



Scratch Pad 44

Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 30, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the June 2001 mailing of Acnestis.

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THE PHILIP K. DICK SPECIAL

Why not a Philip K. Dick special? Why not pages and pages devoted to my favourite author? Much more interesting than writing pages and pages about all those other boring authors whose review copies clunk daily into the letterbox. Thanks to Malcolm Edwards and the people at Gollancz for reprinting lots of Philip K. Dick novels recently.

My Life and Philip K. Dick

Frank Bertrand interviews Bruce Gillespie

Frank Bertrand has been a subscriber to *SF Commentary* since the mid seventies. He wrote to me because of our mutual interest in the work of Philip K. Dick. I lost him a few years ago — his copy of *SFC* 76 returned, marked 'Address Unknown'. Recently, he reached me by email, thanks to Lucy Sussex. Frank's life has become a bit chaotic recently, and he's currently living in Alaska. He is contributing to the Web site philipkdick.com. He's already interviewed Lucy about her story 'Kay and Phil'. Here is his email interview with me. It's on the Web site.

FB: *When did you first read Philip K. Dick, and why?*

BRG: When I began borrowing SF books from the library, at the age of twelve, the first SF book I picked was *World of*

Chance, the title of the English (cut) version of Philip Dick's first novel, *Solar Lottery*. Although not quite the book to make me an SF addict (that honour goes to Jack Williamson's *The Humanoids*, which I read a month or so later), *World of Chance*

left me with the feeling that I must read more of this writer.

When I first read and bought the SF magazines, in the early sixties, I had limited pocket money, so I bought the cheapest magazines available. In 1961 in Australia, the cheapest magazines were the English *New Worlds*, *Science Fiction Adventures* and *Science Fantasy*, edited by Ted Carnell and published by Nova Publications. Each cost 2s 6d (25 cents) per issue. The first issue of the first magazine I ever bought (*New Worlds*) contained the last episode of a serial, *Time out of Joint*, by Philip Dick. This was astonishing stuff, describing Ragle Gumm's tunnel-like ride from one era (1959, the year in which he thinks he lives) to another (1999, the year in which he has actually been living). This abrupt journey from a false reality to a real reality is the essential Phil Dick experience.

FB: *At the time, were you already reading SF, or was PKD the first SF author you read?*

BRG: I became an SF addict almost before I could read, although I did not know the term 'science fiction' at the time. In 1952 or 1953, the ABC, Australia's national broadcaster, played on its daily Children's Session a serial called *The Moon Flower*, by G. K. Saunders. Saunders, who is still alive, was commissioned by the ABC to write an SF serial for children that was not only good drama but scientifically sound. It was the scientific detail that excited me when I was five or six, as the serial dramatised the experience of weightlessness during the trip to the Moon, the landscape scientists at the time expected to find on the Moon, and all other aspects of space travel. I wanted to travel into space. I still do. Since I never will get into space, at least we have the films *2001* and *Space Cowboys* to give some vision of what it must be like to hang weightless in orbit around Earth.

I became aware only slowly that what I called 'space fiction' was labelled 'science fiction', and only when I was twelve did I start reading it. Encountering Phil Dick's work so early in my reading showed me that science fiction was much more than 'space fiction'. *Solar Lottery*, after all, is about future politics. The story showed me that science fiction could reveal much more than I could find elsewhere in fiction was Cordwainer Smith's 'A Planet Named Shayol' in the first *Galaxy* magazine I ever bought. After that, there were no limits.

FB: *After first reading PKD, how did your interest in him then develop?*

BRG: Encountering Phil Dick in the magazines (including *All We Marsmen* in *Worlds of Tomorrow*, a serial that was published in book form as *Martian Time-Slip*) put me on the alert for his work. Merv Binns, organiser for many years of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club, worked as the manager of McGill's Newsagency in Melbourne. In the early sixties he was just beginning to import Ace Books and some titles from Ballantine, Pyramid and the other American paperback publishers. Importing American books was a fraught business at the time, since legally Merv couldn't bring them in if a British edition was available, or even if British rights had been sold. At that time, no British publisher knew about Phil Dick, so the stream of novels that he published from 1960 to 1964 could be bought from McGill's front counter.

FB: *What in particular was it in his stories and/or novels that interested you?*

BRG: Phil Dick's work nearly passed me by, since many of his novels that appeared in the early sixties were ordinary, to put it kindly. As I found out much later, Phil Dick was writing very fast in order to eat (and keep up payments on several alimonies), and it was almost by accident that he produced great books during that period.

