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Traversing the Pink Light:

— A Lacanian Reading of Philip K. Dick's *VALIS* —

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1. Introduction

Philip K. Dick (1928–82)'s late-career novel, *VALIS* (1981), was maligned upon its release primarily as it appeared to be informed by the author's well-documented bouts with mental illness.¹ The novel's abrupt assertions, its sprawling structure, and its failure to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion to the questions it raises were often read as Dick's mental illness manifesting in text, rather than a deliberately implemented literary strategy. The uneasiness that critics expressed ranged from veiled criticism to outright hostility: As Umberto Rossi quotes from a Dick scholar, Eric S. Rabkin: "Why did Dick really write the *VALIS* trilogy? He said his writing was an attempt to make sense of his life, and often so is insanity. Frankly, I think he did go insane" (Rossi 186).

A significant source of the accusation that the novel is a product of mental illness rather than artistic intent is the lynchpin event of the novel: The protagonist, who is Dick himself, is inexplicably shot by a strange pink light, an event that is something that Dick insisted actually happened to him in real life. Dubbing it "2-3-74" by the date he claimed it happened, the event became an obsession for Dick in his final years.² A compounding factor is that, the novel's main narrative thrust is Horselover Fat's attempt to find meaning in the "2-3-74" event.

The question of how seriously to take *VALIS* is one several Dick scholars have struggled with; if they have not outright dismissed *VALIS*, they have attempted to integrate the text's dialect of validity and invalidity into their analysis, as seen in Christopher Palmer's reading of *VALIS*. Umberto Rossi, responding to Palmer's paper, reads *VALIS* not as an oscillation between truth and un-truth, but

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The novel was received negatively not only by Dick scholars such as Darko Suvin, who called *VALIS* "at best a half-success both ideationally and narratively" (Suvin), but also in other, non-literary circles where an essay published in *The Psychologist* refers to *VALIS* as "a novel based on delusions resulting from his own psychotic breakdown" (Luckhurst 13).

²

In 1974, Dick experienced a series of hallucinations referred to as "2-3-74," in reference to the dates they occurred. These hallucinations, including the pink light, are referenced explicitly in *VALIS*. Dick himself had taken the hallucinations seriously and believed them to be a sign from an entity called "Zebra," which he equates to God in *VALIS* (Arnold 2-4).

rather as oscillations between autobiography and fiction, and between religious science fiction and autobiographical fiction. Thus, Rossi argues, *VALIS* is not so much an assertion of the validity of the “2-3-74” event as it is an attempt to disrupt the binary between fiction and non-fiction.

However, as Roger Luckhurst argues, Dick’s trajectory as an author and individual was foregrounded with “an understanding of subjectivity that is always in the process of making itself up, alert to the alluring promise... of a final authoritative self-definition” (Luckhurst 5). A recurring theme of Dick’s oeuvre is the instability of subjectivity, and entire realities dissolving in horrifying matters can be seen even in his non-science fiction work, such as the fantasy short story, “Upon the Dull Earth.” Dick’s desperate attempts to arrive at a “single, definitive conclusion” is the core, unspoken element of his fiction that deals with ersatz realities and identities—an explicit example of the displaced Self becoming increasingly alienated from himself can be seen in *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), where the protagonist, Bob Arctor, becomes out of touch with the projected image on the videos he views to the point that he no longer recognizes him as himself. This alienation becomes even more pronounced *VALIS*, where the split of Self is not just a paranoid delusion of a drug-addled mind, but written into the very structure of the narrative. In the novel, Philip K. Dick splits himself into two other personas, Phil and Horselover Fat, the boundaries between the two becoming increasingly unstable until the very end of the novel.

Crucially, in *VALIS*, not only is external reality under threat, but the very coherence of the subject is already collapsed in the beginning pages of the novel. If, in previous texts, the collapse of reality was a threat that often brought them to a violent, apocalyptic end, it is a forgone conclusion in *VALIS*. Its protagonist, split and disoriented, attempts to reorient himself to obtain a degree of stability, directly mirroring the author’s experience. Here, the instability of the subject is not only a theme; it is written into the very structure when Dick introduces the conceit of being split into two characters.

