CHAPTER 9

On Philip K. Dick

Philip K. Dick's Opus: Artifice as Refuge and World View (1975)

I would divide Dick's writing into three main periods: 1952–62, 1962–65, and 1966–74. The first period is one of apprenticeship and limning of his themes and devices, first in short or longer stories (1952–56) and then in his early novels from *Solar Lottery* to *Vulcan's Hammer* (1955–60), and it culminates in the mature polyphony of *The Man in the High Castle* (further MHC, 1962). Dick's second central period stands out to my mind as a high plateau in his opus. Following on his creative breakthrough of MHC, it comprises – together with some less successful attempts – the masterpieces of *Martian Time-Slip* (MTS) and *Dr Bloodmoney* (DrB), as well as that flawed but powerful near-masterpiece *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (3SPE). The latest phase of Dick's writing, beginning in 1966, is in many ways a falling off. It is characterized by a turning from a fruitful tension between public and private concerns toward a simplified narration, increasingly preoccupied with solitary anxieties and by a corresponding concern with unexplainable ontological puzzles; and it has led to the creative sterility of 1970–74 (*We Can Build You*, though published in 1972, had appeared in magazine version by 1970). However, *Ubik* (1969), the richest and most provocative novel of this phase, testifies to the necessity for a closer analysis of even this downbeat period of Dick's. Thus, an overview of his opus can, I trust, find a certain logic in its development, but it is not a mechanical or linear logic. Dick's work, intimately

influenced by and participating in the great processes of the US collective or social psychology in these last twenty years, shares the hesitations, the often irrational though always understandable leaps backwards, forwards, and sideways of that psychology.[1] It is perhaps most understandable as the work of a prose poet whose basic tools are not verse lines and poetic figures but (1) the agential and spatial relationships within the narrative; (2) various alternate worlds, the specific political and ontological relationships in each of which are analogous to the USA (or simply to California) in the 1950s and 1960s; and (3), last but not least, the vivid characters on whom his narration and his worlds finally repose. All of these carry the meanings, values, and stances in Dick.

In this chapter, I propose to deal with three areas: some basic relationships in Dick's storytelling – a notion richer than, though connected with, the plotting – will be explored by an analysis of narrative foci and power levels; Dick's alternate worlds will be explored in function of his increasing shift from mostly political to mostly ontological horizons; finally, his allegorically exaggerated characters will be explored in their own right as fundaments for the morality and cognition in his novels.

1 Though I appreciate and enjoy some of Dick's stories, from "The Preserving Machine" (1953) and "Nanny" (1955) to "Oh To Be a Blobel" (1964), they are clearly secondary to his novels, where the themes of the most interesting stories are developed more fully and on which I here concentrate. The novel format allows Dick to develop his peculiar strength of alternate-world creation by means of arresting characters counterposed to each other in cunningly wrought plots. Therefore, after 1956 Dick returned to writing notable stories only in his peak 1962–65 period; his later tries at forcing himself to write them are not too successful, for example, the story in Ellison's famous *Dangerous Visions*. Also, the 1967 *Ganymede Take-Over*, written in collaboration, will not be further considered here.
My thanks for help in procuring books and for first forcing me to look closer at Dick can be found in earlier publications of this chapter, which also profited from the contributions to the special Dick issue of *SFS* edited by me (later in *Science-Fiction Studies: Selected Articles on Science Fiction 1973–1975*, eds. R.D. Mullen and D. Suvin, Gregg P, 1976, 159–301).

1. Pilgrimage Without Progress: Narrative Foci and Power Levels

> Amazing the power of fiction, even cheap popular fiction, to evoke.
>
> MHC, ch. 8

In order to illuminate the development of Dick's storytelling, I shall follow his use of narrative agents as *narrative foci* and as indicators of *upper and lower social classes or power statuses*. The concept of narrative focus seems necessary because his narration uses neither the old-fashioned all-knowing, neutral and superior, narrator, nor a narration in the first person by the central characters. Somewhere in between those two extreme possibilities, the narration proceeds instead simultaneously in the third person and from the vantage point of the central or focal character in a given segment. This is always clearly delimited from other segments with other focal characters – first, by means of chapter endings or at least by double spacing within a chapter, and second, by the focal character being named at the beginning of each such narrative segment, usually after a monotony-avoiding introductory sentence or subordinate clause which sets up the time and place of the new narrative segment. The focal character is also used as a visual, auditive, and psychological focus whose vantage point colors and limits the subsequent narration. This permits the sympathizing with, and always at least understanding of, all the focal characters, be they villains or heroes in the underlying plot conflict, which is equivalent to saying that Dick has no black or white villains and heroes in the sense of van Vogt (from whom the abstracted scheme of plot conflict is often borrowed). In the collective, non-individualist world of Dick, everybody, high and low, destroyer and sufferer, is in an existential situation which largely determines his/her actions; even the arch-destroyer Palmer Eldritch is a sufferer.

The novels before 1962 are approximations to such a technique of multi-focal narrative. Its lower limit-case and primitive seed, the one-hero-at-the-center narrative, is to be found in *Eye in the Sky* and, with a half-hearted try at two subsidiary foci, in *The Man Who Japed*. *Solar Lottery* has two

clear foci, Benteley and Cartwright, with insufficiently sustained strivings toward a polyphonic structure (Verrick, Wakeman, Groves). Similarly, though there are half a dozen narrative foci in *Time Out of Joint*, Ragle is clearly their privileged center; in fact, the whole universe of the book has been constructed only to impinge upon him, just as all universes impinged upon the protagonist of *Eye in the Sky*. *Vulcan's Hammer* is focused around the two bureaucrats Barris and Dill, with Marion coming a poor third; the important character of Father Fields does not become a narrative focus, as he logically should have, nor does the intelligent computer though he is similar, say, to the equally destructive and destroyed Arnie in MTS. However, in MHC there is to be found for the first time the full Dickian narrative articulation, surpassed only in MTS and DrB. With some simplifying of secondary characters and subplots, and taking into account the levels of social – here explicitly political – power, MHC divides into two parallel plots with these narrative foci (marked by caps, while other important characters are named in lower case).

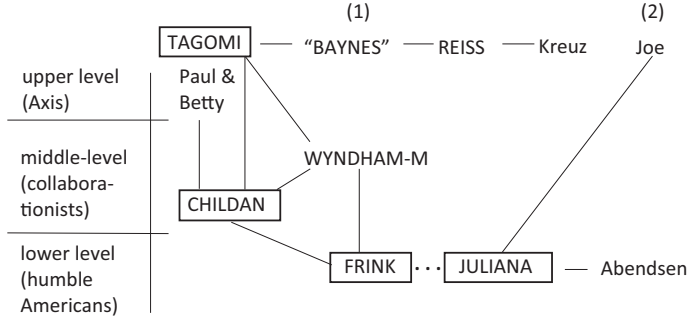

Figure 1: *Parallel Plots and Narrative Foci in* MHC

The upper level is one of politico-ethical conflict between murderous Nazi fanaticism and Japanese tolerance (the assumption that a victorious Japanese fascism would be radically better than the German one is the major political blunder of Dick's novel). In (1), the San Francisco plot, the two sympathetic focal characters are Frank Frink, the suffering refugee Jew and creative little man, and Mr Tagomi, the ethical Japanese official. In (2), the locomotive plot, the sole focal character is Juliana. Tagomi helps "Baynes"

in trying to foil the global political scheme of Nazi universal domination, and incidentally also foils the extradition of Frink to the Nazis, while Juliana foils the Nazis' (Joe's) plot to assassinate Abendsen, the SF writer of a book postulating Axis defeat in World War II; Tagomi and Juliana turn out to be, more by instinct than by design, antagonists of the fascist politico-psychological evil. But the passive link between them is Frink, Juliana's ex-husband, and his artistic creation, the silvery pin mediating between earth and sky, life and death, past and future, the MHC-universe and the alternate universe of our empirical reality. Tagomi's reality-change vision in chapter 14, induced by contemplating Frink's pin, is a Dickian set scene that recreates, through an admittedly partial narrative viewpoint, the great utopian tradition that treats a return to the reader's freeways, smog, and jukebox civilization as a vision of hell – exactly as at the end of *Gulliver's Travels, Looking Backward* or *News from Nowhere*. But it is also an analogue of the vision of Abendsen's book: the book and the pin come from chthonic depths but become mediators only after being shaped by the intellect, albeit an oracular and largely instinctive one. For Dick, a writer (especially an SF writer) is always first and foremost an "artificer," both in the sense of artful craftsman and in the sense of creator of new, "artificial" but nonetheless possible worlds. Frink and Abendsen, the two artificers – one the broodingly passive but (see Figure 1) centrally situated narrative focus of the book, the other a shadowy but haunting figure appearing at its close – constitute with Tagomi and Juliana, the two instinctive ethical activists, the four pillars of hope opposed to the dominant political madness of Fascism. Though most clearly institutionalized in German Nazism, this can also be found in middle-class Americans such as Childan, the racist small shopkeeper oscillating between being a helper and a deceitful exploiter of creative artificers such as Frink.

The second or plateau period of Dick's opus retains and deepens the MHC narrative polyphony. It does so both by keeping a high number of narrative foci and by stressing some relationships among the focal characters as privileged, thereby making for easier overview with less redundancy and a stronger impact. The two culminations of such proceeding are MTS and DrB. In MTS, three of the focal characters stand out (see Figure 2): the labor boss Arnie is powerful and sociable, the autistic boy

Manfred politically powerless and asocial, while the central character, Jack Bohlen, mediates between the two not only in his sociopolitical status but also in his fits of and struggle against psychosis. However, Jack and Manfred, the time-binding precog and the manual craftsman, are allied against the tycoon Arnie. This is the first clear expression in Dick's opus of the alliance and yet also the split between Rousseauist personal freedom realized in Manfred's final symbiosis with the totally asocial, noble-savage Bleekmen, and an ethical communal order, implied in Jack. The politically powerless turn the tables on the powerful – as did Juliana in MHC – by means of their greater sensitivity.

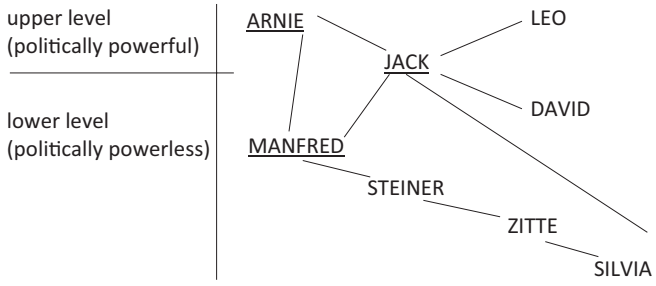

Figure 2: *Character Focalization in* MTS

This allows them a much deeper understanding of people and things, inner and outer nature (which they pay for by greater suffering). Therefore, the set-piece or obligatory situation in MTS is again a visionary scene involving Manfred, Jack, and Arnie in several interdependent versions of nightmarish reality-change (chapters 10–11).

The oppositions are aggravated and therefore explored more fully in DrB, Dick's narratively most sophisticated work. Nine personal narrative foci are here, astoundingly, joined by two choral focal groups: the secondary characters who get killed during the narrative but help decisively in Hoppy's defeat, such as Fergesson, and the post-Bomb-community secondary characters, such as June. The double division in MTS (powerful/powerless plus personal freedom/ethical order) is here richly articulated into (1) the destructive dangers opposed to the new prospects of life and

vitality, further subdivided into (2) the search for a balanced community, and (3) the search for personal happiness. Very interestingly, Dangerfield, the mediator of practical tips and past culture, provides the link between all those who oppose the destroyers. In this most optimistic of Dick's novels, Bloodmoney's Bomb was a Happy Fall: the collapse of US sociopolitical and technological power abolishes the class distinctions, and thus makes possible a new start and innocence leading to the defeat of the new, anti-utopian would-be usurpers by the complementary forces of a new communal and personal order. These forces are aptly symbolized by the homunculus Bill – perhaps Dick's most endearing character – who is both person and symbiotic creature.

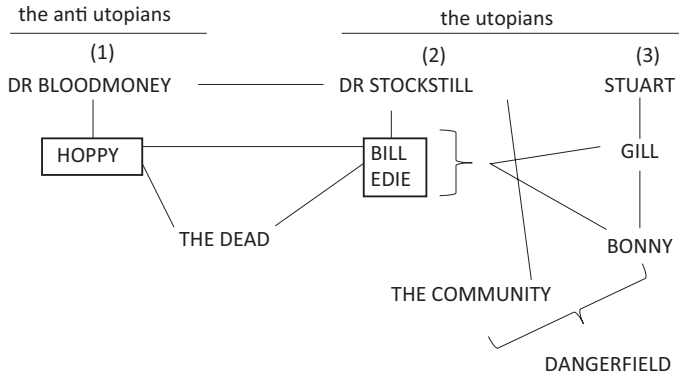

Figure 3: *Character Focalization in DrB*

In this light, the ideological movement of the book is complete when Bonny, the all-embracing Earth Mother figure, has forsaken the old danger, Bloodmoney, and when her son Bill – coeval with the innocence and power of the new order (much as his feebler prototype, Mrs Grayles in Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*) – has defeated the new danger, Hoppy. Fredric Jameson identifies the new danger convincingly with a neo-pragmatic stance connected with modern electronics and the USA, just as the old danger was the classical mad scientist of the Dr Strangelove type connected with nuclear physics and Germany. Jameson's essay, as well

as the analyses of MTS in the same *SFS* "Dick issue" by Aldiss and Pagetti, make it possible to cut short here the discussion of narrative foci in these two masterpieces of Dick's. It only remains to notice that a Rousseauist utopianism cannot finally fuse personal happiness and harmonious community – at the utmost it can run them in tandem, or as the horizons of two successive generations and historical stages.

2. *AM-WEB: Politics and Ontology*

> The disintegration of the social and economic system had been slow, gradual, and profound. It went so deep that people lost faith in natural law itself.
>
> *Solar Lottery*, ch. 2

There remains, in Dick's middle period, the important if ambiguous 3SPE, the discussion of which will require shifting the emphasis to what are for Dick the horizons of human destiny. 3SPE is the first significant Dick novel to allot equal weight to politics and ontology as arbiters of its microcosm and its characters' destinies. I shall deal first with politics.

