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BOOKS

BLOWS AGAINST THE EMPIRE

The return of Philip K. Dick.

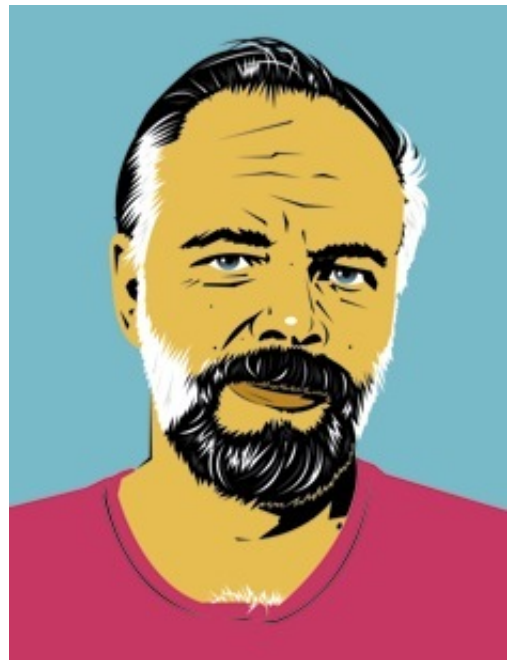
BY ADAM GOPNIK

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There's nothing more exciting to an adolescent reader than an unknown genre writer who speaks to your condition and has something great about him. The Ace paperback cover promises mere thrills, and the writing provides real meaning. The combination of evident value and apparent secrecy makes Elmore Leonard fans feel more for their hero than Borges lovers are allowed to feel for theirs. When they *tell* you it's going to be good, what more can you hope for it to be?

Eventually, enough of these secret fans grow up and get together, and the writer is designated a Genius, acquiring all the encumbrances of genius: fans, notes, annotated editions, and gently disparaging comprehensive reviews. Since genre writing can support only one genius at a time—and no genre writer ever becomes just a good writer; it's all prophet or all hack—the guy is usually resented by his peers and their partisans even as the establishment hails him. No one hates the rise of Elmore Leonard so much as a lover of Ross Macdonald.

Of all American writers, none have got the genre-hack-to-hidden-genius treatment quite so fully as Philip K. Dick, the California-raised and based science-fiction writer who, beginning in the nineteen-fifties, wrote thirty-six speed-fuelled novels, went crazy in the early seventies, and died in 1982, only fifty-three. His reputation has risen through the two parallel operations that genre writers get when they get big. First, he has become a prime inspiration for the movies, becoming for contemporary science-fiction and fantasy movies what Raymond Chandler was for film noir: at least eight feature films, including "Total Recall," "Minority Report," "A Scanner Darkly," and, most memorably, Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner," have been adapted from Dick's books, and even



Dick's mixture of satire and fantasy has inspired countless films.

more—from Terry Gilliam’s “Brazil” to the “Matrix” series—owe a defining debt to his mixture of mordant comedy and wild metaphysics.

But Dick has also become for our time what Edgar Allan Poe was for Gilded Age America: the doomed genius who supplies a style of horrors and frissons. (In both cases, it took the French to see it; the first good critical writing on Dick, as on Poe, came from Europe, and particularly from Paris.) Like Poe’s, Dick’s last big book was a work of cosmic explanation in which lightning bolts of brilliance flash over salty oceans of insanity. Poe’s explanation of everything was called “Eureka.” Dick’s was “VALIS.” The second, literary Dick is now in the Library of America (\$35), under the excellent editorial care of Jonathan Lethem, a passionate devotee, who also provides an abbreviated chronology of Dick’s tormented life. Four of the sixties novels are neatly packed together in the handsome black covers: “The Man in the High Castle,” “The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch,” “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” (the original of “Blade Runner”), and his masterpiece, “Ubik.”

Dick’s fans are not modest in their claims. Nor are they especially precise: Borges, Calvino, Kafka, Robertson Davies are cited, in the blurbs and introductions, as his peers. A note of inconsistency inflects these claims—Calvino *and* Robertson Davies?—but they are sincerely made and, despite all those movies and all that praise, have a slight, useful tang of hyperbolic defensiveness. One of the first things that everyone is inclined to say about Dick is that his subject and his mostly straight-to-paperback publication kept him from literary respectability, leaving him a neglected cult writer who is only now beginning to get his due.