This formal construction of *VALIS* is why textual analysis alone may be insufficient and supports a Lacanian psychoanalytic

approach.³ Lacan refutes the notion of the Cartesian subject, who exists because he thinks. Instead, the Lacanian subject exists where he does not think, and is irrecoverably split, constituted through alienation. The subject is not conceived through identification, but rather through the lack caused by a primal repression, and its continuous failures to stabilize itself from the unconscious lack it has. This notion of subjectivity closely aligns with Dick's works, which portray subjects whose realities and identities are fractured, broken, and unstable, especially in *VALIS*, which features a literally split subject as its protagonist. In a Lacanian perspective, the split is not a symptom to be cured, but rather viewed as a constitutive condition of subject formation. Thus Lacanian psychoanalysis is uniquely prepared to address the textual ruptures that characterize Dick's work, and is thus well-suited to analyze the fractured narrative structure of *VALIS* without falling into the error of definitive diagnosis.

Through this process, this paper does not aim to impose Lacan's theories on *VALIS* or to assert that the entire novel fits Lacanian psychoanalysis. While Dick had an interest in psychoanalysis, it was limited to the works of Freud and Jung. Furthermore, as much as he followed the development of psychiatry closely, he also had an acute sense of wariness towards practitioners, as is apparent in his portrayals of them in his work, which range from the comedic to the antagonistic.⁴ However, a Lacanian reading distinguishes itself from Freudian readings by going beyond psychoanalyzing the author. It focuses on the novel's formal instability and the literally "split subject" manifesting as Horselover Fat and Phil. Thus, Lacanian psychoanalysis can be used as a theoretical framework to analyze where *VALIS*'s narrative fragments, the precise areas in which it contradicts itself, and where it fractures.

The novel's reticence to assign a rational argument or reason for the occurrence of Dick's trauma and what he views as an irrational world is not limited to its insane protagonist; other characters who are ostensibly mentally fit go through the same processes, albeit in a more restrained manner. Dick's decision to make Fat's struggle influence and ultimately concern other, more rational characters is significant, as it relates to certain aspects of Lacanian

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There have been some Lacanian readings of Dick's works, as seen in Carl Freedman's analysis, which summarizes Dick's oeuvre as a series of portrayals of paranoia. Paranoia is an effective framework for analyzing Dick's early works, as they portray relatively stable individuals navigating a materially shifting reality, as Freedman writes: "If Dick's protagonists tend to be paranoid, there is always much for them to be paranoid about" (19). However, this argument loses its persuasiveness in the case of later, more realist works such as *VALIS*. While his earlier works depict clear antagonistic forces that seek to annihilate the protagonist or literally destroy their whole reality (such as in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965)), in Dick's realist works, these antagonistic forces become opaque, and their very existence is put into question.

4

This is especially pronounced in the final work of the *VALIS* trilogy, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1982). Whereas the confrontation between Maurice the therapist and Horselover Fat is darkly humorous, the psychiatrist of *Transmigration* is hostile towards its protagonist, Angel Archer, and weaponizes diagnosis to belittle her.

5

The subject is formed by the split that forms when a subject emerges as a speaking being. According to Lacan, this split, while alienating and traumatic, is a necessary process for the subject to exist, as the subject is the split itself (Fink 44-45).

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An example put forward by Slavoj Žižek in the film *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* directed by Sophie Fiennes, is the "Jew" as viewed by antisemites: To an antisemite, a Jewish person is both devilishly clever and also devoid of any intelligence: These contradictions elude the subject who possesses these thoughts, as the Jewish person for them occupies a position in their mind that they can project any of their desires, no matter how diametrical they are. Thus, it is devoid of meaning, as it means everything to the subject and nothing simultaneously.