Up to the mid-1960s Dick could be characterized as a writer of dystopian SF in the wake of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and of the menacing world-war and post-Bomb horizons in the pulp "new maps of hell" by Bradbury, Heinlein, Blish, and Pohl (to mention those who, together with Vanvogtian plotting and Besterian Espers, seem to have meant most to him). The horrors of Cold War politics, paranoiac militarism, mass hysteria organized by politicians, and encroaching government dictatorship are broached in the stories of the mid-1950s such as "Breakfast at Twilight," "War Veteran" or "Second Variety"; in one of the best, "Foster, You're Dead," the militarist craze for bomb-shelters is further seen as a tool for commercial twisting of the everyday life of little people. In Dick's early novels the dystopian framework is developed by adding to a look at the dominated humble people an equally inside look at the ruling circles – the telepaths and quizmasters in *Solar Lottery*, the secret police in "The Variable Man" and *The World Jones Made*, the mass-media persuaders in *The Man Who*

Japed, and the powerful bureaucrats in *Vulcan's Hammer*. Indeed, *Eye in the Sky* is the formalization of a literally "inside" look at four variants of dystopia, and carries the message that in the world of modern science we are all truly members of one another. Up to 3SPE, then, the novels by Dick which are not primarily dystopian (*The Cosmic Puppets, Dr Futurity, The Game-Players of Titan*) are best forgotten. Obversely, political dystopia has remained a kind of zero-level for Dick's writing right to the present day (e.g., in *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*), at times even explicitly connecting the early stories to the later second-line novels by taking over a story's theme or situation and developing it into the novel's mainstay (e.g., "The Defenders" and *The Penultimate Truth*, or "Shell Game" and *Clans of the Alphane Moon*).

The culmination and transmutation of political horizons occur in what I would call Dick's "plateau tetralogy" from MHC to DrB. MHC, with its superb feel of Nazi psychology and of life in a world of occupiers, occupied, and quislings overshadowed by it, is the high point of Dick's explicitly political dystopianism. Paradoxically if precariously balanced by ethical optimism, its confident balance and richness makes of this in some ways Dick's most lucid book. It is also the first culmination of the Germanic-paranoia-turning-fascist theme which has been haunting Dick as no other US SF writer (with the possible exception of Vonnegut) since "The Variable Man" with its Security Commissioner Reinhart, and the seminal *Man Who Japed* with its German-US Big Brother in the person of Major Jules Streiter, founder of the Moral Reclamation movement. The naming of this shadowy King Anti-Utopus is an excellent example for Dick's ideological onomastics: it compounds allusions to the names and doctrines of Moral Rearmament's Buchman, Social Credit's Major Douglas, and the fanatic Nazi racist Julius Streicher. The liberalism of even the seemingly most hard-nosed dystopian SF in the US 1940s and 1950s, with its illusions of Back to the Spirit of 1776, pales into insignificance beside Dick's pervasive, intimate, and astoundingly rich understanding of the affinities between German and US fascism, born of the same social classes of big speculators and small shopkeepers. This understanding is embodied in a number of characters who span the death-lust spectrum between political and psychological threat. Beginning with the wholly US

Childan (who is, correspondingly, a racist out of insecurity rather than fanaticism, and is allowed a positive conversion) and the German assassin Joe masquerading as an American in MHC, through Norbert Steiner and Otto Zitte as well as the vaguely Teutonic-American corrupt bigwigs Leo Bohlen and Arnie Kott in MTS, such a series culminates in Dr Bruno Bluthgeld/Bloodmoney (descended from Von Braun, Teller, and similar, both through the media and through Kubrick's mad German scientist Dr Strangelo'e). It finally leads to a German takeover of the Western world by means of their industries and androids in *The Simulacra*, and of the whole planet through the UN in *The Unteleported Man*. In this last novel, the revelation that UN boss Horst Bertold (whose name and final revelatory plea are derived from Bertolt Brecht, the anti-fascist German whose name would be most familiar to the music and drama lover Dick) is a "good" German, on the same side of the political fence as the hounded little man Rachmael ben Applebaum, effects a reconciliation of powerful German and powerless Jew.

These politico-national roles or clichés had started poles apart in MHC. But by the end of Dick's German-Nazi theme and cycle the year was 1966, and the sensitive author quite rightly recognized that the world, and in particular the USA, had other fish to fry: the ubiquitous fascist menace was no longer primarily German or anti-Jewish. Already in MTS, the lone German killers Steiner and Zitte were small fry compared to the Americans of Teutonic descent, Leo and Arnie. In DrB, therefore, the Bluthgeld menace is supplanted by the deformed American obstinately associated with the product of Bluthgeld's fallout – the Ayn Rand follower and cripple Hoppy, wired literally up to his teeth into the newest electronic death-dealing gadgets. Clearly, Bluthgeld relates to Hoppy as the German-associated World War II and Cold War technology of the 1940s and 1950s to the US Vietnam War technology of the 1960s. It is the same relation as the one between the Nazi-treated superman Bulero and the reality manipulator Eldritch, and finally between the Krupps and Heydrichs of MHC and the military-industrial complex of US capitalism: "it was Washington that was dropping the bombs on [the American people], not the Chinese or the Russians" (DrB, chapter 5). The transformation or transubstantiation of classical European fascism into new US power is also the theme of

two significant stories Dick wrote in the 1960s, "If There Were no Benny Cemoli" (read: Benito Mussolini) and "Oh, To Be a Blobel" (where a US tycoon turns Alien while his humbler employee wife turns human). The third significant story, "What the Dead Men Say," halfway between 3SPE and *Ubik*, features half-life as a non-supernatural hoax by US economic and political oligarchs on the make.

By the MTS phase, Dick's little man is being opposed not only to political and technological but also to economic power in the person of the rival tycoons Leo (representing a classical big speculators' syndicate) and Arnie (whose capital comes from control of big trade union funds), while on the horizon of both Terra and Mars there looms the big cooperative movement, whose capital comes from investments of members. In the corrupt microcosm of MTS these three variants of capitalism (classical laissez-faire, bureaucratic, and demagogically managerial), together with the State capitalism of the superstate UN disposing of entire planets, constitute what is almost a brief survey of its possible forms. The slogan of the big cooperative-capitalist movement, which Manfred sees crowning his horrible vision of planetary future in decay, is AM-WEB, explained in Dick's frequent record-jacket German as "Alle Menschen werden Brüder" ("All men become brothers– from Schiller through Beethoven's Ninth). But this explanation is half true and half disingenuous – the proper acronym for the slogan is AMWB with no "E" and no hyphen. Thus, within normative Germano-American parallelism, AM-WEB is also, and even primarily, an emblem of the ironic reversal of pretended liberty, fraternity, and equality – it is the *American Web* of big business, corrupt labor aristocracy, and big State that turns the difficult everyday life of the little man into a future nightmare. As Brian Aldiss remarks in the *SFS* Dick issue, the whole of MTS – and beyond that, most of Dick – is a maledictory web. The economico-political spider spinning it is identified with a clarity scarcely known in US SF between Jack London's Oligarchy and Ursula Le Guin's Propertarians. The Rousseauist utopianism of DrB is an indication that the urge to escape this cursed web is so deep it would almost welcome an atomic holocaust as a chance to start anew: "We are, Adams realized, a cursed race. Genesis is right; there is a stigma on us, a mark." (*The Penultimate Truth*, ch. 13)

The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, the interplanetary industrialist who peddles dope to enslave the masses, are three signs of demonic artificiality. The prosthetic eyes, hands, and teeth allow him – in a variant of the Wolf in Little Red Riding Hood – to see (understand), grab (manipulate), and rend (ingest, consume) his victims better. Like the tycoon in "Oh, To Be a Blobel," this Eldritch Palmer or uncanny pilgrim toward the goal of universal market domination is clearly a "mad capitalist" (to coin a term parallel to mad scientist), a miraculous organizer of production wasted through absence of rational distribution (chapter 1), who turned Alien on a power trip. But his peculiar terrifying force is that he turns his doped manipulees not only into a captive market (see Dick's early story of that title) but also into partial, stigmatized replicas of himself by working through their ethical and existential weaknesses. The Palmer-Eldritch-type of super-corporative capitalism is in fact a new religion, stronger and more pervasive than the classical transcendental ones, because "GOD PROMISES ETERNAL LIFE. WE CAN DELIVER IT" (chapter 9). What it delivers, though, is not only a new thing under the Sun but also false, activating the bestial or alien inhumanity within man: "And – we have no mediating sacraments through which to protect ourselves … It [the Eldritch Presence] is out in the open, ranging in every direction. It looks into our eyes; and it looks out of our eyes" (chapter 13). Dick moves here along jungle trails first blazed by William S. Burroughs: for both, the hallucinatory operators are real.

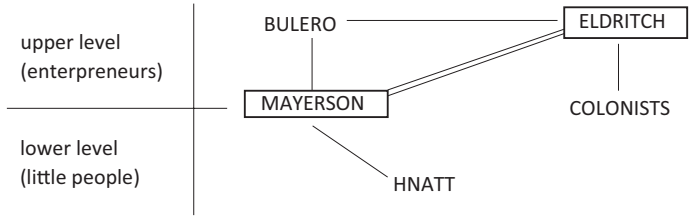

Figure 4: *Character Focalization in 3SPE*

The narrative structure of 3SPE combines multifocality with a privileged protagonist-antagonist (Mayerson–Eldritch) axis and with the division into power levels (see Figure 4). However, the erstwhile normal conflict between

the upper and the lower social levels is here superseded by the appearance of a new-type antagonist, Eldritch, who snares not only the little people – Mayerson and other Mars colonists – but also the established power of Bulero, and indeed subverts the whole notion of monadic individualistic characters of the nineteenth-century kind upon which Dick's, like most other SF, had so far reposed. The appearance of Eldritch, signalized by his stigmata, *inside* the other characters shifts the conflict into their psyches – can they trust their reality perceptions? The political theme and horizon begin here to give way to the ontological. While the ontological dilemmas have a clear genesis in the political ones, they shift the power relationships from human institutions to mysterious entities, never quite accounted for or understood in the narration. 3SPE is thus that first significant station in Dick's development where the ontological preoccupations begin to weigh as heavily as, or more heavily than, the political dystopianism.

Such preoccupations can, no doubt, be found in Dick's writing right from the beginning, and can serve as a key to Dick's theme of mental alienation connected with reality changes. "Foster, You're Dead," the story of a boy alienated by conformist social pressures, is already halfway between Pohl's satires (it was published by Pohl in *Star SF 3*) and the suffering alienated boy Manfred in MTS who erects an alternative reality as refuge. Parallel to that, "Adjustment Team" is a first tentative try at evolving the Pohlian "tunnel under the world" situation of total manipulation – also the kernel of 3SPE – toward metaphysics. The mysterious failure of memory or missing interval of consciousness accompanied by headache, which is a sign of dissolving realities often found in combination with drug-taking, recurs from *The Man Who Japed* through MTS to 3SPE. Tagomi's great vision in MHC and Manfred's AM-WEB vision in MTS can already be interpreted not only as trance-like insights but also as actual changes in collective reality. These are changes in being (ontological, as already in *Eye in the Sky*) rather than only in foreknowledge (epistemological, as in *The World Jones Made)* or, even more simply, fraudulent-cum-psychotic ones (as in *Time Out of Joint*). The narrative Possible Worlds, the depicted planetary realities of both MHC and MTS, are analogies for reality changes immanent in the author's here-and-now and already showing through it, like Eldritch's stigmata. MHC is an alternative world explicating a California, USA, and globe fallen prey to fascism. MTS substitutes the more general

physical category of entropy for its political particular case; Dick's Mars is a run-down future, "a sort of Humpty-Dumpty" where people and things have decayed "into rusty bits and useless debris" (chapter 6), a space and time leading – in ironic repudiation of Ray Bradbury's nostalgia for the petty-bourgeois past and Arthur Clarke's confidence in liberal scientism – to Manfred's devolutionary vision of "gubble" (rubble, rubbish, crumble, gobble) invading everybody's reality and vitality, in a dialectical interplay with Jack's struggle against it. The total manipulation and the entropic human relations are to be found in 3SPE together with and flowing into a false, profit-making religion.

However, the shift from politics to ontology, which was only hinted at in MHC and will culminate in *Ubik*, is in 3SPE not consistent. The referents of this lush novel are overdetermined: Eldritch, the allegorical representative of neo-capitalism, is at the same time the bearer of an "evil, negative trinity of alienation, blurred reality and despair" (chapter 13) of demonic though unclear origin. An orthodox religious and an orthodox politico-economic reading of 3SPE can both be fully supported by the evidence of the novel, but neither of these complementary and yet in some ways basically contradictory readings can explain the full novel – which is to boot overburdened with quite unnecessary elements such as Mayerson's precog faculties, the garden-variety theological speculations, etc. Politics, physics, and metaphysics combine to create in 3SPE a fascinating and iridescent manifold, but their interference also, to my mind, makes for an insufficiently economical novel. It starts squarely within the political and physical field (clash of big drug corporations, temperature rise, colonization of Mars) and then drags across it the red herring of ontologico-religious speculations grafted upon Vanvogtian plot gimmicks (here from Leigh Brackett's *The Big Jump*, 1955) that shelve rather than solve the thematic problems.

3. *All We Marsmen: Characterology as Morality and Cognition*

> We do not have the ideal world, such as we would like, where morality is easy because cognition is easy.
>
> MHC, ch. 15

In Dick's anthropology, the differentiation between upper and lower politico-economic power statuses is correlative to a system of correspondences between profession, as relating to a specific type of creativity, and ethical goodness or evil. This reposes on a more general view of human nature and species-specific human conduct, for which morality and cognition are closely allied, and which will be discussed in this section. Such an alliance breaks down in *Ubik*; this is to my mind the explanation of Dick's difficulties after 1966.

