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A Real Gnostic Gospel (Fr. John Garvey)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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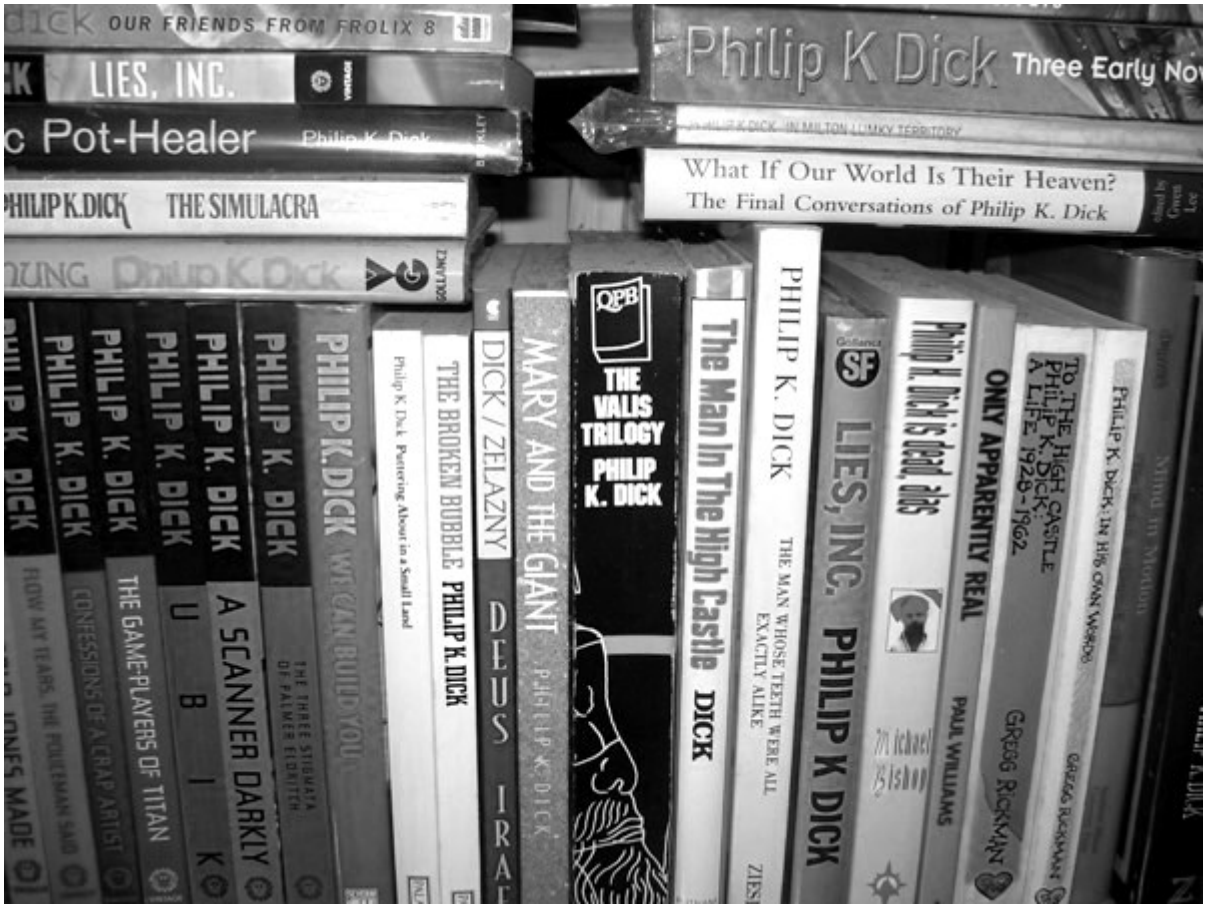
Philip K. Dick (1928-82) was the kind of science-fiction writer who is read and praised by people who don't like science fiction. His fame moved beyond the genre's ghetto after some of his novels and short stories were turned into movies—*Blade Runner* (1982), *Minority Report* (2002), and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), to name a few. He is sometimes compared to Jorge Luis Borges, one of the finest short-story writers, and his work has influenced many authors (genre-bending Jonathan Lethem, for example) and filmmakers (the Wachowski brothers, directors of *The Matrix*).



Books by Philip K Dick

Just as critics dub certain writers' visions of the world "Orwellian" or "Kafkaesque,"

some now use the awkward term “Dickian.” Dick’s paranoid vision is a unique, sad, funny, and—in its strange and sometimes very moving manner—even ennobling way to think about what we are meant to be as humans. In his later work, Dick’s outlook became deeply, even explicitly, informed by a Gnostic sense of the struggle to be fully human. Ancient Gnosticism was, among other things, concerned with the dilemma of humanity trapped in delusion, imprisoned in a world ruled by malign and unseen forces—a recurrent theme in Dick’s work.