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Using Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the sign and the signified and signifier, Lacan argued that a signifier is "a unique unit of being which, by its very nature, is the symbol of an absence" (*Écrits* 17), and that the relation between the signified and signifier is "always appear[ing] fluid, always ready to come undone" (Dor 39).

psychoanalysis. In a Lacanian view, trauma is a fundamental property of human existence, and, the advent of the subject itself is caused by a split between the subject and their mirror image. This necessarily traumatic experience renders the subject irreversibly alienated by the imaginary, ideal ego they see in the mirror.⁵ However, in the process of subject formation, there will inevitably be a kernel that escapes symbolization, unconsciously driving the subject. This signifier, often referred to as a void that resists symbolization, is what Lacan referred to in many other terms, such as the Real, the master signifier, or the *objet petit (a)*.⁶ The *objet petit (a)*, as the object-cause of desire, is what the subject's drives revolve around.⁷

This paper will argue that the Lacanian Real presents an interpretation that integrates the conundrum of the pink light with the often contradictory theories produced by its protagonist, Horselover Fat. Through this process, *VALIS* can be sublimated from its initial status as a failure caused by a psychotic break, to a work that portrays the tribulations of a subjectivity that attempts to stabilize itself in the face of trauma. In a Lacanian perspective, subjectivity itself is impossible to communicate. It constantly shifts, rendering it nonsensical—not just for Philip K. Dick but also for the so-called mentally stable individual. *VALIS*, inadvertently as it may be, serves as a compelling portrayal of this struggle and the fantasy that it is structured on. The numerous inconsistencies in the novel reflect our shifting subjectivity and the incessant sliding of metonymic desire, which Lacan referred to as "a signification that is always sliding, flying and fleeing" (*Formations of the Unconscious* 231). Through this analysis, this paper will highlight the parallels between Horselover Fat and Dick's fantasy in arriving at a self-definition, and how Dick resolves this tension not through wish fulfillment, but by repositioning the subject's relationship with his fantasy by "traversing" it.

2. The Nonsensical Pink Light and Its Inconsistencies

In the novel, Phil/Fat is shot by a light that is "pink," which Fat

describes as euphoric: He is obsessed with the pink light, and the narration states that “[h]e lived for that light, that one particular color” (Dick 15). He cannot find the pink light again despite his best attempts, and the narration dismisses it as “a symptom of Fat’s breakdown” (15). Nonetheless, Fat is undeterred in his attempts to recreate the pink light and seeks out the pink light, the non-recreateable experience, which echoes “the lost object,” the *objet petit (a)*.⁸

In conjunction with its role in the narrative as its driving force, and as Fat’s *raison d’être*, a crucial property of the pink light is that it is incomprehensible; it is an entirely random event that escapes any discernible reason. It also avoids commutability, as its color, though called pink, does not exist in the visible spectrum. Pink is only used as a form of approximation or placeholder to convey its appearance to the uninitiated. Its incomprehensibility leads Fat to reason that the light can only be an act of a particular entity that supersedes human reason, which he concludes to be God.

God, he told us, had fired a beam of pink light directly at him, at his head, his eyes; Fat had been temporarily blinded, and his head had ached for days...⁹ Fat was spiritually haunted by that color... He lived for that light, that one particular color.

However, he could never really find it again. Nothing could generate that color for light but God. In other words, normal light did not contain that color. One time, Fat studied a color chart, a chart of the visible spectrum. The color was absent. He had seen a color which no one can see; it lay off the end. (Dick 14–15)

The incomprehensibility of the pink light is to such a degree that not even Phil, the original personality, is aware of the light’s appearance. Thus, the pink light is a subjective experience to the point that only the fragmented persona of a fractured individual, Fat, is aware of the sensual properties of the light but unaware of any of the rational content of it. However, despite its incomprehensibility, or even because of it, the experience is as ecstatic as it is distressing, and he sets out to recreate or at least

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The *objet petit (a)* refers to the object-cause of desire, which “never was... [only having been] constituted as lost after the fact” (Fink 94). It is a kernel of the Lacanian Real that resists symbolization.