From Dick's earliest writings, aggressiveness is identified not only with militarism but also with commercialism (as in "Nanny"), and villainy with either dictatorial or capitalist rulers (as in "A Present for Pat," and in the stories of the 1960s mentioned in section 2). Opposed to the unscrupulous tycoons and other bigwigs (Verrick in *Solar Lottery*, the terrifying roster of Führer candidates in MHC, Leo Bohlen and Arnie Kott in MTS, Leo Bulero and Palmer Eldritch in 3SPE, the Yancy Men in *The Penultimate Truth*, etc.) are the little people. The two ends of the politico-economic and power scale relate as "havenots" to "titans" (*The Unteleported Man*, ch. 4), but also as creators to destroyers. For, Dick's protagonists are as a rule some variant of immediate producer or direct creator. They are not industrial workers engaged in collective production – a class conspicuous by its absence here as in practically all modern SF. On the contrary, Dick's protagonists are most often the new individual craftsmen, producers of art objects or repairmen of the most sophisticated (e.g., cybernetic) Second Industrial Revolution products. They are versions of the old-fashioned handyman (who is celebrated in the "Fixit-cart" non-statistical, unquantifiable, "variable man" of the eponymous story) updated for a contemporary, or near-future, highly industrialized society; their main trait is a direct and personalized relationship to creative productivity as opposed to standardized mass-production with its other-directedness, loss of self-reliance, and shoddy living (a key to this is to be found in the story "Pay for the Printer," a finger-exercise for DrB).

This characterology is not yet quite clear in the earlier novels, which deal more with the Ibsenian theme of social deceit versus individual struggle for truth than with the theme of destruction vs. creation. Of *Solar Lottery*'s two protagonists one, Benteley, is a classical technician

"cadre," a biochemist, and only the other, Cartwright, is "electronics repairman and human being with a conscience" (chapter 2). Similarly, the protagonist of *Eye in the Sky* turns only at the end of the book from chief of missile lab to builder of phonographs, switching from Dick's chief dislike, militarism, to his chief love, music. But already in his early works there appears a populist or indeed New Left tendency to distrust rational intelligence, contaminated as it is by its association with "the cult of the Technocrat … run by and for those oriented around verbal knowledge" (*Vulcan's Hammer*, chapter 14), and to oppose to it spontaneous action guided by intuition – a politics of the "do your own thing" type. Thus, in *Time Out of Joint* Ragle is a creative personality who dislikes the nine-to-five drudgery of the huge conformist organizations, regimented like armies (chapter 1), and who can "sense the pattern" of events through his artistic abilities (chapter 14). Though the traces of this dichotomy can be felt even in the MHC protagonists Tagomi and Frink – who are juxtaposed as mind and hand, intellectual visionary from the upper power level and intuitive creator from the powerless depths – it is fortunately absent from his most mature creations, the plateau masterpieces in which his ethico-professional pattern of characters and values emerges most clearly. In MTS, Steiner and Zitte are small speculators who exploit the work of others, just as the small shopkeeper Childan in MHC exploited the creativity of the artificer Jew-Gentile pair, Frink and McCarthy; like him, Steiner and Zitte are unable to face reality and so resort to sexual fantasies alternating with suicidal/homicidal moods. At the other end of the power scale, Arnie fuses the financial role of big speculator, represented in pure form by Leo, with Zitte's role of sexual exploiter.

This quasi-robotic role of a sexually efficient but emotionally uncommitted macho, for Dick an ethical equivalent of economic exploitation, is to be found in his negative characters from the android of "Second Variety" to such "titans" as Verrick in *Solar Lottery* or Arnie in MTS who use their female employees and mistresses as pawns in power maneuvers. Opposed to them are the sincere little people, here the repairman Jack Bohlen, who fight their way through the sexual as well as the economic jungle step by laborious step. In 3SPE, the character spread runs from the capitalist destroyer Eldritch to the suffering artist-creator Emily; and the central protagonist

Mayerson's fall from grace begins by his leaving Emily for success' sake and is consummated when he refuses her creations for personal revenge, thus becoming an impediment to human creativity and falling into the clutches of Eldritch's false creations. Emily's husband Hnatt is midway between her and Mayerson: he is her co-worker, the vendor of her products, but his ambiguous position in the productive process finally brings about her creative regression in the novel's rather underdeveloped subplot of false creativity through forced intellectual evolution (this subplot is carried by Bulero, the old-fashioned tycoon). Similarly, in *The Penultimate Truth* the weak and less sympathetic characters are the wordsmiths who have forsaken personal creativity to be abused for the purposes of a regressive political apparatus (Lindblom). This novel divides into two plots, the ruling class and the subterranean one. The first centers, alas, on a Vanvogtian immortal and the intrigue from *The House That Stood Still* (1950), marring one of Dick's potentially most interesting books. For the protagonist of the other plot, Nick, is the democratically elected president of an oppressed community, whose creativity is manifested by political persistence in securing the rights of an endangered member. Thus, Dick's concept of creativity, though it centers on artists, encompasses both erotic and political creative ethics.

Beside the professional roles, Dick has three basic female roles, also clearly present in 3SPE as Roni, Emily, and Anne around Mayerson. The first role is that of castrating bitch, a female macho striving to rise in the corporative power-world (also Kathy in *Now Wait for Last Year*, Pris in *We Can Build You*, etc.); the second that of weak but stabilizing influence (also Silvia in MTS, etc.); and the third, crowning one, that of a strong but warm sustaining force. Although Dick's female characters seem less fully developed than his male ones, such an Earth Mother becomes the final embodiment of ethical and political rightness in his most hopeful novels, MHC and DrB (Juliana and Bonny); conversely, the Bitch is developed with increasing fascination in his third phase.

As suggested above, the totally unethical and therefore inhuman person is often an android, what Dick, with a stress on its counterfeiting and artificial aspect, calls a *simulacrum* (see his very instructive Vancouver speech in *SF Commentary* no. 31). Already in his first novel this is associated with modern science being manipulated by power-mad people, who

are themselves the truly reified inhumans and therefore in a way more unauthentic than their simulacra. An interesting central anthropological tenet is adumbrated here, halfway between Rousseau and Marx, according to which there is an *authentic core* identical with humanity in *Homo sapiens*, from which men and women have to be alienated by civilizational pressures in order to behave in an unauthentic, dehumanized way, so that there is always an inner resistance to such pressures in anybody who simply follows his or her human(e) instinct of treating people as ends, not means. That is why Dick's protagonists rely on instinct and persistence (several of them, such as Jack in MTS or Nick in *The Penultimate Truth* are characterized as permanently "going to keep trying"). That is why social class is both a functionally decisive and yet not an exclusive criterion for determining the humanity of the characters: the more powerful one is, the more dehumanized one becomes, and Dick's only real heroes tend to be the creative little people, with the addition of an occasional visionary. However, even the literally dehumanized alien such as Eldritch has inextinguishable remnants of humanity within him that qualify him for suffering, and thus for the reader's partial, dialectical sympathy for his (now alienated) human potentialities. That is why, finally, there emerges the strange and charmingly grotesque Dickian world of semi-animated cybernetic constructs, which makes stretches of even his weaker novels enjoyable light reading: as the fly-size shrilling commercial and the hypnotic surrogate-"papoola" of *The Simulacra*, the Lazy Brown Dog reject carts in *Now Wait for Last Year*, the stupid elevators and grumpy cybernetic taxis such as Max the auto-auto in *The Game-Players of Titan*, etc. Together with a few interesting aliens, the all-too-human inhumans culminate in the menace of 3SPE and in Dick's richest spectrum of creatures in DrB, which runs from the stigmatic psi-powers of Bluthgeld and cyborg booster-devices of Hoppy to the zany and appealing new life-cycle of homeostatic traps and evolved animals. At the center of DrB is the homunculus Bill, who is in touch with humans, animals, and even the dead, and unites the kinesthetic and verbal powers in the universe of that novel.

I have left *Ubik* for the end of this discussion both because it seems to me Dick's last major work to date and because in it the analogies between morality and cognition suffer a sea-change. The Dickian narrative

model, as discussed in this chapter, is in this novel extremely simplified and then recomplicated by being twisted into a new shape. The character types remain the same and thus link the new model with Dick's earlier work: the bitch Pat, the redeemer Ella, the bewildered old-fashioned tycoon Runciter, the shadowy illusion creator Jory, losing in precision but gaining in domination in comparison to Eldritch, and, most important, the buffeted but persistent schlemiel Joe Chip. But the shift from social to ontological horizons around the axis connecting the two main narrative foci of Runciter and Chip results in a world without stable centers, or peripheries, where the main problem is to find out who is inside and who outside the unstable circles of narrative consciousness, liable to an infinite receding series of contaminations from other – often only guessed at – such centers. The characterological equivalent of this uncertainty is *the half-life*, a loss of sovereignty over one's microcosm. After the explosion on the Moon, is Chip, or Runciter, or neither, or both in that state? The most all-embracing explanation would be that both are in the moratorium with different degrees of control, and acted on by the rival forces of destruction and redemption, Jory and Ella. However, no explanation will explain this novel, about which I have to differ fundamentally with what seem to me the one-sided praises of Lem and Peter Fitting in *SFS*.

No doubt, as they convincingly point out, *Ubik* is a heroic effort with great strengths, particularly in portraying the experiences of running down, decay, and senility, the invasion of entropy into life and consciousness, amid which the little man yet carries on: *impavidum ferient ruinae*. This experience of manipulated worlds, so characteristic of all our lives, is expressed by a verbal richness manifest, first, in a whole fascinating cluster of neologisms connected with the half-life, and second, in the delicious satire centered on the thing Ubik – the principle of food, health, and preservation of existence, of anti-entropic energy promoted in kitschy ad terms parodying the unholy capitalist alliance of science, commercialism, and religious blasphemy. Dick's basic concern with death and rebirth, or to put it briefly with *transubstantiation*, has here surfaced perhaps more clearly than anywhere else in his opus. Yet it seems to me that – regardless of how far one would be prepared to follow Dick's rather unclear religious speculations – there is a serious loss of narrative control

in *Ubik*. The "psi-powers" signifier has here become not only unnecessary but positively stultifying – for example, has anybody in this narration ever got back on the original time-track after Pat's first try-out? did Pat engineer also her own death? etc. Further questions arise later: why isn't Pat wired out of the common circuit in the moratorium? why isn't Jory? etc. There is a clumsy try at subsidiary narrative foci with Vogelsang and Tippy (ch. 1 and 5); Jory "eats" Wendy just when Pat was supposed to have done it; etc. The net result seems to me one of great strengths balanced by equally great weaknesses in a narrative irresponsibility reminiscent of the rabbits-from-the-hat carelessness associated with rank van Vogt, if not "Doc" Smith: the false infinities of explaining one improbability by a succession of ever greater ones.

The deconstruction of bourgeois rationality that Fitting sees here seems thus not to result in a new form but in a nihilistic collapse into the oldest mystifying forms of SF melodrama, refurbished, and therefore rendered more virulent, by some genuinely interesting new experiences. This is, of course, not without correlation to Dick's ideologies after the mid-1960s, his drug-taking experiences, and his (often very ingenious) God-constructions; and one must assume that this was validated by the feeblest and least useful aspects of the late 1960s' counter-culture, by the mentality despising reason, logic, and order of any kind – old or new. Thus, the colorful effort of *Ubik* seems to me, in spite of its many incidental felicities, to be the 3SPE experience writ large: in some ways among the most fascinating SF books of its time, it is finally, I fear, a heroic failure. In art, at least (and I would maintain in society too), there is no freedom without order, no liberation without controlled focusing. A morality cut off from cognition becomes arbitrary; as Dick's own words in the epigraph to this section imply, it becomes in fact impossible.

My argument may perhaps gain some additional strength if it is accepted that Dick's writing around and after *Ubik* has not been of the order of his first-rate novels. From *Now Wait for Last Year* on, it has withdrawn from the earlier Iichness into an only fragmentary use of his already established model, it has centered on *one* male protagonist and his increasingly private and psychoanalytic problems, or, as the other side of the coin, on a Jungian collective unconscious. In *We Can Build You*, for example, the

erstwhile characteristic Dickian theme of the simulacrum Lincoln is left to fizzle out in favor of the Jungian theme of Pris, though the conjuring up of the past probity from the heroic age of the US bourgeoisie against its present corruption cries out for more detailed treatment. While the touch of the master shows in incidental elements of these late novels (e.g., the comics society of *The Zap Gun*, or the imitations of Chaplin's *Great Dictator* in *Now Wait for Last Year*) there are also outright failures, such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* with its underlying confusion between androids as wronged lower class and as inhuman menace. Indeed, Dick's last novel, *Flow My Tears* …, raises to my mind seriously the question whether he is going to continue writing SF or change to "realistic" prose, for its properly SF elements (future Civil War, the reality-changing drug, the "sixes") are quite perfunctory in comparison to its realistic police-state situations.

4. The Time Is Out of Joint: Instead of a Conclusion

> "Oh no", Betty disagreed, "no science in it. Science fiction deals with future, in particular future where science had advanced over now. Book fits neither premise."
>
> "But," Paul said, "it deals with alternate present. Many well-known science fiction novels of that sort."
>
> MHC, ch. 7

A number of very tempting subjects have to be left undiscussed here: the uses and transubstantiations of stimuli from movies and music (especially vocal music concerned with transcending the empirical world, e.g., in Bach, Wagner, or Verdi); the uses of literature – from Shakespeare, Aesop, and Ibsen through Hemingway, Wells, Orwell, and the comics to the SF of the 1940s and 1950s; the strange coexistence of dazzling verbal invention with sloppiness and crudities; etc. Also, no conclusion will be attempted here. That would be rather an impertinence in the case of a writer hopefully only in the middle of life's path, who has grown and changed several times so startlingly, outstripping consistently most of his critics (so that he may also prove my gloomy opinions about his latest phase wrong).

Instead, I would like to stress that in his very imperfections Dick seems typical. All his near futures and alternate presents are parabolic mirrors for our time, which he has always deeply felt to be out of joint. His political acumen was a good dozen years in advance of his fellow Americans, not so much because he mentions Nixon both as President and as FBI Chief in his earliest works as because, for example, in his first novel he asked: "But what are you supposed to do in a society that's corrupt? Are you supposed to obey corrupt laws? Is it a crime to break a rotten law …?" (ch. 14). His ontologico-religious speculations, while to my mind less felicitous, have the merit of taking to some logical SF limits the preoccupations a great number of people have tried to express in more timid ways.