The breakthrough novels, as I remember, were *All We Marsmen* (Frederik Pohl's much better title for *Martian Time-Slip*), the comedy *Clans of the Alphane Moon* and the paranoid shocker *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. For several years I couldn't find *The Man in the High Castle*, although it had won the Hugo, because rights had been sold in Britain.

I loved *Palmer Eldritch* because it told a story of a roller coaster ride down and down, leaving behind ordinary reality and falling into a totally paranoid alternate reality. By the book's end, there is nothing trustworthy left in the world. All has been swallowed by Palmer Eldritch.

I was reading this at a time during which I was taking some rather elementary philosophy at university. Philosophy subjects at Melbourne University at the time were dominated by the question, 'How do I know that anything exists?' Phil Dick covered the territory better than Descartes or Hume. And his books were unputdownable. I always felt guilty about how easy it was to read a Phil Dick novel or short story.

FB: *In what ways do you think Dick covered the question 'How do I know that anything exists?' better than Descartes and Hume? And why was this an important question to Philip Dick?*

BRG: The easy answer is that Philip Dick came after Descartes, Leibniz, Hume, Ayers and all that lot, and must have read them all. Descartes asked 'How do I know that anything exists?', as Plato had before him, and offered the proposition that 'Knowledge is true, legitimate belief'. He offered a tortuous argument in favour of the possibility of knowledge, concluding with the famous proposition, 'I think, therefore I exist.' As Sutin's biography shows, Philip Dick often doubted many aspects of existence, although he thought all the time. Some of the eeriest aspects of his novels were not based on a novelist's fantasy, but on his everyday experience. This was a personal knockdown fight between Philip Dick and reality, and the novels tell of the rounds of that fight. Not only did Dick have the ability to generalise from his own experience to the experience of the characters in his fiction, but he could render those generalisations in the melodrama of snappy popular fiction. Philosophy jumps out of tedious textbooks onto the streets of California.

FB: *At what point, and why, did you decide to write about PKD?*

BRG: To Philip Dick I owe, directly or indirectly, almost everything good that has happened in my life since 1967.

In 1966, Merv Binns began to display copies of a magazine called *Australian Science Fiction Review* on the front counter at McGill's. It looked intriguing. I bought and read it regularly, then subscribed in late 1967. *ASFR* (as it was always called) featured brilliant essays and reviews about SF from such critics as John Foyster and George Turner. From 1965 to 1967 I was doing English Literature at university. I loved writing essays about literature, and found, through *ASFR*, that the same methods could be applied to science fiction authors. What better subject than Philip K. Dick?

In November 1967 I finished my last exam of my main degree, so immediately began work on the essays about Dick that would appear eventually in *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*. I sent the essays to John Bangsund, editor of *ASFR*. In



The famous cover from the first edition of *Martian Time-Slip*. The book gives no cover credit, but surely the cover painting is by Richard Powers?

December 1967, he invited me to travel sixty miles to his place to meet the 'ASFR crew', the group of Melbourne fans who had met each other because of the magazine. It was a heady weekend, as I met for the first time many of the people who have remained very important in my life, such as John Bangsund, George Turner, Lee Harding, John Foyster, Rob Gerrand (who later became one of my partners in Norstrilia Press), Damien Broderick, and Tony Thomas.

I began writing reviews for *ASFR* during 1968. I kept in touch with the 'ASFR crew', although I was living in a country town west of Melbourne. The only thing that didn't happen was publication of my Philip Dick essays. *ASFR* was faltering, affected by John Bangsund's financial woes and his growing conviction that he should publish a different type of fanzine.

When *ASFR* died in late 1968, I asked John Bangsund for the return of my essays. I expected to have a real income in 1969, my first year of teaching, so I announced that I would

be publishing a fanzine, *SF Commentary*. John not only gave me back the essays, but also his entire back stock of unpublished articles. In 1970, he began publishing *Scythrop*, a fanzine that included a wide range of subject matter, including science fiction.

I believed in the Phil Dick essays, and had a conviction that I could publish a good fanzine. After many misadventures, including No. 1, produced in perhaps the most unreadable typewriter face ever committed to stencil, and nearly ruining the lives of John, Lee and John by asking them to print the first two issues, I got *SF Commentary* rolling by the middle of 1969.