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The pink light, as it is written in *VALIS*, is written to be a violent, traumatic act, mirroring Žižek’s writing on the subject: “[T]rauma designates a shocking encounter which, precisely, DISTURBS this immersion into one’s life-world, a violent intrusion of something which doesn’t fit in” (Žižek, *Belief* 47). The pink light, and, by extension, God being depicted as a violent intruder, is repeated in the title of the next book in the *VALIS* trilogy, *The Divine Invasion* (1981).

explain it, whatever the cost. He attempts to trap the pink light within his symbolic framework and understand it by developing theories, attaching signifiers (theology, science fiction imagination, and a variety of other eclectic sources) to the void of his Real. Despite his best efforts, these theories have no logical consistency and only add to the confusion.¹⁰

While the pink light’s confusing nature frustrates Fat, it also drives him and becomes a twisted form of comfort. The pink light was the catalyst for his life breaking down, but it is the only thing that is keeping him alive. Everything he does from then on returns to the pink light, likened to a dog that constantly returns to its familiar territory:

During the years—outright years! —that he labored on his exegesis, Fat must have come up with more theories than there are stars in the universe. Every day he developed a new one, more cunning, more exciting and more fucked. God, however, remained a constant theme. Fat ventured away from belief in God the way a timid dog I once owned had ventured off its front lawn. He—both of them—would go first one step, then another, then perhaps a third and then turn tail and run frantically back to familiar territory. God, to Fat, constituted a territory which he had staked out. (29)

While Fat inevitably returns to his concept of God and the pink light, what God means to him is unclear. His understanding of God is in constant flux, and his concept of God is simultaneously that of the Christian God, a rational entity breaking into an irrational world, as well as Buddha, three-eyed people, and various other sources. His attempts to define what God means to him ultimately reflect the same failure of his attempt to define what the pink light is.

Fat’s preoccupation with the pink light is not limited to the exegesis’s writing: every conversation Fat has, and everything he does, eventually leads back to the pink light. He cannot refrain from continuing his mad theorizing, even when he tries to stop himself from talking about it, to protect himself and convince the people around him that he is sane. The scene in which Horselover Fat talks

with his therapist, the Christian fundamentalist, Maurice, is a comedic example. In his attempt to reason with Fat, Maurice begins talking about God and the Bible, but Fat, unable to stop himself, begins reciting absurd excerpts of his exegesis (90).

Maurice counters Fat's theories with his fundamentalist understanding of God, but it has no effect, as Fat's theories have mutated into absurdity. The words mean nothing to anybody else but him. One of the only concrete descriptions of this Horselover Fat's God appears in Fat's dream as a void (49).

The portrayal of God as a void, while most likely not intentional on Dick's part, is eerily reminiscent of Lacan's portrayal of the *objet petit (a)* as a void. Horselover Fat's God, like Lacan's *objet petit (a)* or the Real, is an empty space around which all the other signifiers revolve and occupies a privileged position in the subject's psyche. In addition, because of the many signifiers Fat attaches to the pink light/God, his emotional response to it becomes as muddled as his attempts to understand it logically.

The narrator is ostensibly Phil but also seems to adopt Fat's persona. His stance towards Fat's proliferation of theories oscillates wildly, unable to settle into a stable position.¹¹ A section that exemplifies this oscillation of positions is when Fat attempts suicide after his wife leaves him. Institutionalized, Fat encounters the eccentric Dr. Stone, who takes Fat's theories seriously, thus redeeming Fat's faith in himself. In the same chapter, the narration suggests that Fat has been cured, albeit only to a limited extent (67–69).

However, even before the scene starts, it is undercut by the sobering reality of Fat's house being foreclosed and his life collapsing around him immediately after his discharge from the hospital. Despite the narration stating that Fat had been healed, later in the chapter, it states something that is the direct opposite of what was written earlier (75–76).

Furthermore, after one of the more fantastical sections of Fat's *tractate* is quoted in which Fat writes of third-eyed people, the narrator writes, "By now Fat had finally lost touch with his reality" (107). However, in the following few paragraphs, the narration suddenly takes Fat's theories and fantasies seriously. The narration

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In his essay, "Postmodernism and the Birth of the Author in Philip K. Dick's 'Valis,'" Christopher Palmer characterizes *VALIS*'s employment of its theologies and information as a "proliferation of textuality" that reflects the postmodern condition.

states, “I myself am willing to step forth and offer some possibilities” (110), as if Horselover Fat had temporarily overtaken it, beginning to talk about the third-eyed people with earnest conviction. The rest of the chapter then begins to talk about the paranormal experiences that Fat had in his life, with little of the mocking and disbelief that the narration takes in other sections—and again, the narration seems to offer the possibility of it being a symptom of Fat’s mental breakdown (40).