On the evidence of the biographers, though, this doesn’t seem quite true. While he served a fairly long apprenticeship—a series of almost unreadable realist working-class novels that he wrote in the fifties are now back in print—and struggled to make money, from the time “The Man in the High Castle” won a Hugo Award, in 1963, he was famous, admired, and *read*. He wasn’t reviewed on the front page of the *Times Book Review*, but so what? Reading his life—either in the reflective French version, by Emmanuel Carrère, or in the thorough and intelligent American one, by Lawrence Sutin—one has a sense not of a man of thwarted ambition but, rather, of a man burning up with ideas and observations who found in a pop form the perfect vehicle for expressing them.

Dick’s allegiance was not to literature but to *writing* and to the possibilities of writing as a form of protest and instant social satire. Another twist of fate, or circumstance, and he could have ended up as Rod Serling; another and he could have ended up as Marty Balin, writing lyrics for Jefferson Airplane. But it’s hard to imagine any circumstances in which he would have ended up as Doctorow, or wanted to. There were a million places to write sci-fi in those years, publishers eager to have it, and readers eager to argue about it. You can find unfairly neglected writers in America; Dick, with a steady and attentive transatlantic audience, was never one of them.

Dick's early history is at once tormented, hustling, and oddly lit by the bright California sunshine of the late fifties. Born in 1928, he had a twin, a sister named Jane, who died when she was only a month old; like Elvis Presley, who also had a twin sibling who died, Dick seems to have been haunted for the rest of his life by his missing Other. He seems to have blamed his mother, unfairly, for her death, poisoning their relations. He had one of those classic, bitter American childhoods, with warring parents, and was dragged back and forth across the country. He had loved science fiction since boyhood—he later told of how at twelve he had a dream of searching in *Astounding Stories* for a story called “The Empire Never Ended” that would reveal the mysteries of existence—and he began writing quickie sci-fi novels for Ace in the fifties and sixties. “I love SF,” he said once. “I love to read it; I love to write it. The SF writer sees not just possibilities but wild possibilities. It’s not just ‘What if’—it’s ‘My God; what if’—in frenzy and hysteria. The Martians are always coming.” The hysteria suited him. He seems to have been a man of intellectual passion and compulsive appetite (he was married five times), the kind of guy who can’t drink one cup of coffee without drinking six, and then stays up all night to tell you what Schopenhauer really said and how it affects your understanding of Hitchcock and what that had to do with Christopher Marlowe.

“The Man in the High Castle” (1962), the book that made Dick famous, is in many ways the least typical, and least interesting, of his sixties novels. It tells what would have happened if the Germans had won the Second World War, and, though skillfully done, it leaves his imagination too tethered to reality and “research” to resonate; not enough Martians come. It’s in “The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch,” two years later, that his style explodes.

Dick tends to get treated as a romantic: his books are supposed to be studies in the extremes of paranoia and technological nightmare, offering searing conundrums of reality and illusion. This comes partly from the habit, hard to break, of extolling the transgressive, the visionary, the startling undercurrent of dread. In fact, Dick in the sixties is a bone-dry intellectual humorist, a satirist—concerned with taking contemporary practices and beliefs to their *reductio ad absurdum*. If we oppress the Irish, why not eat them? Swift asked, in the model of all black satire—and if we can make quotidian and trivial the technology that has already arrived, Dick wonders, then why would we not do the same to the future yet to come, psychic communication and time travel and the colonization of Mars? Although “Blade Runner,” with its rainy, ruined Los Angeles, got Dick’s antic tone wrong, making it too noirish and romantic, it got the central idea right: the future will be like the past, in the sense that, no matter how amazing or technologically advanced a society becomes, the basic human rhythm of petty malevolence, sordid moneygrubbing, and official violence, illuminated by occasional bursts of loyalty or desire or tenderness, will go on. Dick’s future worlds are rarely evil and oppressive, exactly; they are banal and a little sordid, run by a demoralized élite at the expense of a deluded population. No matter how mad life gets, it will first of all be life.

In “The Three Stigmata,” for instance, immigrants have been forced off an overheated Earth for colonies on Mars and elsewhere, and live in cheap communal hovels. For recreation and escape, the Martian colonists build “Perky Pat” dioramas: little doll houses inhabited by the Barbie-like Perky Pat and her Ken-ish boyfriend, Walt. Fanatical about the details of the miniaturized worlds—a whole industry flourishes to supply Lilliputian furniture and appliances—the colonists take a powerful, illegal hallucinogen called Can-D, which lets them “translate” the bodies and lives of Pat and Walt: for a brief, intoxicated moment they *are* Pat, or Walt, living in sixties-style San Francisco, and happy.

