



Nazi Psychoanalysis

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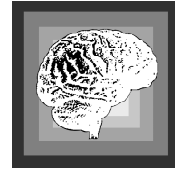
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Essay Review

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Laurence A. Rickels. **Nazi Psychoanalysis**. 3 vols, with a foreword by Benjamin Bennett. *Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Pp. xx + 346, xxii + 332, xxiii + 346. ISBN 0-8166-3697-4, 0-8166-3699-0, 0-8166-3701-6.*

Nazi Psychoanalysis poses a challenge to any book reviewer writing in an academic journal devoted to history. This is because book reviews have generally been understood to be critical tools that help us, if not ‘discover’ historical truths, then at least discern more plausible explanations or evoke greater understanding of historical phenomenon. Yet reviewers of Rickels’ three-volume opus risk seeing their efforts fail to contribute much in the way of enhanced plausibility or expanded understandings, because Rickels’ work subverts the very aims that book reviews are designed to achieve. One can perhaps turn the canons of literary criticism on his work with some effect, but to critique that work as history borders on the banal, because it assumes Rickels is something that he is not: an historian of psychoanalysis.

Rickels presents the fruits of his literary labours in a trilogy, each volume being patched together around a general theme. Volume I is entitled ‘Only Psychoanalysis Won the War’ and returns to World War I theories of shell-shock and war-neurosis in order to delve into concepts of psychological warfare. The second volume has the title ‘Crypto-Fetishism’ and explores the degree to which the ‘Nazi moral system’ parallels that of psychoanalysis, particularly in their common projection and protection of homosexuality. The final volume (‘Psy Fi’) explores ways in which Nazi Germany imagined and expressed itself through technology and science fiction or fantasy.

However, to summarize Rickels’ work in this way is misleading, because it

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suggests thematic focus and narrative coherence. It would be more accurate to say that each volume is a collection of eclectic readings, subjective interpretations and performative takes on various psychoanalytic topics. Rickels' writing involves deploying a wealth of psychoanalytic themes and then – with the help of his considerable powers of language and imagination – associating, interweaving and juxtaposing them with twentieth-century Nazi and wartime culture. He roams widely and (care)freely, from shell-shock, propaganda, data encryption and the psy-op activities of military intelligence to homosexuality, the trauma of aerial bombardment, and the new psycho-cyborgian technologies that envelop plane pilots. No sooner has Rickels picked up one topic, than he abandons it again for another. In his 'excavation project' (I: 39), most chapters are only a few paragraphs long – just long enough to sustain his literary imagination, before he departs the scene for the next ad-libbed performance.

By the author's own account, *Nazi Psychoanalysis* is a:

long haul through tracts on war neurosis, military adjustment, and psychological warfare, all of which had been abandoned, now in the ditches of one world war, now inside the air-raid shelters of the other one, [that] leads to a reconstruction of what can be called to this day 'greater psychoanalysis'. By World War II, between the air-raid sheltering of the populace in a group-therapeutic mode and the intrapsychic wiring of the pilot to his machine, an axis of technologization was being followed, up through cybernetics (both in Gregory Bateson's sense of feedback and in Jacques Lacan's staging of the rearview mirror) all the way out to the fantasy horizon of science fiction, which is where this book begins again. (I: xviii)

For anyone who has not already put the book down in frustration, the most succinct description of what interests Rickels comes later, after 60 pages of self-confessed false starts:

There are continuities and contexts missing from any history of modernism that subsumes, under the category of discontinuity, all tension between its most protected or progressive sources and the aberrations on a mass scale that, via symptomatic or dialectic connection, still belong to modernism, but modernism beside itself. But there are direct hits of continuity, too. What's missing or not seen is always the side-effect of what psychoanalysis calls identification, which originates in trauma. Not to see or to 'Nazi' is what fills in the missing-continuities-and-contexts report. The histories of these missing entries, which are ultimately always into war, never really leave the corridor wars between different departments of psychological interventionism. (I: 61)

In other words, Rickels is interested in linking the history of psychoanalysis to Nazi Germany and in bridging the 1933/45 divide that, until recently, long dominated the historiographic literature. Rickels strives to associate and

concatenate almost anything that has a psychoanalytic dimension to it with Nazi and German culture. He envisions his work as reconnecting 'all the outposts of frontline intrapsychic theorization and treatment inside the orbit of the central psychotherapy institute in Berlin' (I: xvii). To his mind, mass culture in Nazi Germany was saturated with psychoanalytic ideas and interconnections. In other words, he strives to demonstrate that Germany was no exception when it comes to the broad expansion of psychoanalytic understanding that characterized developments in other twentieth-century cultures.

Rickels delights in wordplay. His performance is an aesthetics of the word. He revels in expounding on his materials, mixing his metaphors and drawing liberally on the vernacular of late twentieth-century California, where he teaches German and comparative literature. His chapters consistently carry such evocative titles as 'Gotta read Goette', 'Hi Ya Heidegger' and 'Suckarama'. One chapter is called 'DSM3rd Reich', although neither DSM nor the Third Reich figure in the chapter. He is completely enamoured with his association of 'Nazi' with 'Not see'. A few – but only a few – of these literary gymnastics have a serious side to them. The affiliation of not-seeing with Nazis refers to the blindness within the historiography of psychoanalysis to any association with Nazism and the implicit suggestion that this blindness is somehow indicative of Fascist inclinations.