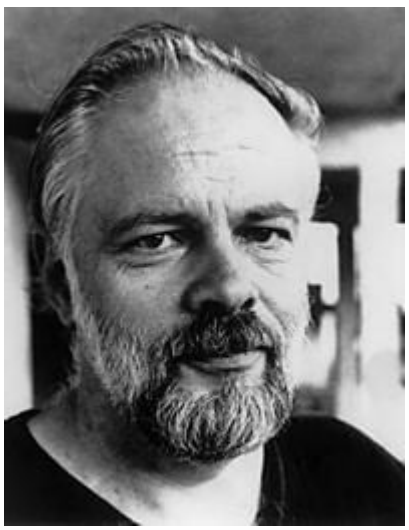
What does science fiction have to say about human nature? For many serious readers, this is GeekCity, a corner of genre fiction inhabited by sad and lonely people who go to Star Trek conventions and collect action figures. The science-fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon is credited with what has entered the wider critical discourse as “Sturgeon’s Law.” When it was said of science fiction that “90 percent of it is crap,” his answer was, “90 percent of everything is crap.” Who can disagree? Serious science-fiction criticism finds examples of imagined alternatives that illuminate our own world in Plato’s description of Atlantis in the *Timaeus*, in his vision of an ideal society in *The Republic*, and in Thomas More’s imaginary society in *Utopia*. Some writers prefer another name for the genre, “speculative fiction,” since much science fiction has little to do with science. Whatever term you choose, the best examples show that one way to see our situation clearly is to imagine another, very different one. This can be done by placing a story in the remote past, an alternative present, or a near or far future. Philip K. Dick was the writer who did it best.

The animating idea behind Dick’s fiction—hardly original in itself—is that things are not as they seem. This is, of course, a major part of any religious insight—and as an Episcopalian, Dick understood this. Walker Percy’s essay “The Message in the Bottle,” for example, describes an island (this could be the beginning of a sci-fi plot) where everything is pleasant. Life seems good for all its inhabitants; then someone walking along a beach finds a bottle with the message, “Don’t despair, help is on the way.” This is what the Christian gospel says to a complacent, obtuse world, and it is not unlike one of Dick’s plots. In many of his stories, as in Gnostic theology, the world is depicted as not merely asleep, but deliberately deceived. Any remedy or salvation will therefore have to include a battle against powers that not only seem insane, but are evil. Overcoming the ruse requires special insight or special revelation that is shared by only a few.

This theme of widespread deception is woven throughout several of his plots. In *The Simulacra* (1964), the U.S. president is an android, but the citizenry has no idea. In *The Penultimate Truth* (1964), World War III starts with a fight between two

superpowers. The battle begins on Mars, spreads to Earth, and is fought by robots. Humans are forced to live and work underground in huge shelters. The war ends, but the people are told that the battle rages above them on an uninhabitable surface. Meanwhile, the authorities continue to generate false war stories while they themselves live a bucolic life on the earth above. In *The Zap Gun* (1967), two great superpowers are at peace, and citizens of both nations are reassured that they are secure because of their side's superior arsenal—but the weapons are designed not to function. Weapon design is, in effect, a kind of conceptual art, although the fact that the weapons do not work is kept from the masses. This is what keeps the world truly disarmed. When aliens threaten the earth, the weapon designers have to come up with something that really functions. There is an implicit Gnosticism here: only a select few know what is going on; most of humanity is sleepwalking.

This isn't a happy point of view, to be sure. Yet what's missing from the film adaptations of Dick's work (of which the best are *Minority Report* and the director's cut of *Blade Runner*) is Dick's humor. Even his darkest stories are laced with funny moments. Another quality missing in the movies is Dick's enduring compassion for the sadness of ordinary, confused human existence. His stories usually take place in a future, or in an alternate reality, where paranoia reigns, where appearances cannot be trusted, where people may be androids—robots made to resemble humans—and androids may be whatever human beings are, where the world we are presented with is a lie.



Philip K. Dick

Dick's life was messy. (Lawrence Sutin has written a good biography, ***Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick***, Carrol & Graf, 2005.) He was born inChicago in 1928 and died in 1982; his twin sister died in infancy. Dick's parents moved

toCalifornia and divorced. He lived with his mother until he matriculated at UC Berkeley for a short time, majoring in German. He was fascinated by German culture. After dropping out of college, he worked in a record store, and music plays an important part in much of his work. He was married and divorced five times, used drugs, was convinced at various points that the FBI was after him, feared for his sanity, and hoped for spiritual deliverance.