At one level, the Perky Pat cult is obviously a satire of middle-class escapism, and, particularly, of American television—if we are prepared to stare stoned at that box for blank escape, why not at a more convincing one? But if it was Dick’s gift to find, again and again, these extended hyperbolic parallels, it was his genius to take them to a level of earnest madness that makes satire touch the edge of the sublime. He saw that his Perky Pat devotees would begin to grant their sad entertainment the force of divine revelation. They argue violently about whether the Perky Pat visions are just “trips” or, as the Perky Pat fundamentalists insist, real experiences of supernatural incarnation. Industrialized entertainment becomes the entering wedge of religion.

Dick’s admirers identify his subjects as (in the words of Ursula K. Le Guin) “reality and madness, time and death, sin and salvation.” Later, as he became crazier, he did see questions in vast cosmological terms, but in these sharp, funny novels of the sixties he was taking on a more pointedly American question: Are there reliable boundaries between vicarious and real experience? Is there *anything* that can’t be made into a form of show business, and any form of show business that can’t be made into something more? Recreation and religion, and their intertwining, are the DNA of his worlds: the tedium of existence forces us toward “fun”; fun becomes the basis of our faith.

Yet Dick’s societies of entertainment are, in turn, oblivious of their basis in organized violence. In “The Zap Gun,” a Cold War satire from 1967, for instance, two monolithic competing political blocs, Wesbloc and Peep-East, have such an overabundance of weaponry that eventually they turn to “plowsharing” it, making weapons that are really toys and ashtrays. They depend on gifted psychic visionaries who see weapons as playthings—turning a military killer-automaton into a new kind of Rock ’Em Sock ’Em Robot—and who are as rare, and as well paid, as movie directors here on the other side of the mirror.

The gift of Dick’s craziness was to see how strong the forces of normalcy are in a society, even when what they are normalizing is objectively nuts. In “Clans of the Alphane Moon,” from 1964, a mental hospital in a remote solar system has been abandoned by its keepers, and the lunatics have, over time, proliferated and organized themselves into a strange but functioning and interdependent country: a clan of paranoids supplies the statesmen, the Skitzes live in poverty but have wild poetic

visions, the Deps provide a depressed realistic appraisal of the future, and the manics are the warriors. It's weird, but it's a *working* society, not a suicidal one. And a society that in some ways resembles Dick's own, that of the Johnson-Nixon years. Of the normalized madhouse on the Alphane moon, a psychiatrist says:

Leadership in this society here would naturally fall to the paranoids. . . . But you see, with paranoids establishing the ideology, the dominant emotional theme would be hate. Actually hate going in two directions; the leadership would hate everyone outside its enclave, and also would take for granted that everyone hated it in return. Therefore their entire so-called foreign policy would be to establish mechanisms by which this supposed hatred directed at them could be fought. And this would involve the entire society in an illusory struggle, a battle against foes that didn't exist for a victory over nothing.

In "Ubik" (1969), in turn, the first premise is that the ancient human dream of communication with the dead has been achieved at last—but, when you go to speak with them, there is static and missed connections and interference, and then you argue over your bill. At the beginning of the novel, one of the heroes, Runciter, tries to connect with his "passed" wife, Ella:

"Is something the matter, Mr. Runciter?" the von Vogelsang person said, observing him as he floundered about. "Can I assist you?"
 "I've got some *thing* coming in over the wire," Runciter panted, halting. "Instead of Ella. Damn you guys and your shoddy business practices; this shouldn't happen, and what does it mean?" . . .

"Did the individual identify himself?"

"Yeah, he called himself Jory."

Frowning with obvious worry, von Vogelsang said, "That would be Jory Miller. I believe he's located next to your wife. In the bin."

"But I can see it's Ella!"

"After prolonged proximity," von Vogelsang explained, "there is occasionally a mutual osmosis, a suffusion between the mentalities of half-lifers. Jory Miller's cephalic activity is particularly good; your wife's is not. That makes for an unfortunately one-way passage of protophasons. . . . If this condition persists your money will be returned to you." . . .

Facing the casket, von Vogelsang pressed the audio outlet into his ear and spoke briskly into the microphone. . . . "This is very unfair of you, Jory; Mr. Runciter has come a long way to talk to his wife. Don't dim her signal, Jory; that's not nice."