Among the first letters of comment on *SFC* 1 was a letter from Philip Dick himself. Life contains few finer moments. His letter was friendly, he arranged for Doubleday to send me his three most recent novels in hardback, and we struck up a friendship that ended only when Dick rejected all his

friends in the middle seventies. I wrote another long essay at the end of 1969, and that appears on *SFC* 9. In turn, my interest produced a large amount of interesting correspondence and essays from *SFC* readers.

I said that my interest in Phil Dick parallels everything interesting developments in my life. In 1972, when I fell in love, deeply and totally, for the first time in my life, Phil was somebody I could write to about the experience. In turn, he had just fallen in love, deeply and totally, so he wrote me long letters about his experience. He fell in love rather often. Phil sent me a copy of the famous 'Vancouver Speech', 'The Android and the Human', which he had delivered during a crazy trip to Vancouver in 1972. I published it in No. 31, one of the best issues of *SF Commentary*.

In 1975, Carey Handfield and I (and later, Rob Gerrand) had the idea of starting a small press in Australia to publish critical works about science fiction. Our first book was *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*, with an Introduction by Roger Zelazny. The book included almost everything that had appeared in *SFC* about Dick up to that time. Norstrilia Press rolled on until 1985, publishing mainly fiction rather than critical works. We printed 1000 copies of *Electric Shepherd*, which sold out by 1995. Our only other book to sell more than 1000 copies was *The Plains*, by Gerald Murnane, the most esoteric and fascinating short novel ever published in Australia.

As an enterprise, *SF Commentary* became a lot more than an organ of the really unofficial Philip K. Dick fan club of Australia, but of the many friends I've 'met' because of the magazine, most of the ones who've stuck longest and best are people who got in touch with me because of my interest in Dick's work. Unfortunately, in the seventies Phil decided that all his own old friends had become enemies. Fortunately, he did keep writing novels during that period. And then he was dead.

FB: *In looking back now on what you first wrote about PKD, how does it compare with what else you've written about him since?*

BRG: I feel a bit of a fraud here, because I haven't written much about Phil Dick since those first essays. For long periods I've felt that there was no need to, but that's quite wrong, of course. In writing about Dick's work, I must have been writing about myself, and in a sense bringing myself into existence. To go back to the novels could be a scary encounter with an earlier me.

In those early essays ('Mad, Mad Worlds' in *SFC*s 1 and 2, and 'Contradictions' in *SFC* 4, and 'The Real Thing' in *SFC* 9) I was the first person to bring up the main literary question worth asking about the work of Philip Dick: how can a writer of pulpy, even careless, prose and melodramatic situations write books that also retain the power to move the reader, now matter how many times the works are reread? I was trying to work out how literary aesthetics break down when faced by the challenge of Dick's style. As my examples, I used a wide range of novels, mainly from the early sixties. In 'The Real Thing' I looked at *Ubik*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Now Wait for Last Year*.

I didn't solve the problem way back then, but almost nobody except Stanislaw Lem, Kim Stanley Robinson and George Turner has looked at it since. In 1973, Lem mounted a comprehensive case in favour of Dick's work in his 'SF: A Hopeless Case: With Exceptions'. Lem's one exception to the general awfulness of English-language SF was Philip K. Dick. Lem argued that Dick did not succumb to 'trash' (by which I assume Lem meant the clichés of the genre) but

instead used that 'trash', those clichés, in order to build an effective and structurally sound new sort of literature. George Turner, in his essay in *Electric Shepherd*, mounted a brilliant attack on Dick's talent and literary methods, an argument I would still need to face if I went back to writing about the main SF novels.

I provided an answer for myself only in 1990, when I read and wrote about Philip Dick's non-SF novels, the legendary manuscripts that had been rejected by publishers in the 1950s and remained in the Fullerton Library in California for years unread. Paul Williams published one of them, and Kim Stanley Robinson put forward a strong case against them in his otherwise wonderful book about Dick's works. Published only after Dick's death, these novels reveal an author of enormous literary range and delicacy, someone who gives so precise a picture of the changes in America in the fifties that his books were too much for publishers' readers. Why then, I asked, do the SF novels, which are often written much less competently, still have greater imaginative power than even the best of the non-SF books? My answer, of a sort, was to look at the SF books, such as *Time Out of Joint* and *Martian Time-Slip*, that were closely based on Dick's own experience at a time — books that can be regarded legitimately as both realist and SF.