On occasion, Rickels strays from his own literary principles and actually tries to (ab-)use language as a medium to communicate some information. Such is the case in the chapter 'Simulations', where he sketches the ideas of Binswanger, Gaupp, Nonne and others on war neurosis. Although at times the text is literally nothing more than a string of quotations, this and a few other chapters provide – *horribile dictu* – a summary of historical attitudes.

Rickels takes no prisoners when it comes to scholarly conventions. His performance makes no discernible distinction between method, narrative and subject matter. Given his associative, even flippant, narrative technique, why he even bothers occasionally to provide references to secondary literature is anyone's guess. The relationship between text and image in the book is tenuous at best. Although he has nothing to say about gas masks, the first volume is peppered with pictures of gas masks. For the most part, Rickels appropriates his protagonists and does as he pleases with them. In his deliberations on Rado – and others for that matter – there is far more Rickels than Rado. Indeed, this is not a book in which readers will learn much about the historical figures that one could expect to be included in a study of Nazi psychoanalysis. It is worth noting, for example, that key members of the psychoanalytic community in Nazi Germany are barely mentioned at all. According to the index, in the 1000 pages of Rickels' trilogy, Felix Boehm is mentioned on only 7 pages, Werner Kemper on 4 pages and Karl Müller-Braunschweig on 5 pages. That is about the same amount of attention that Rickels devotes to Walt Disney, Bram Stoker, Beate Uhse and H. G. Wells.

Not surprisingly, therefore, an enormous gap opens up between these volumes and the expectations that many readers will bring to them. If readers are to take anything historically meaningful away from Rickels, they will have to come to him either saturated with knowledge about twentieth-century psychoanalysis (and contemporary debates in literary criticism) or equipped with an especially ebullient imagination.

Rickels has no truck with other scholars in the field. In the introduction, he attacks Geoffrey Cocks and the second edition of his book on psychoanalysis in Nazi Germany (1997) for taking 'another look at the materials by the stolen fire of my work (admittedly reduced to a night-light by the shame of it)' and chastises academic historians and the 'small-change' (I: xix–xx) of their careerism. He shows essentially no interest in the work of Alexander and Margaret Mitscherlich, Regine Lockot or Peter Riedesser and Axel Verderber, preferring instead simply to 'zap the historians of the Nazi era of German psychotherapy out of the running commentary' (I: 37). If Rickels cannot be bothered to engage the work of these and other authors, he will hardly be in a position to object if others either take issue with the self-indulgence that pervades his writings or simply ignore them altogether. For readers who may be interested in Rickels' idea of 'greater psychoanalysis', but who cannot stomach the twists and turns of his postmodern roller coaster, Eli Zaretsky's recent study *Secrets of the Soul* (2004) will prove far more rewarding.

All of this is not to say that Rickels will leave readers wholly devoid of insight. He won't. But the problem for historians is that many of his insights might just as easily have been drawn from an imaginative reading of, say, Erwin Jaensch or Willy Hellpach (whom Rickels appears never to have heard of) – or, for that matter, the writings of any number of other twentieth-century German psychologists and psychotherapists. For much of what he describes as being part of 'greater psychoanalysis' in Nazi Germany might just as plausibly be subsumed under the rubric of 'greater psychology' or 'greater psychotherapy'. But, of course, this fails to bother Rickels much, because such historical contexts just do not show up on the horizon of his postmodern perch. Indeed, history matters little to him and he admits as much: he sees himself 'preparing neither a legal brief nor a history', but instead speaking before a 'court of mourning' (I: 99), whatever that might be. Whether he is speaking to a court that is mourning the losses attributable to Nazism or to psychoanalysis is not evident.

Nazi Psychoanalysis comes with high praise from two icons of postmodernism. On the cover blurb, Judith Butler describes it as 'marvelously witty, ironic, erudite, and original'. Fredric R. Jameson believes that Rickels has 'unearthed a mass of fascinating information' and that the book will 'constitute a provocative contribution to both psychoanalysis and to studies of Nazi Germany'. And Sander Gilman recommends the book as 'idiosyncratic and illuminating'. The book is certainly idiosyncratic. Whether it is illuminating is altogether another matter. Rickels will perhaps be illuminating to those

who have chiefly an aesthetic appreciation of language. Or to readers for whom psychoanalysis is the alpha and omega of their lives. And perhaps Rickels is illuminating in the sense that – to borrow some psychiatric jargon – a ‘Wortsalat’ is illuminating, i.e., in the sense that it teases with and provokes ‘modern’ or rational sensibilities. In any case, if illumination comes at all, it will come only to readers who have no pretensions to ‘understand’ what Rickels writes. Those in search of a coherent argument will be shunned by him at every turn. Perhaps, like a work of art, his book can be experienced, but it cannot be ‘understood’ in any conventional sense. Rickels’ volumes can be counted among those pervasive but invisible aesthetic shockwaves given off by the implosion of that aging red-giant-of-a-star called psychoanalysis. They may disturb the space and time through which they pass, but they will no longer illuminate very much.

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