The typical Dick novel is at once fantastically original in its ideas and dutifully realistic in charting their consequences. No matter what things may come, they will be exploited, merchandised, and routinized by the force of human weakness. And the interesting corollary: it won't matter; the world of speaking ghosts will work about as well as this one. A society of paranoids can work as well as Nixon's America did and, perhaps, in similar ways.

The other crucial thing one notices rereading Dick today is how much he belongs to a particular time, and how keenly the music of that time runs through his books—not the music of the spheres, or of the future, but the AM-FM radio soundtrack of the sixties and early seventies. On the one hand, the screeching, treble, machine-gun announcements of public disasters; on the other, the chesty, cooing accompaniment of hipster reverie and psychedelic jamming. (You had to be there.) These two worlds were separate then, or felt separated—people did turn to progressive-rock stations with the feeling that the mixture of the d.j.'s deep, stoned voice and "Layla" was a form of rebellion against the Empire. (You *really* had to be there.) Dick's world is always structured around that sort of division: the public news is of one kind, private understanding another. A small, futile, but perceptive band of stoners and hipsters is ranged against the Empire; they don't win, but they do see.

All this remains thrilling and funny; to detail Dick's conceits is to inventory a time. The trouble is that, much as one would like to place Dick above or alongside Pynchon and Vonnegut—or, for that matter, Chesterton or Tolkien—as a poet of the fantastic parable he was a pretty bad writer. Though his imagination is at least the equal of theirs, he had, as he ruefully knew, a hack's habits, too, and he never really got over them. He has three, at most four, characters, whom he shuffles from hand to hand and novel to novel like a magician with the same mangy rabbits. There is the sexy young stoned girl; the wise or shrewish wife; the ordinary schlub who is his Everyman; and the Mad Engineer who is usually the Designated Explainer. He flogs these types into semi-life by means of Ellery Queen devices, including the depressing one of funny names. Then, there is the narrative falsely propelled by the one-sentence paragraph, the internal monologue that really isn't, and sometimes both together:

Sometime during the night, he reasoned, she had come into the room, and then some process had started in her or around her. She had sensed it and had crept off, hiding herself in the closet, so he wouldn't know; in her last few hours of life—or perhaps minutes; he hoped it was only minutes—this had overtaken her, but she had made no sound. She hadn't wakened him. Or, he thought, she tried and she couldn't do it, couldn't attract my attention. Maybe it was after that, after trying and failing to wake me, that she crawled into this closet.

I pray to god, he thought, that it happened fast.

That's from the beautiful and hallucinatory "Ubik," in which Dick also develops the mysterious idea of a "fading" universe, where objects slowly mutate back to their earlier essential forms; hi-fis become Victrolas as they sit there. With the ideas removed, though, it could be in any standard police procedural of the period. The trouble isn't that Dick suffers by some school-marmish standard of fine writing. It's that the absence of any life within the writing on the page ends up robbing the books of the vital force that pushes you past pages. As an adult reader coming back to Dick, you start off in a state of renewed wonder and then find yourself thumbing ahead to see how much farther you are going to have to go. At the end of a Dick marathon, you end up admiring every one of his conceits and not a single one of his sentences. His facility is amazing. He once wrote eleven novels in a twenty-four-month stretch. But one thing you have to have done in order to write eleven novels in two years is not to have written any of them twice.

That's probably why Dick's reputation as a serious writer, like Poe's, has always been higher in France, where the sentences aren't read as they were written. And his paint-by-numbers prose is ideally suited for the movies. The last monologue in "Blade Runner" ("All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain. Time to die"), improvised by Rutger Hauer on the set that day, has a pathos that the book achieves only in design, intellectually, because the movie speech is spoken by a recognizable person, dressed up as a robot, where Dick's characters tend to be robots dressed up as people.

In February, 1974, Dick, after having a tooth pulled by the dentist, and still high on the vestiges of sodium pentathol, opened the door of his house to get a prescription from a delivery girl—and had a vision that dominated and damned the last eight years of his life. The delivery girl visiting the

already drug-addled Dick was wearing a fish medallion; Dick casually asked her about it, and she fingered it to show him that it was an ancient Christian symbol. Dick had an overwhelming, numinous experience of “unforgetting”: he eventually saw (the vision came in bursts) that he and the girl were both early Christians in flight from Roman persecution and exchanging a coded language of gesture. He wasn’t seeing, Shirley MacLaine style, that he had been a Christian in an earlier life; the point was that he was one now. The entire phenomenal world around him was an illusion created by a fallen female God, twin to a good immaterial God; he was experiencing not a flashback but a flash-in. Sometime in the first century—he later pinned it down to the year 70 C.E.—the passage of time had been deliberately stopped by the Empire, the Black Iron Prison. There was no 1974; there never had been. It was still the year 70. The Roman Empire had never ended.