FB: *How would you describe and evaluate the perception of and commentary on PKD, over time?*

BRG: Since I and a few other people, such as John Brunner and Brian Aldiss, discovered and championed Philip Dick's work before other people did, perhaps we haven't attended too much to what critics have been saying about him recently. My feeling is that once the academic critics jumped onto Dick's work, they squashed it under the vast weight of their earnest discussion. *Science-Fiction Studies* has devoted at least two complete issues on his work. The essays and books roll on. Some critics confuse Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* with Philip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, so that the greatly superior book is almost forgotten.

Worse, there is a whole body of writers who seem not interested in Dick's work at all, but only in his strange eruptions of mysticism during his last years. These are the sort of people who find meaning in *Valis*, but are unfamiliar with *Solar Lottery* or *Martian Time-Slip*. I found *Valis* almost unreadable, but I did like the SF version of the same story, *Radio Free Albemuth*, which showed that even during his last years Phil Dick could still write an uncomplicated paranoid thriller about near-future politics.

The interest in the man himself has produced both hero worship and useful biographies and semi-biographical works. Lawrence Sutin's biography was very useful, and it's good that a small press was willing to take a chance on Anne Dick's memoir of her former husband. If only all this interest could have taken place during Phil's life, so that he need not have suffered years of near poverty.

Dick has achieved his real triumph in the scripts of films that don't even mention his name. Many of David Cronenberg's films pay tribute to Dick, either directly (in *Existenz*) or indirectly. There is now a new genre of deliriously ambiguous films, such as *Fight Club* and *Sixth Sense* that, I believe, could never have been made without the influence of Philip Dick in current popular culture.

Not many Australian writers apart from me have written much about Philip Dick. Lucy Sussex has written a unique fictional critique, her story 'Kay and Phil', which keeps being reprinted. Among the critics, Damien Broderick uses Philip

Dick as a major example of a ‘transrealist’ author in his recent book about Transrealism. Some people might still think of me as a writer about Dick, but I am not sure I would still agree with myself, even if I had the courage to reread my essays from the sixties. Peter Nicholls has written brilliantly about Dick’s work. I have in the *SFC* files a long essay by Melbourne academic Chris Palmer about *A Scanner Darkly*, and a friend from Perth has sent me several essays on Dick’s work. I haven’t had time to publish them yet. As Gerald Murnane once said to me, reading Phil Dick is like plunging a syringe deep into the vein of an arm labelled California. Many Australians love reading Dick’s work, but perhaps back away from exploring the implications of the work.

FB: What is your favourite PKD story and/or novel, and why?

BRG: I’ve already mentioned *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* — the most intense experience ever given me by a Philip Dick novel. It so savagely attacks every assumption held by the main characters or its readers that it almost becomes incoherent. It is very frightening, so I haven’t reread it for many years. (I admire Peter Nicholls because, in an essay published in 1978, not only did he work out that *Palmer Eldritch* actually has a coherent plot, but he worked out what it is.)

The only SF novel I’ve read five times, however, is *Martian Time-Slip*, which has my favourite set of characters in any Dick

novel, especially Manfred Bohlen, the time-autistic boy, and his long-suffering parents Jack and Sylvia. The last few sentences of that book are Dick’s finest.

For years, I could not come to grips with *The Man in the High Castle*, because its urbanity and careful detail mark it out as very different from the other novels Dick was publishing in the early sixties. Now that we have the non-SF novels to look at, we can see that *High Castle* is actually typical of Dick at his best. As with *Martian Time-Slip*, its characters remain with the reader, especially the wonderful Juliana Frink, the first character in an SF novel who begged to be played on screen by Sigourney Weaver.

Favourites, favourites; they go on forever. I love *Ubik*, which, in its desperate paranoia, its feeling of sitting on a footpath on the street that divides life from death, encapsulates perfectly my state of mind at the end of 1970 as I tried to crawl through the second and last year of my highly unsuccessful career as a school teacher. Phil Dick speaks to and for me in *Ubik*.

Philip K. Dick is the only SF writer, any of whose works I can pick up and know that I will have a totally pleasurable reading experience. Sometimes I don’t know why I enjoy the experience of a particular book or story; sometimes I grump at the books after I’ve finished them; but there is no substitute for taking that roller coaster ride with Philip K. Dick.

