

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



December 16, 2011

# The Voices in Philip K. Dick's Head

By CHARLES PLATT

## THE EXEGESIS OF PHILIP K. DICK

Edited by Pamela Jackson, Jonathan Lethem and Erik Davis.

Illustrated. 944 pp.  
Houghton Mifflin  
Harcourt. \$40.

In 1979, I visited Philip K. Dick for a profile I was writing. In a modest apartment he shared with dusty stacks of books, deteriorating furniture, a vintage stereo system and a couple of cats, he took the opportunity to go public about a singular experience dominating his life. For the past five years, he told me earnestly, he had been receiving messages from a spiritual entity. “It invaded my mind and assumed control of my motor centers,” he said. “It set about healing me physically and my 4-year-old boy, who had an undiagnosed life-threatening birth defect that no one had been aware of. It had memories dating back over 2,000 years. . . . There wasn’t anything that it didn’t seem to know.”

Dick had already written more than a million words of personal notes on this topic, he said, notes he referred to as his “exegesis” — a word that traditionally means an explanation or interpretation of Scripture. In his case, he was trying to explain the voices inside his head.

The delusions of a penurious science fiction writer might seem of marginal interest, except that Philip K. Dick was not just any science fiction writer. Shortly after his death in 1982, his book “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” became the movie “Blade Runner.” Since then, no fewer than 10 other motion pictures have been based on his work, including “Total Recall” and “Minority Report.” He is widely regarded as one of the most conceptually innovative writers in the 20th century, whose influence has been acknowledged by novelists from William Gibson to Ursula K. Le Guin.

Even in his earliest stories, Dick wrestled with the nature of perception. As he described it to me, “I began to get an idea of a mysterious quality in the universe . . . a kind of metaphysical world, an invisible realm of things half-seen.” He could not accept the notion of a single, objective reality, and favored Jung’s concept that what we perceive as external may be an unconscious projection. When he tried to embed these ideas in serious contemporary novels, he found no market for them, and thus used science fiction as the unlikely vehicle for his philosophical questions.

An example is his disturbing novel “The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch,” in which colonists on Mars escape the deprivations of their environment by using a drug that opens a gateway to a shared, artificial reality. But Dick takes the concept a step further, suggesting this reality could be molded by the drug manufacturer; and then a step further still, as another entity competes to take over and manipulate the reality, along with the people in it. This reflects the other principal obsession throughout Dick’s work: his fear that a powerful person or group can change the perceptions and beliefs of others. He saw this process inflicted by politicians, religions and “authority figures in general.”

After his death, the overlap between his hallucinatory experiences and the concerns in his fiction made him a tempting subject for academic study. He had been a college dropout himself, with little regard for academia, but he was no longer around to debunk the professors who analyzed his oeuvre. So it is that his “exegesis” has now been exhumed and published (partly, at least) as “The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick,” edited by Pamela Jackson, Jonathan Lethem and Erik Davis, with assistance from several academics, including three theologians.

The struggle of a highly intelligent man to find a rational explanation for something inexplicable inside himself could make fascinating reading, if it was thoughtfully organized. Alas, the “Exegesis” pursues its target in the manner of a shotgun firing randomly in every possible direction. Dick ruminates, cogitates and associates freely from one topic to the next. He mulls the content of his dreams, descends into labyrinths of metaphysical hypotheses and (ironically) wonders how he can ever use this material to create a publishable book.

Nor does he succeed in explaining the source of his visions. Jackson and Lethem acknowledge it could have been merely a stroke, residual brain damage from drug use or temporal lobe epilepsy; but they seem unimpressed by such pedestrian possibilities. They insist that “to approach the ‘Exegesis’ from any angle at all a reader must first accept that the subject is revelation.”

The trouble is, any revelatory messages are embedded in more than 900 pages of impulsive theorizing, much of which is self-referential. Dick typically floats a concept, criticizes it 10 pages later, criticizes the critique, then rejects the whole thing as a totally different notion enters his head.

We receive no help from the editors in mapping this tangle. As Richard Doyle, a professor of English and information sciences and technology at Penn State, writes in his afterword, “When you begin reading the ‘Exegesis,’ you undertake a quest with no shortcuts or cheat codes.” Thus we’re on our own when we ponder sentences like “This forces me to reconsider the ‘discarding and annexing’ process by the brain in favor of a *proliferation* theory,” or “So irreality and perturbation are the two perplexities which confront us,” or “I dreamed: I am the fish whose flesh is eaten, and because I am fat, it is good. (Bob Silverberg ate me.)”

What’s missing here is context. From my interactions with Dick, I know that many of these musings were written while he stayed up all night, sometimes in an alcoholic haze, while perusing his favorite source, Macmillan’s Encyclopedia of Philosophy (edited by Paul Edwards). He also retained a healthy sense of humor about his supposed tutelary spirit. “On Thursdays and Saturdays I would think it was God,” he told me, while “on Tuesdays and Wednesdays I would think it was extraterrestrial. Sometimes I would think it was the Soviet Union Academy of Sciences trying out their psychotronic microwave telepathic transmitter.”

Fortunately, he retained this humor and self-skepticism when he grappled with his metaphysical ideas in his 1981 novel “Valis.” There he portrayed himself as an eminently sane observer, engaging in dialogues with a delusional alter ego whom he named Horselover Fat. A deity does enter the story, but the book’s theosophical concerns range from the sublime to the mundane, as characters ponder issues like why God allowed a much-loved

cat to die. (The deity says the answer is simple. The cat should have known better than to run in front of a car. It died because it was stupid.)

The “Exegesis” takes itself much more seriously, and becomes tiresome as a result. The editors note that Dick’s children, who are the heirs to his estate, weren’t entirely happy about its being published, in case it “attracted unwelcome attention and threatened to undermine their father’s growing academic and literary reputation with its disreputable aura of high weirdness.”

Their worries were unfounded. The sheer mass of this folly will surely discourage most readers. Philip K. Dick’s novels — the works that *he* considered important and publishable — endure as the most fitting tribute to his intellect, his imagination and his willingness to acknowledge that when all is said and done, human existence may be nothing more than a cosmic comedy.

*Charles Platt has written more than 40 books of fiction and nonfiction, including “The Silicon Man” and “Dream Makers.”*