It is when Dick's view is trained both on society and reality in their impact upon human relationships, with the ontology still clearly grounded in a recognizable and consistent world, that I believe Dick's major works, from MHC to DrB, have been written. His concerns with alienation and reification, with one-dimensional humans, parallel in SF terms the concerns of a whole generation, expressed in their own ways by Marcuse or Laing. His concerns with a social organization based on direct human relations parallel the movements for a radical democracy from the Berkeley Free Speech movement (the scene of his most fully utopian work, DrB) to the abortive world youth-New Left movement of the late 1960s. His deep intuitive feeling for decline and entropy raises the usual Spenglerian theatrics of space-opera SF to the "Humpty-Dumpty" landscapes of MTS, 3SPE, and *Ubik*. He always speaks directly out of and to the US experience of his generation, most so when he uses the parabolic mirror of Germans and Nazis. He has the strengths and limitations of his existential horizons, which are identical to that of his favorite hero – the artificer, including the verbal craftsman. His books are artefacts, refuges from and visions of reality – as are Abendsen's book *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* in MHC and Lederman's *Pilgrim without Progress* in 3SPE. In fact, only a fiction writer could have embarked on the Pirandellian ontology of *Ubik*, whose characters search not only for their Author but also for their World. Explicating the message in terms of the form, half a dozen works by Dick, at least, are SF classics. That is equivalent to saying that they are significant humanistic literature.

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Goodbye and Hello: Differentiating within the Later P.K. Dick (2002)[2]

> "You've read these?" Allen scanned the volume of Ulysses. His interest and bewilderment grew. "Why? What did you find?"
> Sugermann considered. "These, as discriminated from the other, are real books."
> "What's that mean?"
> "Hard to say. They're about something."
>
> (Dick, *The Man Who Japed,* ch. 9)

> Reality is that which when you stop believing in it, it doesn't go away. (Dick, *VALIS*, ch. 5)

1. Two Personal (But Not Only) Premises

1.1. Historical

It must have been 1972 or 1973 when my nose was first rubbed into the work of Philip Dick by a student at McGill, a young woman who went on to become a professor of psychology at Berkeley. A friend of hers, a young Lithuanian-Canadian, was one of those fans having the entire opus of favorite SF writers in his flat, in this case all I was missing from Dick. I then asked my co-editor Dale Mullen whether he'd let me edit an issue of our journal, *Science-Fiction Studies*, on Le Guin and Dick, which soon became two separate issues. Among other matters in organizing that

2 My thanks for help with materials to Donald M. Hassler and a number of Italian friends and institutions can be found in the 2002 periodical publication of this chapter. It was sparked by the invitation to a keynote speech at the Dick Days of "Mutamento Z" in Torino, May 2002.

issue, I somehow got Dick's phone number in southern California to solicit from him a contribution, which he eventually graciously gave. I had the feeling he was somewhat bewildered by academic attention, and it turned out later he had classical ambivalence toward it – he both wanted and resented our praise. Our conversations were entirely practical and unremarkable, except for one incident after he had received the *SFS* issue in 1975, when he gently complained about my slighting his German, since he had been readily understood by the Munich hotel he stayed in! This turned out to be an instance of his talent for fabulation, for it appears he never was in Munich, but I was at the time entirely innocent of his psychic complexities …

Many years later, when his executor was preparing a volume of his letters for print, he asked me for permission to reproduce Dick's 1974 letters denouncing me and two other prominent participants in the *SFS* issue, Fredric Jameson and Peter Fitting, at the same time that he was cordially conversing with us, to the FBI as agents of a Soviet-bloc Communist committee situated in Cracow and going under the name of Lem; he knew that Lem wasn't a single person because the latter had corresponded with him in several languages … I have since understood the terrible existential panic he was in when he tried to ingratiate himself with the FBI, and forgiven if not forgotten.[3] It is a case in point for Dick's typically US cocoon, that mixture of empirical political savvy I praised in the first essay and the global political illiteracy to which I shall return in my conclusion.

But away with memories of Atlantis! How is it proper today to talk about him? We could say this as in the title of Michael Bishop's novel: "Philip K. Dick is Dead, Alas" – and we are alive, at a time probably worse than his fears, twenty years later. We have therefore the benefits of hindsight, of having available almost all that matters which he wrote, including the mainstream novels, his letters, essays, and other

3 It is not fully clear just which of the 21 letters to the FBI Dick mailed and which he left in his trash expecting the FBI may sift it (cf. the debate in Mullen et al. eds., 246–64 and 275–78, and Sutin 215–17). In both cases he thought they may be read.

expository prose. All of this, including a lot of critical literature, should of course be critically sifted: beside benefits, snares for the unwary have also multiplied since he died in 1982. And furthermore, most important, all of us who have loved (or love-hated) his work, but who at any rate have recognized his genius – that is, his cognitive importance to us the readers then and now – have cognitive, which means also ethical, obligations to his opus and his memory. Perhaps I should then start rather from 1975, when the first major collection of critical work on him was published in that *SFS* issue. This would for me personally be an obligatory starting point because I feel that my essay in that issue needs supplementing in two ways: by taking into account the new materials, and also new theoretical insights and positions some of us on the Left have arrived at examining the few splendors and many miseries since 1975 – including among the splendors new thinking about salvation sparked by new needs and with help from Liberation Theology or a better understanding of Walter Benjamin.

Thus: what does P.K. Dick's fiction from *Ubik* on have to say to those of us, his readers, who have not given up trying to make sense – in however overdetermined and roundabout ways – of our common world in order to find out possibilities of action in it? After all, we see the powerful social classes, all the Palmer-Eldritch-type mad capitalist and military groups lording it over us, working successfully for destruction all the time – that proves that action is possible. We need horizons and orientations, today more than ever, which allow for radical change to counteract their destruction of material and moral life, of our bodies and our values.

Let me be as clear here as I can: I do not wish to talk in the simplified language and conceptuality of a difference between "esthetic" and "committed" (*engagé*) texts, nor, *a fortiori*, in that of "progressive" vs. "regressive" that lurks at its back. I hold with Wittgenstein and Brecht that "to see how" – as opposed to staring or seeing only retinally – is to think as well as to see, that the optical nerve functions by way of the brain. The whole history of art and philosophy has shown us that we cannot understand any "what" without the "how," "for the "how" is in a way an inquiry into "what is what." A navel-gazing "how" may engage our sympathies at moments of the gazer's great navel pain. But such a "how," that denies it

exists as a function of "what," grows increasingly sterile. Thus I do wish to cleave to the fundamental opposition between Eros and Thanatos, fertility and sterility, making our lives easier or more difficult to understand.

Therefore: what can Dick's late novels say to those of us who are not interested in theology as believers or even near-believers, but who are prepared to see theology and cosmogony as an interesting and perhaps highly important symptom of earthly relationships? Those interested in mystical experiences or Gnostic divinities are welcome to find pleasure in dealing intransitively with them, but I wish to explore whether they could be profitably treated as a highly abstract or coded form of transitive talking about individual vs. community and other crucial matters of relationships among people in Dick's time – and by easy extension, in our unhappy times too.

I would like to investigate the significant post-*Ubik* novels of Dick with this in view, but I can here manage only an overview of some foci in selected novels. I cannot, as one should, reconsider here the two "bridge novels," *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? (written 1966, published 1968) and the much richer *Ubik* (written 1966, published 1969). I shall concentrate on *A Scanner Darkly*, *Radio Free Albemuth*, and the "VALIS Trilogy."

1.2 Methodological: The Emitter and His Signals

What I am looking for as far as method goes is a tool or lens which would allow us to approach the tug-of-war between, on the one hand, simple psychological alienation or rebellious *anomie* and, on the other hand, a more articulated delving into the collective reasons ceaselessly reproducing that alienation and reification – that is, between a creativity or critique that is useful or useless for radical anti-capitalist change; only a "thick" version of the latter approach, not only ideational but also formal, has a chance to be enlightening. This may be a central problem of all SF (not to say of all art today); at any rate, as befits a major creator, it is clearly a major and increasingly foregrounded dilemma at the heart of Dick's opus. I have no wish to conceal that this is a variant of the permanent Left or radical critique of the bourgeois world, which is for urgent salvational reasons inevitably drawn to ideal polarities, although we know full well that in practice, and especially artistic practice, there is little black and

white but rather various shades of gray and all other colors. The point is that taking centrally into account the shifting spacetimes and value-systems in fictional texts can retain this political interest but supplement it not only with the tools of modern narratology and if you wish semiotics (let me invoke here only early Lukács, Bakhtin, and Jameson), but also of modern existential and phenomenological inquiry. Indeed, this approach can at its best embody the politics in its inquiry, while recalling it overtly and criticizing where need be any of its stripes, including the necessary simplifications of day-to-day activism.

In other words, I wish to test and if need be clarify my 1975 thesis that *in P.K. Dick's opus we can see an oscillation between the horizons of transitive epistemology*, where reality is undoubted but the characters' or reader's approach to it is in question, *and intransitive ontology*, where the reality itself is in question. I shall use the shorthand of "epistemological" vs. "ontological" for these horizons. Perhaps this distinction can be further focused by borrowing the one between *signal* and *noise* from the theory of information.

Given a stream of information, signal means all that informs us about the source of that stream or that has "meaning" – in the case of a novel, a however roundabout or mediated meaning about possible relationships in the *koinos kosmos* (as Dick would rightly say), the Possible World Zero common to author and readers. It is then usually thought by engineers that noise is all that which carries no information or has no meaning. However, noise gives us another type of information, that about *the channel*. It is auto-referential information, indispensable for any technician who wants to repair a radio or TV and, as De Carolis points out, "listens to the buzzes and whistles to draw information about the device and *not* about modern music" (modern music then often incorporates the buzzes and whistles by upgrading them from noise to signal). I'd add that in a larger sense, this somewhat misnamed noise is also information, and indeed one about a specific subset of PW Zero, the psychophysical consciousness of the author as refracted through the writing conventions and genres she is using. In the case at hand, the "device" or subset is Dick's existential situation as he understood it *at the moment of* writing, and (this seems important) *through* or indeed in part *because of the writing*.

The problem here is a dialectical one: on the one hand, the flow of information being received by the reader scanning the novel is a single whole; on the other hand and simultaneously, at every and any moment optimal information about PW Zero can *only* be attained by distinguishing clearly between the channel noise – here, Dick's psycho-theological encoding – and the meaning coming from and about the signal source. In the theory of information, this distinction is essential but only possible as the work of an external observer: "the channel itself is indifferent to it."

In the classical case in which a system observes itself, which is the case of every artist, there is an inbuilt temptation to confuse signal and noise. The temptation grows particularly strong in the case of a badly functioning society which causes the appearance of isolated and anomic intellectuals and reinforces their anguish. I hold that this is the case of a good part of us, and that in the humanist intelligentsia the isolation – Karl Marx's "alienation" and Hannah Arendt's "loneliness" – is directly proportional to our clear-sightedness and significance as intellectuals, say writers. It causes what De Carolis calls a "primary solipsism." Even conservative or Right-wing writers in SF have been known to share the *anomie*, witness Heinlein's "All You Zombies–" and the interminable follow-ups in the novels of his senility. The pedigree of such solipsism is impressive, for it extends from Buddhism and Plato's Myth of the Cavern to all subjectivist philosophy, say from Descartes through the German Idealists to early Wittgenstein and today. Their common horizon is one of taking the blend or confusion between signal and noise for a natural condition of our PW Zero. An epistemic beast, how to understand the source, is mistaken for an ontological beast, what the source is. The central materialist tenet that we can only have given interpretations of reality, but that it exists outside of us and independently of any our group, is here abandoned.

Obversely, however, for use in a highly sophisticated and *sui generis* context such as fiction or art in general, the engineering aspect of the theory of information has to be modified. No significant writer is able to quite forget the meaningful signal. The urge to communicate to readers matters not confined exclusively to herself as channel seems to make the difference between creativity and psychosis. We shall see that in Dick's case there is a functional equivalent to the emitter's indifference in an

artful oscillation concerning the presence and nature of meaning within a spectrum of mutually exclusive explanations. While the civic *persona* of Phil Dick may have hovered very near psychosis and was most probably at moments deep within it, the control and clarity largely evidenced in his work disallow using this as a key to their interpretation: the writer's *persona*, the implied author, was for all relevant purposes not psychotic or crazy.

The criteria I am using as epistemic tools make it mandatory for criticism (as I understand it) to scrutinize whether it is generally possible to extend the author's understanding of his situation as exemplary to everybody else's situation. A spread of answers is possible, which I tried to discuss once for the specific case of Victorian SF (Suvin "Narrative"). In the pessimal case, the author is so idiosyncratic that it cannot be extended at all; the writings are then soon forgotten. In very rare optimal cases, the author's understanding can be shared with some appreciable accuracy by large groups of people, entire social classes of a civilization – these are then the authors taught in Literature 101 or high school, your Shakespeares, Dostoevskys, Rabelaises, Homers or Lucretiuses. More usually, the author's take on reality cannot be extended outside of a small group sharing his existential position (his core fans, in SF parlance), or at least not without confronting it significantly with other types of understanding that the critic has good reasons for treating as more illuminating and useful – in brief, better. Any such more normative reasons are finally in the nature of a bet and neither necessarily nor (for sure) eternally valid. But for given purposes, those of discussing a worthwhile and significant but not quite optimal writer – which is, as a rule, what we do in SF – they can be supremely useful. Given the resonance that the works of P.K. Dick have now had for thirty or forty years, and which may in the foreseeable future vary as to whom it affects and in exactly how but to my mind has no reason to abate, I believe this is his position in our present debates.

To discuss the significance of Dick's later works, then, necessarily leads to some disentangling of meaning and noise. It also necessarily leads to some, I hope discreet, use of his biography. I shall assume as a given for this investigation what a number of us have been arguing about the epistemologically transitive and thus socially critical or "signaling" nature of his earlier novels, which culminates (as is by now generally accepted) in

what I called his "plateau tetralogy" of *The Man in the High Castle*, *Martian Time-Slip*, and *Dr Bloodmoney* (written 1961–64, published 1962–65). I leave here unresolved the stature of the contemporary *Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch,* on which some critics heap one-sided praise[4] whereas others such as myself now doubt we should speak of a "plateau tetralogy."

Finally, I see no other way of seizing what Dick is getting at than to identify in each case the main nodes of his plots, which inevitably means also to interpret them, while getting at an encompassing evaluation only after having disentangled them. Dick's truth lies in his plot or *fabula*.

2. *Approaching the Later P.K. Dick: Dead End and Necessity of Salvation*

2.1.