— Bruce Gillespie and Frank Bertrand, May 2001

In the January 2001 *Acnestis* mailing, Ian Sales was rather sniffy about Philip K. Dick’s *Ubik*. Since this is the ‘Philip K. Dick Special’, I can take the trouble to disagree with Ian. Fortunately, I don’t need to write a new article. I’ll just quote myself. It would be much better if I could quote Stanislaw Lem’s case that *Ubik* is the best English-language SF novel (he makes this case in ‘Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case — With Exceptions’, *SF Commentary* No. 35/36/37, July–Sep. 1973), but that might attract a large writ for breach of copyright. (Lem’s article is in *Microworlds*, his collection of essays about SF, if you can find a copy; or in *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*.)

The following appeared first in *SF Commentary* No. 9, February 1970 (pp. 11–25). It also appears in *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*, now out of print. I wonder if I still agree with myself.

Philip K. Dick: The Real Thing

by Bruce Gillespie

Editions used:

NWFLY = *Now Wait for Last Year* (Doubleday; 1966; 214 pp.)

DADOES = *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968; 210 pp.)

Ubik (1969; 202 pp.)

I

In *Now Wait for Last Year*, Philip Dick describes the situation thus:

‘What’s the relationship between this man’s angina and the Secretary’s pains?’

‘Relationship? Is there one?’ . . .

Eric bent over the cot on which the patient McNeil lay. So this was the man who had the ailment which Molinari imagined *he* had. Which came first? Eric wondered. McNeil or Gino Molinari? Which is cause and which effect — assuming that such a relationship exists . . . But it would be interesting to know, for instance, if anyone in the vicinity had cancer of the prostrate gland when Gino had it . . . and other cancers, infarcts, hepatitis, and whatever else as well. (*NWFLY*, p. 87)

In one of the scenes from *Ubik*, the traveller Joe Chip faces this problem in his trip across a disappearing America:

To Joe the official said, 'Go out by hangar three and look for a red and white Curtiss biplane.'

'Thanks,' Joe said, and left the building; he strode rapidly toward hangar three, already seeing what looked like a red and white Curtiss Wright biplane. At least I won't be making the trip in a World War JN training plane, he said to himself . . .

A short fat man with red hair pattered with an oily rag at the wheels of his biplane; he glanced up as Joe approached.

'Are you Mr Jespersen?' Joe asked.

'That's right.' The man surveyed him, obviously mystified by Joe's clothes, which had not reverted. 'What can I do for you?' Joe told him. 'You want to trade a LaSalle, a new LaSalle, for a one-way trip to Des Moines?'

Together they made their way to the parking lot

'I don't see any '39 LaSalle,' Jespersen said suspiciously. The man was right. The LaSalle had disappeared. In its place Joe saw a fabric-top Ford coupe, a tinny and small car, very old, 1929, he guessed . . . Obviously, it was now hopeless. He would never get to Des Moines. (*Ubik*, pp. 130-1)

The occurrences in Philip Dick's novels are impossible. In what future will you find (a) one man who may exhibit all the signs of an illness of a man in the next room, (b) a process by which time devolves around a modern man without him going mad, or the whole chemistry of his body collapsing, or (c) a drug (JJ-180, the 'star' of *Now Wait for Last Year*) that literally, magically, turns back the tides of time, wipes out memory or transfers people between different time zones, all in the space of one second? More importantly, how often would you find people who would know what was going on when these things happened? Yet try to invent a science that will 'explain' all the elements in *Now Wait for Last Year*, for instance.

In *Ubik*, Philip Dick invents a technology to 'explain' magical happenings. One of Dick's characters says that 'Defusing a psi operation has to be done on a systematic basis'. Presumably Dick refers to all the rigorous 'systems' of E. E. Smith stories and Campbell editorials. Telepathy does not make sense; in context, the statement is a joke. In *Ubik*, Hollis's psis disappear suddenly from view. Glen Runciter's inertials have been hired to track them and stop them from invading the population's mental privacy — Hollis has removed them from the telepathic 'scene' and made Runciter's organisation ineffective:

Runciter: 'You're sure the teep was Melipone? Nobody seems to know what he looks like; he must use a different physiognomic template every month. What about his field?'