Another notable section is where Phil writes about his wife Beth’s and Fat’s experiences with the paranormal. Beth, an impartial party who does not believe in Fat’s theological experiences, testifies that she, too, had seen the same phenomenon, so Fat’s experiences are given credence. In a reversal, the anecdote is immediately undermined when Phil writes that it may just have been a symptom of Fat’s mind deteriorating (44).

It is also stated that it was not God who had saved Horselover Fat in his suicide attempt, but rather “the smarts of a good pharmacist” (43), further emphasizing the ineffectual powers of God and material practice over religious theorizing. The next page goes even further, stating that Fat’s encounter with God did him no good and that God’s act is “nonsensical” (44). However, later in the narration, it is earnestly stated that only God could have saved Fat.

Conflicting juxtapositions of this nature are sustained throughout the novel as the narration oscillates between belief and disbelief, never arriving at a decisive position on whether it takes Fat’s theories seriously. Crucially, the narration is ostensibly Phil, the “rational” personality, yet these oscillations portray the subject attempting to impose stability on himself, only to fail. This, in turn, underscores the novel’s formal instability and the failure of its internal logic, demonstrating the Symbolic framework’s relative fragility in the face of the Real.

Ultimately, the novel does not provide the reader the answer to the question of whether Horselover Fat was right or simply mad, nor does it even provide a definitive answer to whether the novel—and Dick himself in extension—believes that God exists or is simply a delusion of Fat. Overall, the pink light is a signifier whose only concrete characteristic is its inherent incomprehensibility, serving as

a void to which Fat can project all his anxieties and desires. This, in turn, renders the pink light into a mess of incongruities that are never resolved.

A significant characteristic of Fat's character is revealed during his conversation with his therapist, Maurice. When Maurice tells him to do things that bring Fat joy, the narration states that "Fat had no concept of enjoyment; he understood only meaning" (82). Fat's endless theorizing, which he applies through speech, employs signifiers in the symbolic dimension. While Fat believes he is creating meaning by bringing the signifiers together, he ultimately references a nonsensical signifier (the pink light) through this process, altering their meanings without considering their original context, thereby solidifying its incommunicability. This is the irony of Fat's predicament: he believes he understands only meaning, yet he is wholly subjugated by the pink light's inherent incomprehensibility, which runs counter to any tangible understanding.

Another element contributing to the novel's disorienting qualities is the abundance of trains of thought that start and stop, as well as important revelations that the narrative abandons abruptly as they are introduced. Notably, Phil/Fat develops yet another split personality called Thomas, whom the narration asserts is an early Christian who lived thousands of years ago, coexisting with Phil/Fat of the present day through time fluctuations. This third personality is introduced and then abruptly dropped, never to be mentioned again (110-21). Thomas differs from Phil/Fat in significant ways. As opposed to Phil and Fat, who are literally split into two other beings, Thomas manifests through an enactment by Fat, whose behavior temporarily changes to match the new personality. This, however, does not last, as can be seen from his disappearance from the narrative, and Thomas serves as an example of the novel's fractured structure. The formal effects of the introduction and immediate disappearance of Thomas, like other non-sequiturs in the novel, reinforce the notion that it portrays a subjectivity constantly fracturing. The symbolic framework of *VALIS* is too unstable to sustain these new threads, which immediately collapse, and it is forced to return to the original split.¹²

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These non-sequiturs can also be read as signifiers arising from the original fracturing point. Thomas is depicted as an early Christian, and other tangents, such as Fat secretly baptizing his son Christopher with hot chocolate and a hot dog, are all connected to Christianity. This recalls Fat's obsession with God, whom he returns to like the timid dog the narration describes (29). In this sense, they are manifestations of the failure of Fat's symbolic framework to entrap his metonymically sliding desire to become closer to God and can only bring temporary relief.