At the same time, Dick felt a keen loyalty to many friends, whose lives were often as complicated as his own. His novels are full of regular people with ordinary, often dull jobs; they struggle for decency, sometimes fail, sometimes succeed. There is always something sad, frustrating, and funny about their struggles, and I can't think of another science-fiction writer who comes close to describing this sort of ordinary life with such compassion. The science-fiction novelist Ursula K. Le Guin once wrote that Dick's characters reminded her of Dickens's; sometimes you remember one and can't place which novel he or she appears in, but the humanity remains vivid. Dick drew from his own life, sometimes quite directly, in writing his novels. *A Scanner Darkly* is about drug use—based in large part on his own experience—and it's scary. It begins, "Once a guy stood all day shaking bugs from his hair." It contains the only funny suicide scene I've ever read, and at the end of the novel Dick uncharacteristically explains what he has just written:

This is a novel about some people who were punished entirely too much for what they did. They wanted to have a good time, but they were like children playing in the street; they could see one after another of them being killed—run over, maimed, destroyed—but they continued to play anyhow.... Drug misuse is not a disease, it is a decision, like the decision to step out in front of a moving car. You would call that not a disease but an error in judgment. When a bunch of people begin to do it, it is a social error, a lifestyle. In this particular lifestyle the motto is "Be happy now because tomorrow you are dying," but the dying begins almost at once, and the happiness is a memory. It is, then, only a speeding up, an intensifying, of the ordinary human existence. It is not different from your lifestyle, it is only faster.

Before movies made him known beyond science-fiction circles, Dick's best-known work was *The Man in the High Castle*. It won the Hugo award (science fiction's highest) in 1962. It describes an alternative 1962 America, in which the Nazis and the Japanese won World War II. There are some nicely imagined touches (Americans forge Wild West artifacts to sell to wealthy Japanese collectors; Germans fly rapidly around the world not in jets, but in passenger rockets), but at the center of the novel is a search for the author of *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*,

an alternative-world tale in which Germany and Japan were defeated. This alternative world is not the one we know, the one that really followed from the defeat of Hitler; and finally, it is suggested that the world the protagonists live in isn't real either. The *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese text, figures in the book's plot, and Dick apparently used its chance-based methods of divination in composing the story. Although Dick never alluded to it, this sense of not being able to know what reality really is reminded me of the Taoist sage Chuang Tsu's dream that he was a butterfly: it wasn't clear to him whether he was Chuang Tsu dreaming that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he was Chuang Tsu.

In 1978, Dick delivered a lecture, "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later." In it, he said: "The two basic topics that fascinate me are 'What is reality?' and 'What constitutes the authentic human being?'" This fascination went back to his first published story, "Roog," which "had to do with a dog who imagined that the garbage men who came every Friday morning were stealing valuable food that the family had carefully stored away in a safe metal container. Every day, members of the family carried out paper sacks of nice ripe food, stuffed them into the metal container, shut the lid tightly—and when the container was full, these dreadful-looking creatures came and stole everything but the can… [T]he dog's extrapolation was in a sense logical, given the facts at his disposal."

Dick's approach was not always so light. In an angry short story about abortion, "The Pre-Persons," he wrote of a future in which the courts had decided that a person was a real human being only when capable of doing algebra. Children not yet old enough to grasp algebraic concepts lived in dread of extermination trucks that could come and take them away. Dick's antiabortion stance led the feminist science-fiction writer Joanna Russ to send Dick a letter, "the nastiest letter I've ever received." Although he later apologized for any hurt feelings, he said, "for the pre-persons' sake, I am not sorry."

If Dick's early work sometimes had an implicitly Gnostic aspect, that quality became more explicit in his later writing. In 1974, Dick, recovering from minor surgery, answered his door for a delivery of painkillers. The young woman delivering the medication was wearing a fish pendant, and when he asked what it was, she told him that it was a sign worn by the early Christians. In "How to Build a Universe," he writes,

I suddenly experienced what I later learned is called *anamnesis*—a Greek word meaning, literally, "loss of forgetfulness." I remembered who I was and where I was. In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, it all came back to me. And not only could I remember it but I could see it. The girl was a secret Christian and so was I.

We lived in fear of detection by the Romans. We had to communicate with secret signs. She had just told me all this, and it was true.

For a short time, as hard as this is to believe or explain, I saw fading into view the black, prison-like contours of hatefulRome. But, of much more importance, I remembered Jesus, who had just recently been with us, and had gone temporarily away, and would very soon return. My emotion was one of joy. We were secretly preparing to welcome him back. It would not be long. And the Romans did not know. They thought he was dead, forever dead. That was our great secret, our joyous knowledge. Despite all appearances, Christ was going to return, and our delight and anticipation was boundless.