Both for my purposes and in fairness to Dick, I do not have to deal with works that do not represent him at his utmost stretch (except as testimonials to his dilemmas). In my judgment such is the case of five novels written in what one might call his crisis decade 1966–76, between *Ubik* and *A Scanner Darkly*. Stableford and Clute rightly call *Deus Irae* "a rather unsatisfactory collaboration with Roger Zelazny." In *Galactic Pot-Healer* (written 1967–68, published 1969), the emblematic artist-craftsman is chosen as the necessary helper of a very unclear godhead. Though any novel by Dick will have its share of felicities, the central flaw of this one is a hesitant approach to an "inner space" quasi-Jungian allegory, which is neither clear nor cogent enough to sustain the weight put upon it. It also ends abruptly, and such perfunctoriness will increase in the following three novels: *A Maze of Death* (written 1968, published 1970), *Our Friends from Frolix 8* (written 1968–69, published 1970), and *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* (written 1970–73, published 1974), are broken-backed narratives. Most of *A Maze* is a banalised ontology,

4 Among those critics is Lawrence Sutin, to whom we owe the rich and refreshingly balanced, and thus so far the best, biography of Dick (albeit with a quite one-sided title), but whose readings of Dick's texts often seem very dubious to me.

with insufficient narrative control and a plot of successive murders in an isolated planet community à la Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*, which is pulled back into epistemology in the last dozen pages. There the preceding narration is revealed as a collective dream generated by a mind-linking machine to alleviate the dead end of a crew's endless voyage in an out-of-control spaceship. This superordinated reality seems even more hopeless, since it lacks the presence of divine manifestations from the universe of the realistic dream, but in Dick's frequent sting-in-the-tail reversal one appears to the main character Seth who will be reborn as a cactus.

Our Friends is a story of competing supermen "races" out of van Vogt, where a redeeming man returns from the stars with a selfless Frolixian alien who wipes out the superior part of the supermen's brains. The usual and prescient Dickian police state is in evidence hunting the little working man, and among the felicities which make it the most interesting text of the three is some excellent satire of fakely objective TV comments; however, the final discussion pits the superiority of private sentiments not only against the arrogance of power but also against intellect in general. Finally, the protagonist of *Flow* finds out he officially does not exist in the US police state of an alternate reality, but in the last quarter of the story his original reality seeps back for reasons vaguely indicated as due to mind-altering drugs, which also ontologically alter reality. The main turns in the plot thus arrive like a succession of rabbits out of a hat, in a quite arbitrary way. These new drugs are associated with a subsidiary female character, one of the four or five who flit scattershot in and out of the protagonist's life; there is also a subplot bearer, no less than a humane police general. Beside the grim background of concentration camps and besieged campuses, the novel has, as usual, some splendid passages of pain and bewilderment, and six pages of a great Parable of the Rabbit trying to overcome his biology, which however stands isolated in the narration.

All these novels are interesting documents – but not much more – for what Stableford and Clute call Dick's "sense of a shrinking [and derelict] world," full of pain and increasing loss of orientation for everybody involved, that has been coming intensively to the fore since *Martian Time-Slip* and is calling for extraordinary *forces of salvation*. The dead end in

and of these novels, where the politics (if any are indicated) can only be totally oppressive and are to be forsaken in favor of new existential orientations, centered on an ethics of love and caring, threatens to dissolve even the powers of coherent narration. All of this indicates well the reasons for Dick's receptivity to a sudden radical break of horizons which would hold the promise of starting anew. K. S. Robinson's example of *Our Friends from Frolix 8*, where "For the first time since the 1950s, a world police state is overthrown, but the revolution is accomplished by an alien with God-like powers" (*Novels* 103), indicates the direction to be taken.

My question is, then, whether the remaining half a dozen novels – *A Scanner Darkly*, *Radio Free Albemuth*, and the "VALIS Trilogy," and their peculiar do-it-yourself theological focus and argumentation – may be read, in terms of literary theory as well as of theological tradition, as a *parable* of collective earthly matters. A first tentative indication of the horizons within which to approach the later Dick is then that the theological aspect of his speculations may be a property of the channel, of the individualist psychology of Philip Dick, while the focus on the salvation of our common world below deals with the source in Dick's reality, the USA of 1967–81 (as emblematically represented by its different California locales). Not being a psychologist or theologian, I'm in the position of the engineer who is not interested in the channel *except* insofar as it is indispensable for articulating the source – but at that moment, I may be supremely interested in the channel. In fiction, the channel is even more intimately interwoven with message or meaning than in information theory, for it codetermines if not the source, then our understanding of or take on it.

However, before I get to Dick's last "vision" novels, *Radio Free Albemuth* and the "VALIS Trilogy," I wish to sound the depths of his descent into despair in *A Scanner Darkly* as a logically and historically necessary introduction to my question. It is a powerful and almost unbearable novel, certainly his first masterpiece since *Ubik*.

2.2. Dick's Second Plateau: *A Scanner Darkly*

In this novel (written 1973–75, published 1977), Dick's frequent depiction of a US police State ("this fascist police state," ch. 1) to whom the little

man-protagonist is opposed grows almost totally dark since the little man Bob Arctor is himself an active agent of the police, a narc with the cover name Fred. While the rich live "in their fortified huge apartment complexes" (ch. 2), the little people – our almost exclusive focus in the text – live in a totally controlled State where surveillance cameras (upgraded to holograms) are routinely used, every pay phone is tapped, supersonic tight beams are used for police assassinations (ch. 10), and the closest friends inform on each other (Fred, Donna, and Barris) and suspect each other. Two themes are prominent: the universal use of *drugs* which not only cause hallucinations and loss of reality sense but finally make for physical death or at least brain death; and the SF gadget of the *scramble suit*, an invention that hooks up a multifaced lens to a mini-computer holding a million and a half physiognomies projected at random onto a spherical membrane that fits around a person. The suit makes police agents unrecognizable, and is used not only for spying on the public but also in all of the narc's contacts with the police. This latter quite improbable ploy, which no police in the world would have authorized, serves to strengthen the paranoid situation where not only everybody informs on everybody but nobody knows who is who.

A thick web of correspondences obtains in the novel. The scramble suit resonates semantically with drug-induced scrambled receptor sites in the brain, or the split between its two hemispheres. This was a popular hypothesis at the time, which as presented with a fair amount of pseudo-scientific gobbledegook – "a toxic brain psychosis affecting the percept system by splitting it" (ch. 7) – mixes about three incompatible theses. This can be taken either as one of Dick's frequent fast shuffles as a virtuoso semantic cardsharp or more charitably as a sign he wasn't taking the hypothesis too seriously as a causal explanation. Dick was usually (alas) little interested in causes, he was interested in the phenomenological results, which had then to be explained through the best analogies he could at the moment find. In other words, the cybernetically created shifting identities are not only parallel but in some unexplained way analogous to the drug-created split identities. A further almost Symbolist correspondence surrounds the acronym SD: it is the new super-drug Substance D, whose source the police can apparently never find; it is Spiritual Death or Slow Death; it

is also Scanner Darkly (with the A edited out in another fast shuffle – and an early title was "To Scare the Dead," *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick*, 229).[5] Finally, the omnipresent image of the novel is the materialized metaphor of a man divided against himself: when the narc "Fred" has to spy on himself he must edit enough out of the holo videos to keep his identity as Arctor secret.

The boundaries of fact and fiction begin to crumble in this "creative editing yourself out" (ch. 7) but leaving enough in to avert suspicion. Nonetheless, there are two villainous forces in the book, the *total police control* over his characters' lives and the *total invasion of drugs* into it. Though the novel is held together not only by the system of correspondences but primarily by the focus on how both these forces "scramble" Fred's mind, their duality introduces a basic confusion of values. The police control which is ostensibly there to combat drugs is shown as not only abhorrent but totally counterproductive: in order to inform on the dope-dealers the narcs have to begin taking drugs themselves, and in fact our protagonist Fred/Bob Arctor becomes addicted to Substance D and succumbs to it in the course of the novel. But on the other hand, Dick's animus is clearly against the drug culture, which he knew well but only marginally participated in during the 1960s (his thing was rather pills). True, his appended "Author's Note," which identifies this novel as a requiem for the naive and wiped-out drug-taking generation of his, is entirely too oversimplified to account for the book. Still, if the drugs are supremely bad, then *the bad and grotesque police fighting it is in a way good*. This contradiction is never explored nor even mentioned in the novel (it can obliquely be inferred through Fred's sympathetic boss, and is accompanied by some dubious theology about God transmuting evil to good in ch. 14). It is of a piece with Dick's permanent ideological type that I would call "the good ruler," or finding the good in a bad ruler. How illusory and misleading this tends to be can be seen by comparing it with the Rampart scandal in Los Angeles in the late 1990s, which revealed that the L.A.P.D. Crash sections had set

5 Unless another name or title is mentioned, all quotes from Dick's non-fictional writings are from Sutin ed. by page number.

up prostitution and drug networks to compete with the gangs they were supposed to be fighting …

Finally, there is also a hint that there has been a total takeover by commercial interests: all places are the same, with identical McDonaldburgers everywhere: "Life in Anaheim, California, was a commercial for itself, endlessly replayed. Nothing changed: it just spread farther and farther in the form of neon ooze … How the land became plastic, he thought …" (ch. 2). However, this is not analyzed further; the economics of the drug-trade will only surface at the end, but then in an interesting way.

Instead, *A Scanner* focusses on the phenomenology, and primarily on Fred's increasingly split and malfunctioning mind. This is both the novel's limitation and its strength. On that level it is coherent and narratively consistent, even though it does creak in a few places (such as Arctor's German quotes in ch. 11, or his final adventures as "Bruce"). In Robinson's opinion, "There exists no finer character study of an undercover agent in contemporary America than this novel" (*Novel*s 109). Amid the thick gloom, the novel abounds in sympathy for the put-upon little people, primarily Arctor and his love Donna. Arctor's possibly drug-induced visions, as when he hears a voice saying death will be vanquished and all the lives "backward right now" will be righted, do not help him to help himself. In the same culminating chapter 13, amid his withdrawal seizure, Donna recounts to him the story of Tony Amsterdam, who saw God after an acid trip and felt very good; however, after a year he realized he would never see God again: "he was going to live on and on like he was, seeing nothing. Without any purpose." What he had actually seen through a doorway was another mysterious world of silence and nighttime beauty: "And then later on, when he couldn't see it any more, he'd be on the freeway driving along, with all the trucks, and he'd get madder than hell. He said he couldn't stand all the motion and noise, everything going this way and that, all the clanking and banging." After this parable, Donna tells the stupefied Fred /Arctor he'll be restored: "On the day when everything taken away unjustly from people will be restored to them. It may take a thousand years, or longer than that, but that day will come, and all the balances will be set right." (all in ch. 13) Such passages prepare the outburst of the soteriological theme in the "VALIS cycle" (*Albemuth* and the "Trilogy").

Though not sufficiently developed, Donna is an interesting character. She is both a federal police agent and the member of a resistance movement, and uses Arctor's illness to "plant" him inside a work farm that the resistance suspects of growing Substance D. Her speech about ripping off Coca-Cola as a capitalist monopoly (ch. 8) is an instance of the genuine, somewhat crazy plebeian resentment not too far from Pirate Jenny's song from Brecht-Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, the downtrodden dishwasher girl dreaming of killing the whole class of her oppressors. The authorial voice is very near to Donna: after the Tony Amsterdam parable and some further meditation on this cursed, fallen, wrong world, she hears a police car siren in hot pursuit: "It sounded like a deranged animal, greedy to kill" (ch. 13).

Arctor gradually loses his identity, evolving first into a cohabitation with the emotionless informer Fred, while after the crisis both identities are lost in a seemingly brainless treatment patient called Bruce. Unbeknownst to him, Bruce has been secretly planted by Donna to work for the powerful and rich New Path company, which offers work-rehabilitation for the drugged. In their closed fields, we are shown Bruce discovering the pretty flowers that indicate the company grows the drug Substance D or Mors ontologica (meaning "ontological death"). It is made clear that even though he doesn't understand what he saw, he will be able to report back. Thus finally, the spirit of rebellion and subversion is continuing on in spite of the overwhelming forces of the Police State and drugging. It must be confessed though that this is only a vague and, in some ways, unresolved indication, a little undying spark of hope amid the overwhelming gloom.

Laudably, the novel rises in places to skeptical self-reflexivity (Dick's forte whenever used), so that epistemology and ontology are actually discussed on the final two pages. When Bruce thinks the blue flowers are gone, the New Path boss who cut off his view tells him, "No, you simply can't see them … Epistemology …" (ch. 17) This fits well into Dick's definition of reality as "that which when you stop believing in it, it doesn't go away" (*VALIS* ch. 5), but not with his less clear-eyed moments. Both of the themes here, the occlusion of reality by means of biochemistry or of electronic optics, are epistemological. So is all the talk about the split percept system, Fred's self-diagnosis that he has a "cognitive … rather than perceptive" impairment (ch. 7), or the realistic affair of the forged cheque (ch.

11). Ontology, a true change in reality, takes over briefly here and there, as when the picked-up girl's face melds into Donna's and this registers on the scanned holo-cube (at the end of ch.s 9 and 10). Yet doubts linger on: compared to Paul's epistle to the Corinthians that invokes a superior reality, Dick's title is not only technologically upgraded from glass to scanner (ch. 13), but even in this largely epistemological novel lacks Paul's monolithic confidence in a real and superior reality.

The private psychological problems of the small man culminate and self-destruct in this descent into Hell, after which they cannot be of further fictional use for Dick. As in Dante, even though much more ambiguously, he emerged and looked at the stars.

2.3. Dick's Second Plateau: *Radio Free Albemuth*

Diametrically opposed to *Scanner* in tone (but not only in that), *Radio Free Albemuth* (written 1976, further RFA) is Dick's first full-blown attempt to translate his "mystical experience[s]" (RFA ch. 2) into fiction, to present them as fiction, and to cope with them by means of fiction. Since it was published only after the "VALIS Trilogy" and Dick's death, in 1985, it has been unduly overshadowed by the *Trilogy* and the debates it promoted about his sanity and his theological system, which I consider marginal to my purpose and to Dick's significance. Unduly, for it is a coherent, lucid, and significant achievement, at least on par with the "VALIS Trilogy." On the whole, it successfully melds the Police-State theme with the theme of invading extraterrestrial visions.

