

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

4-1-2013

Lost in the Labyrinth: Review of *I Think I Am: Philip K. Dick* by Laurence A. Rickels

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, gerard.canavan@marquette.edu

Accepted version. *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Spring 2013): 175-178. DOI. © 2013
Duke University Press. Used with permission.

Gerry Canavan

Review of Laurence A. Rickels, *I Think I Am: Philip K. Dick*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
for *Novel*

In the last part of his three-volume study *Nazi Psychoanalysis* (2002), Laurence A. Rickels established a definition for what he calls “psy fi”: that overlapping cultural nexus where science fiction, psychoanalysis, psychosis, psychological warfare, and the growing technologization of the self all meet and begin to merge with one another. As suggested by the title of the larger project, *Psy Fi* takes “Germanicity” as the horizon of futurity, not only as “the open book of evil politics”—all our contemporary dystopias transfigured mediations on Nazi Germany—but also in the sense that “investments to this day in maintaining the good war as ongoing frame of reference necessarily require that Nazi Germany keep on winning.” American geopolitical ascendancy requires the dead Nazi threat as its uncanny double, its vitalizing, justifying other. In this way “psy fi” employs Germany as a token both of the past and of the future, as well as a hidden shadow of the present.

Now, in *I Think I Am: Philip K. Dick*, Rickels applies this proposed super-genre to an exhaustive survey of the legendary writer of science fiction. Reading only the words “psy fi,” one immediately thinks of Dick, whose voluminous body of work is defined by precisely these sorts of paranoid speculations, divided selves, psychotic breaks, and reality breakdowns—as well as by a lifelong preoccupation both with the Nazis and with Germanicity more generally. Rickels’s title, an obvious play on Descartes’s famous *cogito*, functions as a summary of the overawing thematic preoccupation that crops up time and time again in Dick, well past the point of obsession: “I *think* I am (but I really can’t be sure).” But, as Rickels admits with some professed embarrassment in the first pages of *I Think I Am*, he began reading Dick only quite late. Having been told for so long that he absolutely *must* be drawing his ideas from Dick’s fiction, Rickels, in a kind of transparent reaction formation, for decades refused to read him at all. Now broken down, Rickels makes up for lost time by reading *all* of Dick, touching on almost every one of Dick’s published and unpublished novels over the course of *I Think I Am*’s 400 pages. And this of course is the second pun embedded in Rickels’s evocative title: a tight, even excessive identification with Dick (“I think I am Philip K. Dick”).

Over the years that Rickels refused to read Dick his position in the culture at large has grown considerably. At least a dozen of his novels and stories have been adapted into films like *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, and *Minority Report*, with at least a dozen other unacknowledged, quasi-plagiarized descendents. Fredric Jameson’s once extravagant characterization of Dick as “the Shakespeare of science fiction” now seems prescient in both aspects: not only has Dick come to stand almost unchallenged within the realm of science fiction literature as the master of the form, but his works have earned increasing stature within the mainstream literary canon as well. The Library of America has published his thirteen most important novels in three hardcover volumes, the first such release for a writer of science fiction. A generally obscure writer of science fiction novels during his lifetime—well-known in science fiction and counterculture circles, but largely unknown outside these groups—Dick is now among the best known and most studied writers of his generation, making frequent appearances on contemporary literature syllabi in English departments and “best of” lists in the popular press.

Dick presents significant interpretative problems for critics. Forty-five years after Roland Barthes declared the death of that slippery and inscrutable figure, the Author, the Author nevertheless persists at the center of critical practice. And Dick's tumultuous personal life frequently intrudes upon the autonomy of his literary works, almost to the point of exclusion: his lifelong preoccupation with his twin sister, who died in infancy; his many troubled relationships, including five marriages; his drug use; his various psychiatric diagnoses, none of which is wholly satisfying or sufficiently explanatory; and most importantly the hallucinogenic "VALIS experience" that Dick would spend the last decade of his life futilely trying to unravel. VALIS ("Vast Active Living Intelligence System") was Dick's name for an entity which he believed contacted him in February and March of 1974, a belief that was eventually translated to his religious VALIS trilogy and which today is understood as a genuine mystical experience, a full-on psychotic break, and an amusing, self-conscious literary hoax—or perhaps all three—depending on which of Dick's critics one asks. The problem of studying Philip K. Dick is little different today than it was in 1975, when Stanislaw Lem wrote that (in contrast with most authors, or Authors) "Philip K. Dick does not lead his critics an easy life, since he does not so much play the part of a guide through his phantasmagoric worlds as he gives the impression of one lost in their labyrinth." Critical readers of Dick frequently become unmoored between attempts to use psychiatric diagnosis to unlock the secret of Dick's novels and attempts to use Dick's novels to unlock the secret of his diagnosis.