Dick was never entirely clear about what that experience meant. But he was convinced that something of great significance had happened to him, and wrote at length about his encounters with what he called “the cosmic Christ” in a free-form journal called “The Exegesis,” in which he understood Christ as part of a continuity which included Ikhnaton, Zoroaster, and Hephaestus. This syncretism is typical of Gnosticism. Dick’s efforts to explain what all this meant are less interesting than the work that came from the experience, his final three novels.

Dick’s visions and dreams coalesced in the *VALIS* trilogy—VALIS being an acronym for Vast Active Living Intelligence System, or God (of a sort). The most tangled, complicated, and autobiographical is the first, *VALIS* (1981). It is the least successful of the three, but worth reading because of its seriousness and its painful closeness to Dick’s own life. The plot of *VALIS* contains not only autobiographical fragments, but a movie with a secret meaning and a rock-star couple whose daughter, Sophia, is thought by some to be the returned Savior. The novel wrestles with the first question that haunted Dick—“What is reality?”—and it suggests one good answer, based on a real incident in Dick’s life. When a student asked him during a lecture for a simple definition of reality, he answered, “Reality is that which when you stop believing in it, it doesn’t go away.” Toward the end of the book Dick writes, “I lack Kevin’s faith and Fat’s madness.... I don’t know what to think. Maybe I am not required to think anything, or to have faith, or to have madness; maybe all that I need to do—all that is asked of me—is to wait. To wait and to stay awake.”

The second book of the trilogy, *The Divine Invasion* (1981), tells of an exiled or absent God—another Gnostic theme—trying to return to earth, which has been held captive by Belial, a fallen angel, since the fall of Masada. The novel involves a virgin birth, which perplexes the Catholic woman who is pregnant with a divine child. She says remotely, “Catholic doctrine, I never thought it would apply to me

personally.” The child must struggle to awaken to his own identity. As in classic Gnostic teaching, a perverse power holds the world in its grasp, and it is represented by both the established church (the Christian-Islamic Church) and the imperial political establishment, whose members are uncomfortably but profitably allied. *The Divine Invasion* is an amazing story of parallel realities, redemption, and the war between good and evil, with a wonderful ending.

The final novel in the trilogy, the last Dick completed, is *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1982). The author based Bishop Timothy Archer on Episcopalian Bishop James Pike, who went on an odd pilgrimage into the Judean desert with too little preparation and died of exposure. So does Timothy Archer, in search of the truth about Gnostic scroll fragments. Archer is a complicated character: brilliant and selfish, genuinely insightful and clueless. The novel is narrated by Archer’s daughter-in-law, Angel Archer. In Dick’s novels, the point of view frequently shifts from person to person; but here Angel is the sole narrator, and her voice carries the novel, which contains serious arguments about Gnosticism and a few genuinely funny and politically incorrect jokes.

In these and his other stories, Dick creates characters who struggle not only for salvation, for ultimate truths, but sometimes merely to be decent human beings—and the two struggles are really one. What reality is and what it means to be authentically human are intrinsically linked. Dick’s answers, such as they are, range randomly from new-age nonsense, through his own episodes of delusion and paranoia, to a Gnostic Christianity that contains more of the pain and compassion of real Christianity than most Gnostic visions. Many Gnostic writings advance an elitism that delights in being among the chosen in whom the divine light resides. Dick saw glimmers of the shattered divine light in many confused and struggling people, and he found something of cosmic significance there, both in the light and in the struggle. His finest novel, *The Divine Invasion*, for example, ends with the fall of Belial, the angelic dark force that held the good God at bay. Belial “lay broken everywhere, vast and lovely and destroyed. In pieces, like damaged light.”

“This is how he was once,” Linda said. “Originally. Before he fell. This was his original shape. We called him the Moth. The Moth that fell slowly, over thousands of years, intersecting the earth, like a geometrical shape descending stage by stage until nothing remained of its shape.”

Herb Asher said, “He was very beautiful.”

“He was the morning star,” Linda said. “The brightest star in the heavens. And now nothing remains of him but this….”

“Will he ever be as he once was?” Herb Asher said.

“Perhaps,” she said. “Perhaps we all may be.” And then she sang for Herb Asher one of the Dowland songs…. The most tender, the most haunting song that she had adapted from John Dowland’s lute books:

> When the poor cripple by the pool did lie
> Full many years in misery and pain,
> No sooner he on Christ had set his eye,
> But he was well, and comfort came again.

Philip K. Dick’s fiction—perhaps because most of it was written in a genre known for conceptual risk-taking—dealt in an unembarrassed way with questions involving the ultimate meaning of our lives in a tone that was compassionate, often funny, and at some unexpected moments very moving.

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