The police State is instituted by Ferris F. Fremont – a blend of Nixon, McCarthy, and Hitler – who had become US president in 1969. First of all, this locates the story in a parallel Possible World or universe, which is however a parable of what is coming about in the Possible World Zero, our universe in the mid-1970s. But dating the swing to full repression to *before* rather than after the novel's appearance is strange. In this type of dystopian SF, the nearer the story date the greater the urgency. Orwell's putting the Possible World in a shockingly near future was also a twisted way of talking exactly about what Dick too is talking about, for the date of 1984 simply inverts the last two digits of 1948, the year Orwell was writing.

Thus, in a further twist on Orwell, Dick's chronological novum underscores the urgency of danger: in a very similar world, whose Berkeley and Orange County venues are described with detailed autobiographic realism, *freedom has already been lost*. Fremont comes to power by denouncing a mysterious but ubiquitous subversive organization "Aramchek": "Obviously no one can destroy it. No one's safe from it. No one knows where it'll turn up next …" (RFA ch. 3). As Valis reveals to Nick, Fremont is himself part of a vast secret organization which has assassinated the Kennedys, Malcolm X, King, and so on. Like Hitler, he institutionalizes ubiquitous "security" agents – especially zealous are the young – to check on "the moral state of hundreds of thousands of citizens," and builds concentration camps (ch. 9).

A bad limitation of Dick's – which he however shares with the great majority of US SF – is his insularity. While vastly if unsystematically knowledgeable about music, literature, and the aspects of philosophy that interested him, he was not at all conversant with nor really interested in the world outside the USA – except for the Cold War rivalry with the USSR which subsumed the Vietnam War, but is here explained as a covert identity of the two "Fascist" powers. True, the USA is a very big island and up to the invention of the airplane, submarine, and ICBM could really isolate itself from the Old World, but at the same time it has since the nineteenth century related to most of the world as the rich North to the poor South, and moreover a North which is rich because the South is poor. Therefore, Dick is reduced to noticing poverty only in the specific and overdetermined form of the US slums, mainly formed by immigrants, and he can easily forget economics in his otherwise totalizing explanations. Nonetheless, if we factor this limitation in, then Fremont's canny political invention and strategy is prescient of, and continues to be highly apposite to, the present regime's repression in Bush Jr.'s "Homeland" (including the use of the Social Security number for checking on people). And the objection that the huge US military establishment proves it cannot be in cahoots with USSR is met with another, to my mind prescient reply: "To keep our own people down. Not theirs." (ch. 15) The prescience is again partial: the real reply would be, of course, "to keep both the US and other peoples down."

The visionary experiences are discussed as they unfold between two *alter egos* of the author, Nicholas Brady and Phil Dick, who also function

as alternative narrators in a tripartite Phil-Nick-Phil narrative.[6] Nick has the revelations from aliens that push him into an underground movement called "Aramchek" against the dictator Fremont. His friend Phil, an SF writer, functions not only as a dialogic sidekick but also as a doubter whose confutation adds to Nick's credibility, and finally as an ally who stays on in a coda to the novel after Nick's death.

Dick's message is heavily and multiply safeguarded and so to speak fenced in through spinning a series of conflicting interpretations, a feat he excelled at. This is a staple of interesting SF, prominent in Wells's foundational *Time Machine*, though Dick probably absorbed it rather through van Vogt's *Null-A* series. As he put it, "Theories are like planes at LA international: a new one along every minute" (ch. 19). It has the function of forestalling, ventilating, and undercutting the reader's objections. Phil's first alternative hypothesis is one of psychosis:

> As far as I was concerned it was a chronic fantasy life that Nicholas's mind had hit on to flesh out the little world in which he lived. Communicating with Valis (as he called it) made life bearable for him, which it otherwise would not be. Nicholas, I decided, had begun to part company with reality, out of necessity … This was a classic example of how the human mind, lacking real solutions, managed its miseries. (ch. 5)
>
> Come back, Nicholas. To this world. The present. From whatever other world you're drifting away to from pain and fear – fear of the authorities, fear of what lies ahead for all of us in this country. We've got to put up one last fight. "Nick," I said, "you've got to fight." (ch. 14)

However, Phil then witnesses Valis flashing a message to Nick that saves his small son from death by an undiagnosed hernial failure, and his second hypothesis that Valis is God, more precisely the Christian Holy Spirit (ch. 7). A bewildering string of incidents and speculations taken from Dick's life, including some frank admissions of the fear that made him collaborate with the FBI by denouncing others (ch. 10), is worked into the novel. It is revealed the messages from the star Albemuth are beamed to Earth through an orbiting satellite, which is discovered and blown up

6 To prevent confusion, "Dick" will henceforth mean only the author P.K. Dick, whereas his namesake in the various novels will be called Phil.

by the Soviets, covertly allied with the USA. The messages seem to imply also that the characters live simultaneously in the evil Roman Empire (an idea possibly stimulated by the masterpiece *334* by his acquaintance Thomas Disch), at a time when the first failed attempt of overthrowing it by Christ will be repeated. It should be stressed that the soteriological speculations arising out of a channeling of the 1960s impulse for justice and peace into mystical visions are as usual, but perhaps more fully so, firmly rooted in an American demotic or plebeian language, a mix of innocence and arrogance, that constitutes a great part of their charm and believability. When the vision allows him to see the trashy world around him with new eyes, Nick reflects:

> My incompetence had called these invisible friends forth. Had I been more gifted I would not now know of them. It was, in my mind, a good trade. Few people had the awareness I now possessed. Because of my limitations an entire new universe had revealed itself to me, a benign and living hyperenvironment endowed with absolute wisdom. Wow, I said to myself. You can't beat that, I had caught a glimpse of the Big People. It was a lifetime dream fulfilled … (ch. 18)

Phil's third hypothesis is that a parallel universe, possessing a more advanced science that had not divorced itself from Christianity, was assisting our backward Earth; or alternately, fourth, that the ancient Christians were returning and broadcasting to Nick's through his unused brain tissue (ch. 19). A fifth hypothesis about a superior life-form from Albemuth materializing in his brain and making the chosen carriers immortal is broached later by Sylvia, a first sketch for the Sophia of the *Trilogy*. When this welter of conflicting interpretations has slyly established that what is to be interpreted is at any rate believable, we are given Nick's most extended dialogue with Valis, a father figure arranging for a usually fatal accident out of which Nick walks away reconstituted, understanding he has been reborn many times, "to work toward some distant goal unseen, not as yet comprehended … Overthrowing the tyranny of Ferris Fremont was a stop along the way, not a goal but a moment of decision, from which I then continued as before." (ch. 23) For all the echoes of Plato's anamnesis, the mystical vision is here also a political one, which can be shared by total disbelievers in supernatural agencies. Dick constantly oscillates between rank UFOlatry or

mystification of the Scientology type and a shrewd realization of political oppression and a faith that enables resistance to it.

As Nick then correctly realizes, Fremont would win, the police would destroy their small resistance group. Typically and self-reflectively, Dick envisages resistance by means of coded messages through art: Nick is a highly placed recording studio executive, and he attempts to smuggle subliminal messages into popular records. This fails, Nick and his whole group are shot, and Phil is condemned to perpetual forced labor. However, an opening toward brighter perspectives is re-established in the novel's coda, narrated by Phil as lifelong convict of the Fascist regime. It is a double opening, ideological and pragmatic, on a continuing subversion against the Fascist takeover. The ideological opening is achieved in the discussion, similar to the end of a Shavian play, with another convict friend, the plumber Leon, who prefers political resistance to religion but appreciates Aramchek's actions and its reliance on the inner voice of simple people. His final judgment is however: "There has to be something here first, Phil. The other world is not enough … Because … this is where the suffering is. This is where the injustice and imprisonment is. Like us, the two of us. We need it here. Now" (ch. 30). And at the end of the whole novel, the despondent Phil hears the latest hit rock release from a radio used by kids beyond the press-gang workplace, which features the exact words Nick was going to use smuggling in the revelation about Fremont. Nick's group was a diversion that achieved its goal. The tune is suddenly cut off, but still it exists. The novel ends on this impenitent note:

> The transistor radio continued to play. Even more loudly. And, in the wind, I could hear others starting up everywhere. By the kids, I thought. The kids.

It should be noted that this culmination of the novel, to me one of the high points of Dick's whole opus, articulates the typical Dickian, multilingually coded, title in political terms. For "Albemuth" carries strong echoes of "alba" from Latin, which means both white and later, as in Provençal poetry, dawn and also a poetic form, the song about dawn when the lover must part from his damsel (best known in English literature from Romeo's parting with Juliet); while "muth" means courage in German, phonetically adjusted to proper Semitic sound as in the Biblical "behemoth": the courage

of waiting for the dawn of justice, the supreme earthly or societal virtue, hidden in an allusive metaphor. The whole title of *Radio Free Albemuth* imitates in its form the various "freedom stations" – true or fake – of anti-Nazi and anti-Stalinist resistance as well as some countercultural enterprises run by local communities in the 1960s as "the free University" and indeed "free" radio-stations (e.g., in the US and Japanese student revolt). Beyond that, it can be glossed as an emission by a more knowledgeable, artistically hidden source working for freedom from political oppression and instilling the courage of waiting for the dawn of justice. There are many noises in the channel, and some outright fade-outs; and as any emission, it is liable to misinterpretation as to what the source is saying.

3. The "VALIS Trilogy"

3.1. *VALIS*

The novel *VALIS* (written 1978, published 1981) can be divided into two parts, before and after the viewing of the eponymous movie *Valis* in chapter 9. Both parts are rather prolix, but the first part especially so. They are situated in the 1960s California, to begin with the Bay Area where "[t]he authorities [had become] as psychotic as those they hunted" (ch. 1), and the author's *alter ego* is suffering from "fear, helplessness and an inability to act" (ch. 4). As Robinson encapsulates it, the first part is of interest as a presentation of a character similar but not identical to P.K. Dick, split into Horselover Fat and Phil Dick: "the flamboyant science fiction thinker, with reality breakdown as his dominant theme [, and] the hard-headed realist observer of contemporary America" ("Afterword" 251). In my terms, Fat's belief in a divine revelation from VALIS carries the ontological theme, bolstered by long excerpts from Fat's exegesis, and Phil's as well as his friend's Kevin's needling the epistemological theme.

Through most of the book, "Fat plunges into the flow of theories, terms, citations, accepting, forgetting (never refuting), collaging, stitching … As we read, we lose the propositions in the process." (Palmer 335) Confusingly

if endearingly, right at the beginning the narrator, whose diagnosis is that Fat is going nuts, says "I am Horselover Fat, and I am writing this in the third person to gain much-needed objectivity." Phil the narrator keeps in the first eight chapters a running fire of shrewd observations about how Fat projects his hunger and his take on world as information onto the God that is supposedly firing independent info (the Logos) on him. Thus, Fat (as Phil) is writing very convincingly how Fat is a silly and whacked-out psychotic. Yet this ironic distance conveys in fact Fat's – and even more so the author's – sanity and believability. In the novel's second part, sparked by the viewing of a movie that convinces the little group around Fat to visit the movie-makers, it becomes clear Phil was a patsy, and his frequent and quite shrewd sardonic observations and rude hyperbolae were set up so that they can be confounded, wiping out the reader's disbelief too.

However, at the end it still remains unclear how Fat can go cavorting around the world, unless Phil is truly a psychotic imagining this. This is only one main example of an intrusive, perhaps willed, lack of focusing in the novel as it develops: a lot of mutually incompatible speculations, repetitive info dumping, repetitive fixations of Fat's (such as the needless detour on his relation to Sherri for a chapter and a half), or simply bits of sloppy writing – the noise in the channel. Amid all this, the interesting aspect of Fat's cosmology is his belief that we all live in "the Empire," a Black Iron Prison for body and soul, composed simultaneously of contemporary USA/California and the Roman Empire at the time of the first Christians. The less interesting aspect is Fat's belief in a plasmatic quasi-divine species which from time to time bonds with people like Jesus, the Kennedy brothers, and Martin L. King, or – at different times – his belief in an irrational and evil ruler of the present universe (or at least Terra, as in C.S. Lewis's novels), behind whom the real benevolent forces of creation also operate and venture down to help us. This is, as Dick knew, a form of Gnosticism. Therefore, Dick's home-made cosmology added, the phenomenal world of evil isn't real, and we deluded people are morally innocent – though neither necessarily follows from the rule of evil.

Fat has grown increasingly agitated by missing God (like Tony Amsterdam) and is coming to believe that his choice is immediate salvation or death. Therefore, when his group views the movie *Vali*s, written and

directed by the rock star Lampton who receives the same pink-beam burst as Fat did, after some decidedly delirious exegesis they contact the makers, and get invited to visit them in Northern California. The movie-makers appear to be from a race come to Earth in ancient times to counteract the Empire with help of VALIS, the satellite from Albemuth, though hints may be found that its info radiation is also toxic. The real godhead or Logos is Sophia, the preternaturally wise 2-year-old daughter of Lampton's wife and VALIS. At the first interview with her, Phil and Fat fuse back into one person, that is, Phil grows whole. The new female Christ's or Wisdom's teaching, where Dick rewrites the Sermon on the Mount, is a kind of humanist rather than theist religion: "Man is holy, and the true god, the living god, is man himself … You … are to love one another as you love me and as I love you …" And further: "The day of Wisdom and the rule of Wisdom has come. The day of power, which is the enemy of wisdom, ends … This has not been your world, but I will make it your world; I will change it for you. Fear not" (all ch. 12). However, Sophia warns them not to trust the Lamptons, who turn out, in a vanvogtian twist of competing supermen, to be on the wrong side. Immediately thereafter, Sophia is killed by the Lampton group, supposedly in an accident, Fat "returns," and sets off on a search for her reincarnation. The rest remain in California; at first disenchanted, they keep getting hints that the true king may return. They keep the faith and wait. It is a minimal and unresolved ending, when compared with the high-flown hopes of salvation or even (as Robinson points out) with the aching dream-glimpse of harmonious life in a petty-bourgeois suburban Arcadia, taken from an earlier age or childhood memories (ch. 7).