Fat's tortured confusion permeates the entire narrative, even in its latter half, where Fat and his friends face the possibility that Fat might be right about anything, and the promise of an "authoritative self-definition" seems within reach. Fat displays dismay towards this possibility rather than joy, the narration noting that he has "a perplexed expression on his face. Almost an expression of suffering..." (165). Moreover, the novel ultimately does not conclude in a satisfactory manner; instead, Horselover Fat continues his search, and nothing has been truly resolved.

3. The Lacanian Fantasy and Traversing the Pink Light

From a Lacanian perspective, the fact that the novel closes not with an answer or ending to Horselover Fat's search, but instead with its continuation, strengthens the argument that the novel is not simply a collection of delusions. The search cannot end because it is a fantasy, not a fantasy in the pejorative sense of the term, but in a psychoanalytic sense.

The fantasy in Lacanian psychoanalysis serves as a screen through which the subject filters the Other's desire, which often contains horrifying content that excites as much as it agonizes.¹³ Hence, the Lacanian notion of *jouissance*: a surplus pleasure that upsets as much as it excites. In *VALIS*, Horselover Fat's motives are structured around vague fantasies that shift from a search for the meaning of the pink light to a quest for God, and then to the revival of two deceased women, culminating in the resurrection of the dead savior Sophia throughout the novel. What is crucial about these fantasies is that they also serve to obstruct the core trauma behind them, and the violent intrusion by an alien force that the pink light is. Significantly, Fat himself is born from this traumatic event, as he is the "wound" that Phil has incurred. As the narrator states: "Now there is no Horselover Fat; only the wound remains" (144).¹⁴ Moreover, unbeknownst to Fat, his search is for a void of negativity, the Real, that lacks any positive consistency and escapes any form of symbolization, as the search is for the inscrutable Other.¹⁵

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Lacan refers to the fantasy as "never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinate in the function of repetition" (*Four* 60). The "something" that Lacan refers to in this quote is his concept of the Real, which is equated to *jouissance*.

14

In his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek refers to Amfortas' wound as "his nauseous enjoyment...this thickened, condensed life-substance which does not let him die" (83). Likewise, Fat is a wound borne from Phil's pain, and Fat finds perverse enjoyment (*jouissance*) in the pain that he undergoes in his theorizing.

15

Lacan defined his concept of the real as "the impossible" (*Four* 167), or as something which cannot be expressed through speech as it lies away from the symbolic, which is the "complex rules and other kinds of presuppositions" (Žižek *How to* 9) and the imaginary (280).

One must note that a key characteristic of the Lacanian fantasy is that it is not an obstacle to be overcome. It, like the *objet petit (a)* or the Real, is the very structure that maintains the consistency of the subject, and without it, the subject would dissolve or collapse. In *VALIS*, without the wound caused by the void-like nonsense of the pink light, Fat's existence collapses, as seen in the latter half of the novel, when the savior, Sophia, temporarily heals the split between Fat and Phil. The resolving of the fantasy does not bring Fat relief—it brings him annihilation instead. Dick inadvertently aligns the phantasmatic structure of Horselover Fat even closer to the Lacanian fantasy, when Fat comes back immediately after Sophia is accidentally killed, as his lingering presence even after he is “healed.” After the healing of the split between Phil and Fat, Phil, who should now have incorporated Horselover Fat into his own psyche, cannot recognize his son, Christopher, as his own and instead refers to him as Fat's child.

However, the novel's final section also hints at a significant shift. After the death of the savior, Sophia, Phil and Fat are split into two again, and Fat's search continues. However, Fat approaches his search with significantly more positivity, even when it seems he is aware of its futility (247), while Phil gives up. Furthermore, Fat, in the final sections, seems to accept, to a degree, that his quest may have no end and that he will be unable to find the savior, yet still holds on to his resolve (249). Fat's change in demeanor is best shown when he calls Phil to say that he will search for the savior in the Micronesian Islands. While Phil feels dismay when he hears that there are more than two thousand islands that Fat needs to search, Fat is described as sounding “healthy and excited and full of energy” (253).