Rickels's take on this problem is a clever one: he seeks to return diagnosis-making agency to Dick himself. Because "the unhousing or unhinging of reality—the crisis of uncanniness" requires a singular subject/mind to "be legible as world," Rickels "gives priority to the legible borderline passing through psychosis along which Dick unfolds his thought experiments on the way to giving them form." But what ultimately makes Dick's writing "psy fi" is not just the presence of this metaphysical and metapsychological themes but also, crucially, *self-analysis*, the key discursive mode that unites science fiction, psychoanalysis, and memoirs of psychosis. Rickels attempts to find his way out of Dick's labyrinth by focusing on Dick as the agent of his own psychoanalysis, which means returning to those theoretical and practical studies in psychoanalysis which "Dick would or could or should have read." Thus, in the first part of the *I Think I Am*, we come at Dick (or out of Dick) through Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, as well as through Freud's reading of Schreber, as well as Dick's reading of Freud. In Dick's hands Schreber's illness immediately becomes science fictionalized as perhaps not illness at all, but as potential contact with a macrocosmic world beyond empirical comprehension—precisely the move Dick himself makes with respect to his own VALIS experience. Dick's is a world where, even if psy fi isn't already real, it threatens to become so at any moment.

Later chapters track Dick's encounters—both as documented within his lectures and nonfiction writing and within the huge, largely unpublished personal journal called the *Exegesis* which housed Dick's philosophical and psychological speculations about VALIS, as well as only speculated by Rickels—with such thinkers as Carl Jung, Ludwig Biswanger, and Gotthard Günther, as well as Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jameson, and Derrida (in one literary-philosophical register) and Faust, Tolkien, Asimov, and *The Matrix* (in another). Note, crucially, the prominence of Germans on that list; Rickels reveals Dick as a kind of amateur Germanist.

At times Dick himself recedes into the background of Rickels's study, seemingly forgotten, only to reemerge time and again in a new novelistic discourse on psychoanalytic themes. For Rickels Dick becomes less a novelist than a companion theorist, working through

the same issues in a (semi-)fictional mode, employing science fictional tropes like *precogs*, *andys*, and *half-life* to poke at the limits of experience and self-knowledge in the hopes of ultimately passing beyond.

In pursuit of this metaphysical transcendence *I Think I Am* provides little in the way of traditional argumentative signposting, offering up no single “big idea” and relying instead on loose thematic groupings for its organizational logic. Its free-flowing, winding, seemingly undirected path—combined with Rickels’s writerly penchant for allusion, quotation, puns and wordplay, and autobiographical diversion—results in a volume that is almost useless as an introduction to either Dick or modern psychoanalytic theory but *incredibly* useful for scholars already familiar with these concepts and looking for new insights and a novel approach. The gathering of Rickels’s wide-ranging, encyclopedic archive is by itself an important contribution to scholarship, completely independent of his smart readings of Dick and psychoanalysis.

In fact barriers to entry are in some sense a deliberately crafted feature of the text. Rickels writes with a confidence that one has read his other works—and the work on which that other works is based, and the work on which that is based—that can alienate the novice. Likewise, Rickels’s own style can at times be quite alienating, especially before one has grown used to it. In his introduction to *Psy Fi*, Benjamin Bennett suggests that Rickels’s unique style should be thought of neither as *theory* nor as *practice*, but as *performance*—as, indeed, a kind of tour de force of association, elaboration, expansion, and improvisation. This is something like criticism in the mode of the novel, or (better) perhaps dramatic monologue. “In other words, as long as you expect Rickels to do something for you—to teach you, to improve you, to take you somewhere—as long as you insist on something ‘positive,’ you will be disappointed,” Bennett notes. The journey is itself the destination. “You are never going to have all of this book anyway. The way you in fact are, as yourself, named, scarred, broken, accidental, radically compromised, like modernity *itself*, is how this book wants its reader, and how you, the reader, want the book.”

This aesthetic is, if anything, even more operative in *I Think I Am* than in *Nazi Psychoanalysis*. Notably, the book has neither a conclusion nor a proper introduction; it has, rather, an “introjection,” suggesting both an interruption/intervention into a discourse that is already ongoing as well as the psychological process by which the subject internalizes thoughts and habits from others into oneself. Rickels clearly introjects Dick, in both senses; likewise, we as readers introject *Rickels*, entering this book without a roadmap and thus becoming completely beholden to its whims and flows—riding a wave of thought that belongs a third to Rickels, a third to Dick, and a third to modernity itself. In this way *I Think I Am* is perhaps best read, unexpectedly, as the true object of its own self-analysis, Rickels in the end replicating Dick’s own dual status as both the builder of the labyrinth and the one who is trapped within it.

Gerry Canavan
Marquette University

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image—Music—Text*. Tr. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill & Wang, 1978.

Jameson, Fredric. "Futurist Visions that Tell us About Right Now," *In These Times* 6:23 (May 5-11, 1982).

Lem, Stanislaw. "Philip K. Dick: A Visionary Among the Charlatans." Tr. Robert Abernathy. *Science Fiction Studies* 2.1 (March 1975).

Rickels, Laurence A. *I Think I Am: Philip K. Dick*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

---. *Psy Fi. Nazi Psychoanalysis*, Vol. III. Introduction by Benjamin Bennett. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.