Dick spent the rest of his life working out the complexities of this idiosyncratic Gnosticism, achieving, at last, a fantastically elaborate metaphysical cosmology—the central conception was of VALIS, for Vast Active Living Intelligence System—that he placed (under the signature of his alter ego Horselover Fat: the Greek meaning of “Philip” combined with the German meaning of “Dick”) at the end of a visionary novel, also called “Valis” (1981). Dick’s admirers can fight for days—and over hundreds of pages—about the meaning, the precise content, and the value of the “2-3-74” visions. As the people around him testified, hallucinations and fantasies, wild paranoid delusions, and plot-spotting filled his mind. He really did go crazy, and it wasn’t the cute-crazy of the movies, with well-cast hallucinations and Jennifer Connelly to comfort you. It was true staring madness, hell on earth. But, as Lawrence Sutin insists, at another level Dick always had a saving, ironic awareness that his crazy visions might just be crazy visions, and this gave him, at times, a comic distance from them which deepened his writing.

“Valis,” the novel, the first and best in a trilogy in which Dick struggled desperately to articulate what he had seen, is a hard book to read, and a harder one to forget. Without Dick’s name, it almost certainly wouldn’t have been published—it’s just too static and strange. Yet, once you force yourself to read it, and read past the really nutty bits, it emerges as perhaps the most emotional and in an odd way the most artistically achieved of all his books. In a manner ironically reminiscent of mid-period Philip Roth—if you can imagine a mid-period Philip Roth in which three-eyed aliens living in a parallel dimension play a crucial part—Dick divides his persona into two voices. One belongs to Horselover Fat, who has had exactly the epiphany that Dick had in 1974, and is trying to cope simultaneously with the mental breakdown that the vision entails and with his sad personal circumstances (one of his girlfriends is dying horribly of cancer, as was one of Dick’s); the other belongs to “Philip Dick,” who narrates the book, in an empathetic but disinterested tone, correcting Fat’s (that is, his own) faults and speculating calmly on the real meaning of his epiphany.

There are many books with unreliable narrators under the control of sane authors; this is the only one I know where a sane, reliable narrator (on the book’s own terms) is under the control of a

clearly crazy author. What makes it heartbreaking is the author's consciousness, expressed sporadically through the fictional narrator Dick, that he (that is, the real Dick, embodied in the pathetic Fat) has undoubtedly gone nuts—but that, just as undoubtedly, he is in possession of the truth about the cosmos. His account of his vision is braided with the details of cancer treatments and the mordantly rendered specifics of time spent in a ward for the insane—a man who knows he's broken but believes that the breaking has poured forth a flowing truth.

"The core of my writing is not art but truth," Dick wrote a year before he died. "Thus what I tell is the truth, yet I can do nothing to alleviate it, either by deed or explanation." It doesn't dilute the force of his vision to see it as a metaphor, consistent with, but crazier than, the central metaphor of his earlier work: the social arrangement of power is always that of a brute oligarchic minority forcing its will on a numbed population, with amusements the daily meal and brutality the implicit threat; for all that has changed technologically, that fatal pattern has never really altered. The future will be like the present, he had once known, and now he saw that the past was like the future, too.

What is moving in Dick's madness is his insistence that the surest sign of the madness of the world outside him is the violence that we accept as normal. In "Clans of the Alphane Moon," he had already glimpsed the possibility that normal governing might be the work of paranoids. This Nixon-era vision becomes, in the VALIS books, a metaphysical truth. "The Empire is the institution, the codification, of derangement; it is insane and imposes its insanity on us by violence, since its nature is a violent one," Fat writes. That this is followed by an explanation of how those deaf-mute three-eyed invaders arrived in ancient Sudan from a planet in the star system Sirius does not diminish its force; if anything, it increases it, by reminding us of the price the visionary paid for it.

Until his death, of a stroke, in 1982, Dick never stopped crying out. He was buried at last beside his infant sister, Jane, the missing half he had longed for and eventually made into a part of his cosmic mythology, the much mourned female God. The vision of an unending struggle between a humanity longing for a fuller love it always senses but can't quite see, and a deranged cult of violence eternally presenting itself as necessary and real—this thought today does not seem exactly crazy. The empire never ends. ♦

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