What is one then to make of this novel, which is to my mind at best a half-success both ideationally and narratively? Ideationally, because it perhaps rightly refuses to present any coherent cosmo-theological system. But then the interest shifts out of the cosmological *non sequiturs* either into the analysis of Fat's psychosis and/or into the interaction of Fat with Phil, Kevin, the deity, the superior race of Lampton's, and similar. The urgency and importance of the salvational quest, as well as the grave charm of the encounter with Sophia, have undercut the assumption of simple psychosis. Yet the interest in the quest bogs down in narrative repetitions and meanders, for the novel abounds in false starts and dead ends; themes and motifs

get picked up and dropped for no apparent reason except that another and more dazzling one occurred to Dick as he was writing. It has been reported the major narrative success of his last period, *A Scanner*, was tightly edited by a New York editor. He could have profited from such help here.

The main hinge where a lack of clarity and narrative coherence makes itself felt is the ideationally central Sophia, who appears too late and is snuffed out after one bout of interviews and pronouncements. Maybe there's a valid allegorical point there, something like "we see supreme and coherent wisdom only late and only briefly," akin to incarnating Wisdom into a 2-year-old girl, which I take to be a valid and indeed felicitous indication. In the theology of *VALIS*, Wisdom, even when revealed, will be destroyed by the forces of the Blind God just as Christ was. This is a tenable if despairing hypothesis. But the novel as a whole has a much too large investment in realistic questions of life in Orange County and Fat's sanity to make such a sudden and brief irruption of allegory believable. The same holds for the ensuing second split of Phil and Fat, with a regenerated and active Fat roaming around Oceania (which suggests to me he hadn't learned much from Wisdom). The echoes of Gauguin are out of place in a Tahiti and Bikini of nuclear fallouts and venereal diseases.

In the French eighteenth century, a short prose form was found which came to be called *conte philosophique*. In the hands of great writers, such a "philosophical story" – that is, a narration whose goal was to reveal through a series of incidents and debates about them a major ideological and civic point – became a major social force, and by the way a major form of early SF. It faced the false pretenses of European civilizational superiority with the dignity and wisdom of Others – the superior political and sexual morality of the Tahiti chief in Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*, or the superior cosmic stature, material and moral, of the inhabitants of Saturn and Sirius in Voltaire's *Micromégas*. Dick's final works, and perhaps most of his major achievements, aspire to the status of a new kind of *roman philosophique* – indeed in the "VALIS Trilogy," with its ambitions of a new *Ulysses*, of a *roman-fleuve philosophique*. The ambition is laudable and where it most nearly succeeds of major importance. But a do-it-yourself philosophy, even by an imaginative genius as Dick certainly was, will result in major problems. One way of putting it would be the significant fact

that in *VALIS* the true God "takes on the likeness of sticks and trees and beer cans in gutters – he presumes to be trash discarded" (ch. 5); though perhaps the superior extra-terrestrials do this as his agents. As in *RFA* and indeed earlier, Dick's god is an artisan/artist – potter, writer, or modern sculptor – who works in trash and discarded Americana. Dick knew of Stanisław Lem's diagnosis that he makes art in spite of and out of trash, the metaphor for his world pinpointed by his famous neologisms "gubbish" and "kipple," and went the atheist Lem one better by deifying trash. The cosmology itself is like the above description of the divine force, cobbled together from bits and pieces of trashy Americana with a beautiful little glazed pot thrown in at some points, but with little unified impact except as they are typical objects of a realist gaze. This is to be followed in the other two novels of the Trilogy.

3.2. *The Divine Invasion*

This second novel (written 1980, published 1981, further DI) is ideationally and narratively more coherent, though the following account streamlines not only Dick's gradual revelations but also his sometimes competing explanations, confusingly overloaded details and layers, and simple inconsistencies (only a single set of planes will be landing on LA International Airport in my account, without collisions). True, for most of the first eight chapters it is located on a standard paranoiac planet where each colonist lives alone in an isolated dome, akin to Dick's earlier and usually inferior SF. However, that planet is far from the influence of the evil Demiurge fashioning the reality of Terra (as in C.S. Lewis), so that Jehovah can arrange for the coming about of a latter-day and somewhat weird Holy Family. It consists of Herb Asher as an unwilling Joseph, Rybys as a combination of Virgin Mother and sick Bitch, and their child-to-be Emmanuel. Dick's usual roles of the little-man protagonist plus the powerful antagonist are filled by Herb and – in a jump to Gnosticism – the boy Emmanuel or Manny, who eventually turns out not to be Christ but the fallen male aspect of a split Godhead that has for unclear reasons forgotten his divine character. The family, accompanied and aided by old

Elias, then travels to Earth for the novel's theological-cum-political battle evolving in the flesh and mind of the characters.

The central antagonistic conflict is, as in *VALIS*, between a reconstituted Manny and the satanic ruler of this world, Belial, who has crowned his dominion since the fall of Masada by setting up a clerical-fascist police State run by the combined forces of the Christian-Islamic Church and the Communist Party; in a vanvogtian subplot, there is a behind-the-scenes struggle between Church and Party, on the model of the medieval Papacy vs. Empire. This dystopia is again a version of Plato's Cave, the Black Iron Prison from *VALIS*: "They are living in a cheap horror film" (ch. 5). There are two non-antagonistic subsidiary tensions: Manny meets the girl Zina, a refurbished female principle or Shekhinah much more articulated and charming than her predecessor Sophia in *VALIS*, and Herb finally gets to meet his idol singer Linda Fox who is in this universe not yet famous and thus not out of his reach. The first opposition is more weighty: the male aspect of divinity, aided by Elias – the prophet Elijah – and gradually remembering he is En Sof, wishes to reconstitute "substantial" reality by wiping out the enemy world as Lord of Hosts, a proceeding which discounts the unwilling victims of even the best power play, such as Rybys (ch. 5 – the point is not fully clarified). The female aspect, equally opposed to the satanic Demiurge and dystopia, wishes to break reality down and to make the male principle remember their joint powers by using beauty and play in a sub-world that Belial never penetrated, which I would interpret as art, playfulness, and epistemology, though in Dick it is also consubstantial with compassion (ch. 12). A series of reality fluctuations arises both from Belial's temporarily getting the upper hand and from the contention between Manny and Zina; their ontology is somewhat unclearly superimposed on earlier epistemological fluctuations due to Herb's cryogenic suspended animation – a contamination of recycling from *Palmer Eldritch* and *Ubik*. These fluctuations shape the tensions of the second opposition in the Herb-Linda subplot. However, the correct actions of the little man feed back into the macrocosmic level: Herb's accepting Manny's brute facts of reality (Linda's menstruation) in spite of his esthetic idealization of her, as well as his turning back from his private interest at a key point, in turn enable

Manny to realize his limitations and accept Zina.[7] In that sense Herb's story is a sophisticated and optimistic semi-humanist rewrite of the bet in *Job* or *Faust*. Linda herself becomes then Herb's intercessor or personal Savior, the female principle on the micro-level, bringing mercy into the harsh world of Old Testament justice and divine wrath. Concomitantly, as the Godhead remembers its entirety and grows whole, Belial can be defeated without destroying the underlying reality his sway has occluded.

I would here too find the most interesting ideational aspect in the eventual fusion between Zina's beauty and Manny's truth, a variant of Keats's ending to the *Grecian Urn*, though I think it is unfortunately too optimistic about the powers of beauty to hold today's technoscientifically enhanced forces of destruction at bay without a Lord of the Hosts. I do not mind Dick's creative rewriting of the Bible (see the witty discussion of it as a hologram in ch. 6) in a blend of Gnosticism, the Kabbala, Platonism, and scraps of half a dozen other mystery religions (cf. Sutin, *The Shifting Realities* 337): by their fruits ye shall judge them. What I mind is that in DI the incompatibility between epistemology (interpreting an underlying real reality – that which doesn't go away when you disbelieve) and ontology (changing the underlying reality or making it go away) is never fully faced; when briefly glanced at – in chapters 5, 11, 13, and 15, for example – it is interpreted in different but always improvised ways. The trouble with the Gnostic-cum-Kabbalistic idea of two realities with competing supernatural powers running each is that it has to be read either as SF or as autobiographically based "realism." Yet the SF parts or aspects violate "the H.G. Wells Law" – to have only one (or let us say one set) of unbelievabilities in one narration – which then results in narrative incoherence. But if the reader wishes to focus on the "realistic" parts or aspects, the resulting case-studies of psychosis are to me of some interest as articulations of real pain but a

7 I reluctantly part company here with Robinson, who thinks Herb's subplot is from ch. 13 on in an illusory world, created only by Zina and not also validated by Manny (*Novels* 119–20). It seems both uneconomical and contradicted by as straightforward statements as one gets in the later Dick, though admittedly all of them call for more or less probable interpretations. Mine might be kinder than Robinson's kind interpretation of what he sees as the ensuing murkiness (i.e., failure) of the novel as deliberate on Dick's part.

real inspiration only when its political causes are also articulated – directly as in *A Scanner* or however indirectly.

3.3. *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* and the "VALIS Cycle"

"If *The Divine Invasion* is considered as the work of Horselover Fat, then *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* is " 'Phil Dick' at work," remarks Robinson wittily: "the narrator … Angel Archer shares many qualities exhibited by the narrator of *VALIS*: a lucid, straightforward style, using the colloquial language of 1970s' California; and a fascination with their visionary friends and their ideas" (*Novels* 120).

This final novel of the putative "VALIS Trilogy" (written 1981, published 1982, further TA) is not SF – nor Fantasy nor writing about visions that seriously suggests they change reality – but mainly a flashback account by Angel about Bishop Timothy Archer (modeled on Dick's friend Jim Pike) and subsidiarily about his lover Kirsten and his son Jeff. While it has some grim humor and a number of Dickian insights strewn scattershot throughout without much regard to characterization, it is a world in which all main characters except Angel and the somewhat unclear commentator Edgar commit voluntary – or in Tim's case involuntary – suicide, while Kirsten's hebephrenic son Bill is maimed through electroshock treatments. Tim dies last, while searching in the Palestinian desert for the *anokhi* mushrooms, which the sect of newly found, sensational pre-Christian manuscripts apparently used to attain illumination (this seems the only faint SF element left). In ch. 14 Angel's narration returns to the present framework for a coda in which Bill believes he has been taken over by a Tim returned from death.

Tim is fascinating to Dick, and his loss painful, because he too strove to get at the meaning or sense of existence. But he has a central flaw: to see everything in the world in terms of competing written texts, such as the manuscripts which prove to him Jesus was not divine, rather than seeing suffering people. Therefore, his stance is undercut by Angel's pragmatic skepticism: as if Phil from *VALIS* were succeeding to finally demolish a desiccated Fat. Chapter 7, one of the two culminations of TA, contains a

not only hilarious but also brilliant and for the nonce quite coherent demolition (starting from ancient Hindu logic yet) of the role of self-delusion in Tim's occult beliefs, as well as a remarkable outburst of Angel's against Tim's book detailing his belief in astrology and in being haunted by his dead son, which I cannot forbear citing for the edification of all believers in occultism:

> Cast charts of the stars, cast horoscopes while the most destructive war in modern times is raging. It will earn you a place in history books – as a dunce. You get to sit on the tall stool in the corner; you get to wear the conical cap; you get to undo all the social activist shit you ever engineered in concert with some of the finest minds of the century. For this, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., died. For this you marched at Selma … (ch. 7)

This leads to Angel's scathing critique of "the otherworldly orientation of the revealed religions of the world" and of the bookish mind in Tim, failing to attain illumination. However, Angel not only notes at the end of this critique – eight pages of perhaps the most brilliant writing Dick penned after *A Scanner* – that she was herself also deluded in her opinions about Tim, and she turns out later to be deluded about other important matters, but as a narrator she participates in Dick's fundamental confusion between occultist abstraction and conceptual abstraction in general. No human being can do without abstract concepts: in that sense, abstraction defines *Homo sapiens*. True, a purely "horizontal" abstraction, spinning concepts out of concepts, if unchecked by frequent "vertical" verifications in practice, can lead to irrelevant and highly pernicious systems, such as Tim's (and sometimes Dick's) occultism. It may be legitimate if a bit trite to deride a bookishness such as Tim's, which does not allow him to notice that he has run over a gasoline pump. However, the argument recurring in Dick's whole *Trilogy* (and descending from *The Brothers Karamazov*) that the death of a cat or dog is ethically and indeed ontologically more significant than pretensions to divine omnipotence is itself a bit of high, if pleasingly materialist, abstraction; even Sophia in DI fails that test. And the refusal of abstraction is cannily caricatured in this novel, as Robinson notes, in the pleasant and wronged but also comically inefficient Bill: it seems appropriate that he is the polar opposite of

the equally inefficient Tim. Equally, the bookishness is redeemed in TA's second culmination, Angel's relation in ch. 9 of the impact on her of the end of *Paradiso*, which issues in initiating her into "the real world … of pain and beauty" as opposed to Tim's use of books where "words pertained not to world but to other words."

The novel's world is quite sterile, as is for instance spelled out in the great ch. 5 passage about suicides in America, cited later. For, the alternative to careful and verifiable abstraction is (except for music and tending animals, about which Dick is usually at the top of his sympathetic form) a politically passive – if not outright reactionary – and psychologically deadening pragmatism. From Angel's own stance, which indicts Tim for a wrongly conducted search after illumination and salvation, there are strong indications that we find her in a rut at the end of the novel: "I am stuck, now, and … know but know not what" (ch. 13). Thus I don't see much reason or justification for the novel's coda (nor for its title) in terms of a believable "transmigration of Timothy Archer." If there is a point to the coda, it is in the dead-end Angel has arrived at in her job and life, instanced in the inconclusive discussions with, and the New Age banter of, her would-be new guru Edgar. She is not a Holy Fool as Parsifal (who haunts this book). No resolution is arrived at in Dick's last novel: to the end he remains a bearer of bad news.