The divide in their emotional reactions towards the impossibility of Fat's search is both an extension of their characters in the earlier sections, and also an emphasis of the fundamental split between the two: Phil is the formally constructed form of the two, being formed in the intersubjective network of the symbolic, as the respectable science fiction author, repressing the search for *jouissance*. In contrast, Fat is the persona that has formed by the disruption from the incomprehensible trauma of the pink light, and “free” from the

constraints of the symbolic order, and thus free to pursue his *jouissance*.

The shift is not limited to Fat's much more cheerful outlook on his search, but also to the object he seeks, which moves from the pink light to the savior. This distinction is significant in several ways: the pink light eventually served as a metonymic expression of God for Fat's ill-defined search, and, as such, God itself was an incommutable 'thing' with no consistency. However, in the final sections of the novel, God has now become a concrete figure, Sophia, and Fat is shown to be excited by his search, in direct contrast to the despairing figure he had cut before.

In a Lacanian interpretation, this can be seen as Fat having begun to 'traverse his fantasy'—an expression which is used when the subject has been able to recognize that his desire is a metonymic expression of the Other's desire and reconfigure their relation to their drives (Žižek, "Traversing the Fantasy"). As Levi R. Bryant elucidates, traversing the fantasy entails recognizing the impossibility of total *jouissance* and of the non-existence of the Other (Bryant, "The Beyond of Fantasy"). Fat, unconsciously, had been able to reconfigure his relationship with the object of his desire, the pink light, the metonymic stand-in for God and the savior. His search had shifted from being the means to the end to his actual source of enjoyment, and he begins to identify with his fantasy and recognize that it is his very essence; literally, as he himself is only the personification of the subject's fantasy.

This is also what makes *VALIS* striking, not only from a Lacanian viewpoint but also from a literary standpoint. The final section of *VALIS* marks the point at which the narration begins to abandon its neurotic self-analysis and its attempts to diagnose itself. It is the point where Phil and Horselover Fat part ways in a kind of co-existence, eschewing a fanciful complete healing of trauma, but rather an acknowledgement of the lingering effects of trauma and the fantasy that it bore, but still a healing nonetheless. Prior to the conclusion of *VALIS*, the narrator would use a "constantly shifting diagnostic language Dick brought to bear on himself" in reference to excerpts of Dick's *Exegesis*, where he would engage in a "cracked Socratic dialogue" (Luckhurst 15). While the novel refrains from

offering its protagonist relief by giving him a spiritual definition of reality to which he could cling, it provides him even greater relief: the possibility of deriving enjoyment from his condition, rather than pain.

4. Conclusion

VALIS does not allow itself complete relief from the trauma of its protagonist, a resolution of his questions, or a definitive statement on the nature of reality and himself.¹⁶ However, what it does allow is an acceptance of his search for a self-definition, and an acceptance of the trauma that had come with it. Horselover Fat, who is the trauma's embodiment caused by the subject's split, is not something to be cured by elimination, but instead something that will exist as long as Phil does. The acceptance of that wound represents a pathway of continued fantasy, without despairing resignation or a complete descent into madness. Instead, trauma and the resulting search can be the motivation behind continuing existence over suicide.

The foregoing pages of this paper have sought to argue that, in a Lacanian perspective, Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*, rather than being the ravings of a madman, is, in fact, a compelling portrayal of the nonsensical signifier's domination of the subject's unconscious. The inconsistent tone of the narrative and the absence of a definite resolution regarding the pink light's meaning and the protagonist's trauma make for a frustrating reading experience. However, the novel's indecisiveness ultimately elevates it by inadvertently reflecting the primordial split of the subject. By resisting the temptation to make a definitive statement that would halt the protagonist's tormented search, the text asserts the rationality that underlies its mad exterior and elevates it into a work that warrants a critical reassessment beyond its initial dismissal as a product of mental illness.

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In some of Dick's works, reality itself, which can be read as an extension of the Self. This can be seen in works such as "The Electric Ant" (1969), where the protagonist's death results in a complete disintegration of reality itself.

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