‘Finis!’.

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