Finally, if one is to try for a synoptic view of what might be called the *VALIS* Cycle (the so-called Trilogy, which we might as well accept as such, and RFA), their common denominator would be the explicitly theological salvational quest, arising out of the deep despair evident in all the post-1966 works and culminating in *A Scanner*. My thesis is that the superhuman godheads are allegorical projections of individualist psychic states that Dick cannot otherwise account for (cf. his interview with Lupoff). They come openly onstage in *Palmer Eldritch* and then *Ubik* and *Do Androids?* as either clearly evil or deeply ambiguous, the recourse to them grows hesitantly affirmative in *Our Friends* and *A Maze*, and crescendos into a full-blown main salvational theme here. Very interestingly, the bearers of salvation are either disembodied info dumps or females. As earlier too in Dick, anchorage in reality and salvation is sometimes sought in a personal erotic relationship, but few female figures can bear such a load. Linda Fox

in DI can function as Herb's personal savior (in a heretical US filiation of female Intercessors or Christs, also present, e.g., in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*) only because she is semi-divine, in a universe codetermined by the female part of the Godhead. Usually, exaggerated expectations lead to exaggerated, sometimes hate-filled, characterization of the blameworthy erotic partner, or to that figure's downgrading into plot prop or ideological mouthpiece. Beside the divine females in DI, the only exception is Angel in TA, a late but significant amend of Dick's.

A genological note: Dick subsumed the strengths of his then unpublished mainstream novels, culminating in *Confession of a Crap Artis*t, in his first plateau beginning with *Man in the High Castle*. In this second, more hesitant plateau, he begins deliberately mixing SF and mainstream realism, drawing authorization for this from his heretical theology in which the Godheads are just as real as the Little Man. To my mind this does not fully work, but it makes for a bewildering richness of alternative hypotheses and plot twists. In a final welcome twist, the cycle culminates in *TA*, a realist novel about the quest for salvation which subsumes and subtly undermines the theological quests. For: all the objections Angel makes to Bishop Archer, the excessively book-fixated quester and eldritch palmer, could be made to P.K. Dick's mode of Theological Fantasy.

4. Looking Backward at PKD

4.1 Questions, Objections

Probably, any criticism that could be addressed to Dick's erratic brilliance from a Left or materialist point of view, he already knew and, in some way, or at some point in his life shared. If we quoted the young fireball atheist Marx to him: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world … To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of people is to demand their real happiness" (Marx 175) – he would, possibly with some exaggeration, refer to his Berkeley phase as "a fireball radical and atheist" (*Shifting* 106) and, more persuasively, refer us to his

persona Phil from RFA and *VALIS*. If we told him what the real trouble was with the Gnostic-cum-Kabbalistic idea that there are two realities (the evil occluded one which we see and a more real underlying reality, consubstantial with the true God, which may displace it): namely, that it is extremely difficult to make a non-arbitrary or coherent narration out of it, and that he never succeeded in doing so – he could point to his prescient 1966 note, "Religion ought never to show up in SF except from a sociological standpoint … God per se, as a character, ruins a good SF story; and this is as true of my own stuff as anyone else's. Therefore, I deplore my *Palmer Eldritch* book in that regard." (58) If we pointed out that, despite Angel Archer's fulminations in TA against abstraction as deadly mechanical, no human being can (as I argued earlier) do without abstract concepts, and that concepts were certainly omnipresent in Dick – he could reply that the defining trait of SF readers is, "Basically, they enjoy abstract thought" (45), and that, obversely, it is "the schizophrenic [who] is unable to think abstractly" (76). If we persisted in harping that whatever the means, the end is to solve people's woes in this world, Dick could reply that even his wildest metaphysics never forsook that goal, that for him Christ's Kingdom of God was an actual, fleshly place existing not only in a possible but in a real alternative reality (238), and that his obstinate kicking against the pricks of the phenomenal world flowed out of his belief both in the utter necessity and the possibility of a just reality, to be attained by Blake's mental strife (310). Insofar as the shifting and contradictory Dick clung to such answers, and never quite forsook them, he has remained the firebrand radical from his twenties, and it may then be secondary whether he was an atheist or a "panentheist" (46).

Nonetheless, if we then saw Dick not as a renegade, one of the many Collettis and Laclaus intellectually fallen by the way under the terrible psychic pressures of Post-Fordism, but as a friend and comrade, we could still have legitimate, sometimes even strong, disagreements with some of his horizons and oscillations. Let me make it clear that I do not necessarily object to the theological coding: it may not be my way of seeing human relationships, but I am prepared to respect it. It becomes obnoxious if and when it hinders liberation on the reader's Earth – as both Liberation Theology and the end of Dick's *RFA* would agree. It is in that perspective

that fuzziness leads astray. My objections would take different forms for different novels, but I shall here make only four points: the absence of strong yet mainly sympathetic female figures; the absence of urbanization and of the key production and speculation aspects of capitalist economics; the compositional fixation on what Dick calls his "love of chaos," which may be clearest in the "sting-in-the-tail" reversal; and the characterological fixation on the "Good Magnate or Ruler" beside the Little Man. They converge in and largely constitute Dick's political illiteracy, outside his clairvoyance about the police:

- I shall leave the first point to other critics since it is so blatantly obvious, and only state that there are to my mind deep subterranean links between the fascination with but also refusal to accept non-maternal femininity and the isomorphic refusals to acknowledge the city, capitalism, and little people acting together without the upper levels of power (cf. Hayles). I do not mean to tell a writer what to write about; but Dick liked Spinoza, who knew that every determination is a negation and vice versa, and he knew that bringing light means shutting out darkness and vice versa (*Shifting* 206). It's the writer's business to choose what to write about; but it's then the reader's business to notice what his choice shut out.
- Dick's loci are rural, small town, and suburban; cities occur rarely and then usually as nightmarish habitats. This is an understandable reaction to Los Angeles, though less to the still beautiful San Francisco of the 1950s and 1960s. However, it is coupled with the taboo on large industry, industrial workers, and the workings of high finance (even in the US, never mind globally). True, except for the foreclosing local banks Dick had no experiential link to them, but he could have read up on them at least one tenth as much as he did on metaphysics. He was very interested and shrewd about politics, until complete disillusionment set in at the end of the 1960s. In 1976, he wrote despairingly:

> Perhaps my days of being a fighter for freedom are over, due to age, due to worry, but due mostly to the discovery – and existence – of the enormity of the secret political police apparatus … and the dreadful things they have done … So my novel in progress [one of the drafts for the "VALIS cycle,"] has nothing to do with politics; it has to do with the mystery religions … I have not made my peace with the "straight" society, but at the same time I am too weak, too worn out by illness and fear, to do anything but try to make financial ends meet … (34–35)

Dick may be here too harsh on himself, for his mystery religions are also political. He also elsewhere rightly lists among reasons for his stance the disillusionment in oppositional movements (191). But politics rarely had for him to do with economics (the splendid system in *Martian Time-Slip* – cf. Suvin, "Opus" – and the unclear hints about Substance D in *A Scanner* would be among the exceptions): he knew all about reification and alienation, but little or nothing about exploitation.[8] He is nearer to Simak than to Pohl, never mind cyberpunk.

- I suggested earlier that the truth of P.K. Dick is to be found in his plots. This makes analysis doubly difficult. First, it ideally calls for a blow-by-blow discussion that results in exegeses longer than the texts they discuss, such as Barthes's *S/Z* – and its pioneering imitation as applied to SF, Delany's *Angoulème* – or previous works of the close reading school (Spitzer, I.A. Richards). The criteria for judging message vs. noise in the plot depend on believability and coherence; what may be believable is almost entirely, and what may be coherent is at least partly, a matter of cognitive (and finally ideological) horizons. Second, Dick could not only spin a new theory every minute – see the remark in *VALIS* – but he also, unfortunately, took to heart the worst teaching he could have got as a young writer, A.E. van Vogt's device of a new idea every 800 words (66). John Huntington has clearly shown how this mechanical generation of complexity "give[s] the impression of deep understanding simply by contradicting [it]self" (172). It may make for richness and bedazzlement but it certainly enforces confusion. In particular, Dick has a recurring vanvogtian habit of pulling a final rabbit out of the hat at the very end of a narrative so as to upset any conclusion about it. This may be a part of what he meant by his love of chaos, but as he also remarked, "a self-cancelling nothing … will not even serve as a primordial chaos" (*Shifting* 209).[9] His love

8 Rabkin's article has the great merit of opening this discussion, but he takes economics as what impinges on Dick's little people, not in the political economists' sense of an encompassing system (a Dickian reality behind and within empirical reality, indeed).

9 I have, except for this final section, rarely used Dick's non-fictional pronouncements, for usually one can be found to buttress any thesis you want to set up. This is probably also true for pronouncements within his fiction, but there they at least

of chaos is thus potentially fertile, especially when brought to bear on what was experientially known to him, the personal relationships around the Little Man protagonist in a world of grim pressures. But its downside is mystification. The introduction of new concepts and absence of orthodox conceptual coherence is potentially liberatory, an act of primal subversion or nay-saying; but the absence of any coherence, including narrative believability, however papered over by dazzling footwork, opens wide the door to arbitrary associations from the latest source Dick has read (such as the double brain hypothesis in *A Scanner*) or privately encountered.

- As to Dick's permanent ideological type that I would call the "Good Magnate or Ruler," or finding the good in a bad upper-class representative, this may be ethically appealing as charity toward all, but it is only defensible when one totally gives up questions of political responsibility. The best example is the supposedly good police general from *Flow My Tear*s.

Reliance on the individual ethics of the powerful but good guy; mistrust of conclusions and solutions; mistrust of strong women; and disinterest in cities and exploitative economics: insofar as these obtain in Dick, his stories can only connect personal with universal redemption, and "revolt and disobedience" (307) with changing the spurious world, by means of miracles. In such, often key places, they are not only ethically and politically but also narratively flawed. It might be fair to encapsulate Dick's major strengths and weaknesses by noting that he – in the vein of Ibsen, Pirandello, much Post-Structuralism, and the Kabbala – tended to equate language and reality, "As if the world had become language" (DI ch. 14). He was quite right in refusing the prevailing reality, but his basic and irreducible philosophical as well as political mistake was, I believe, to envisage this refusal only from the vantage point of the lonely craftsman-creator, however allegorized; whereas reality can only be, and is constantly being, changed by bodies or classes of people.

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serve to characterize the writing's tone and horizon, and possibly the opinions of the narrator.

4.2. Laudation, or What Remains

Finally, however, all objections would be sterile unless accompanied by a view of why do today, in our new body-killing and psyche-wasting global maxi-disorder, those of us who have no investments in born-again *pentiti* (repented) nor in "Pink Beam" sects recur to Philip Dick? In brief, for a twofold reason: he never ceased to argue with the world, refusing the suffering of Joe Everyman yet also solidarizing with his heroic endurance and active efforts under attack of the Powers That Be; he never ceased to search, and have him search, if often in contradictory, fuzzy or indeed flawed ways, for this worldly salvation. (Alas, except for Angel in his last novel, this does not extend to her.) The first entry in Dick's selected non-fiction, dating to 1949, has his protagonist think: "So it was not his world. If it were his world he would have made it differently. It had been put together wrong, Very much wrong. Put together in ways that he could not approve of." (Sutin ed. 6) A quintessential countercultural figure of the Californian and US 1950s and 1960s, he kept the faith to this root insight: saying *no* in thunder and if need be galactic godheads. A quarter of century later, his definition of an SF writer was still, "He is stuck with a discontent" (74). Insofar as this holds, my apprehensions from 1975 do not obtain, for Dick has in these places not turned his back on illuminating the *koinos kosmos*, our common reality.

If few of us have anything to tell Dick about alienation, reification, and commercialization, on the contrary all of us can learn a lot from him about their effects in pain and bewilderment on normal Americans – which today, within the American and increasingly Americanized empire, means the pain and bewilderment of 95 or maybe 98 percent of all inhabitants of this globe. The Black Iron Prison from the "VALIS cycle," a blown-up version of the dark scanning in *A Scanner*'s California, is diametrically opposed to the Reaganite fantasy of an Evil Empire – and today to Bush Jr.'s Forces of Evil – attacking the virtuously pure and free USA and "West" (whatever that may mean – "the rich North" would be more appropriate). Even in his last novel, his great gift of indignation was undimmed:

> Thousands of young people kill themselves in America each year, but it remains the custom, by and large, to list their deaths as accidental. This is to spare the family the shame attached to suicide. There is, indeed, something shameful about a young man or woman, maybe an adolescent, wanting to die and achieving that goal, dead before in a certain sense they ever lived, ever were born. Wives get beaten by their husbands; cops kill blacks and Latinos; old people rummage in cans or eat dog food – shame rules, calling the shots. Suicide is only one shameful event out of a plethora. There are black teenagers who will never get a job as long as they live, not because they are lazy but because there are no jobs – because, too, these ghetto kids possess no skills they can sell. Children run away, find the strip in New York or Hollywood; they become prostitutes and wind up with their bodies hacked apart … (TA ch. 5)

Dick fought hard against the temptation of weariness, leading people to look for a Führer above them to whom they can delegate responsibility, the Man on the White Horse, which in practice means some form of Fascism. Mostly though not always, I think he avoided it. His godheads are either monsters to be fought, as Eldritch or Jory, or children, as Sofia, Manny, or Zina, working in tandem with, and in the best cases – as in my reading of DI – in feedback with the little people. Undeniably, there is a deeply salvational, and therefore in my book also political, aspect to this. His salvational godheads are sometimes over-dogmatic, as Sophia or Manny until he learns better, but basically plebeian and liberatory. He passed judgment himself on dehumanized fanatics, whom he then called androids and schizoids:

> Once I heard a schizoid person express himself – in all seriousness – this way: "I receive signals from others. But I can't generate any of my own until I get recharged …" Imagine viewing oneself and others this way. Signals. As if from another star. [Maybe Albemuth?] The person has reified himself entirely, along with everyone around him. How awful … (201)

There are two key phrases for me here. The first one is the generating of – not signals but – messages. Dick's oeuvre is full of messengers: from Juliana in *Man in the High Castle* and Walt in *Dr. Bloodmoney*, the theme grows omnipresent and mysterious in *Ubik*. In *A Scanner*, messages inside Arctor's brain get so confused that they break down. By the VALIS Cycle, almost everybody is a messenger and everything a message (cf. Galbreath 113): the universe is practically nothing but information. Dick too was an urgent messenger.

The second key phrase may be "in all seriousness." It has been noted that Dick was one of the most humorous writers of his time. His gamut was large: from grim to uproarious humor, passing through sympathetic pathos. Humor is seeing the same event or object in several incompatible frames at once. I cannot imagine an unhumorous SF writer I would care to reread.

An urgent message for salvation, with humor. This too, we have learned from Philip Dick.

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See also Lupoff below.

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