'We asked Joe Chip to go in there and run tests on the magnitude and minitude of the field being generated there at the Bonds of Erotic Polymorphic Experience Motel. Chip says it registered, at its height, 68.2 blr units of telepathic aura, which only Melipone, among all the known telepaths, can produce . . .' (*Ubik*, p. 2)

Does jargon extend to everything? Can it possibly extend to telepathy? We know it is one big laugh, but there could be a catch of puzzlement that mars the guffaw.

In *Ubik*, Dick talks about a different part of this telepathic technology: the functions of Beloved Brethren Moratorium, owned by Herbert Schoenheit von Vogelsang. After you die, your 'protophasons' of encephalic half-life glimmer within your body. Your 'bereaved' may contact you at the Moratorium. There is one problem: as you natter away, your proto-

phasons leak away. Each frame of life draws your mind toward death.

The reader does not really believe in all this, especially as we learn little about the future technology that might weld together such unlikely allies as Runciter and Assocs and the Beloved Brethren Moratorium. Dick does not mention, for instance, what the government (if any) thinks about all this.

The chalk marks against Dick score his board badly. Impossible and impossible, as Dick's honorable predecessor, Lewis Carroll, might have said. Mistakes in political science (or, should I say, political technology?) glare more obviously than mistakes about the shape of computers in 1992. Dick's governments, where he talks about them at all, repel us. Not only are they usually fascist governments that would not allow the freedoms that Dick's characters presume, but their functions are laughably over simplified.

Dick's 'societies' look no more credible. In *Now Wait for Last Year*, government officials amuse themselves by collecting Lucky Strike packages and lose their identifies in Wash-35 (a miniaturised Washington of 1935). The war between Earth, Lilitar and the reegs proceeds, but makes no visible difference to the face of Earth. Molinari, the all-powerful UN General Secretary, who directs the War, was 'elected into office'. But who elected him, and why? Dick does not show us the population of Earth, but only the small group of people who surround Molinari.

'Just head west,' he told the cab. I've got to get back to Cheyenne, he realised. Somehow, by some route.

'Yes sir,' the cab said. 'And by the way, sir, you failed to show me your travel permit. May I see it now? just a formality, of course.'

'What travel permit?' But he knew; it would be an issue of the governing 'Star occupation agency, and without their permission Terrans could not come and go. This was a conquered planet and very much still at war. (*NWFLY*, p. 164)

Sure, cabs work in Saigon, but among bomb ruins and beggars' feet. Earth's war does not warrant all the worry hat Molinari expends on it.

But the realities of national politics do not affect Molinari — like Hitler or Franklin D. Roosevelt (Dick combines elements of both), Molinari directs events from his well-protected bunker. But in *Now Wait for Last Year*, we do not brush near the SS lackeys, and Molinari does face the daily swarm of Marcos's sycophants. Molinari has it on a plate; LBJ might well envy his continuing success, but he would learn nothing from Molinari about how it is done.

Late in the novel, Dick makes great play of the scene where

Trailed by Secret Service men, they . . . entered a guarded, locked room which Eric realized was a projection chamber; the far wall consisted of a permanent vidscreen installation on a grand scale.

'Me making a speech,' Molinari explained . . .

Chuckling, Molinari said from the deep, foam-rubber chair in which he lounged beside Eric, 'I look pretty good, don't I?'

'You do.' The speech rolled on, sonorous, even containing, now and then, a trace of the awesome, the majestic. And it was precisely this which Molinari had lost: he had become pitiable. On the screen the mature, dignified man in military garb expressed himself clearly in a voice that snapped out its sentences without hesitancy; the UN Secretary, in the video tape, demanded and informed, did not

beg, did not turn to the electorate of Terra for help . . . but how had it been done? How did the pleading, hypochondriacal invalid, suffering from his eternal half-killing complaints, rise up and do this? Eric was mystified.

Beside him Molinari said, 'It's a fake. That's not me.' He grinned with delight as Eric stared first at him and then again at the screen. (*NWFLY*, pp. 93–4)

The TV screen image (false) beckons to the millions (we don't meet any of them, except for the robant taxis) of Earth. Molinari Mark II whips up enthusiasm and directs the emotions of the crowd. We know the effects of television and the public meeting on twentieth-century politics. But we also know of the groundswell of discontent housed in separate discontent minds that must receive the message. Without believable governed, Dick's governors continue to mystify *Us*.

As I have hinted, the political-economic structures in *Ubik* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, if structures can be said to exist at all, look fascist. The only other people in Dick's novels beside the main characters are the members of the *other* fascists. In *Now Wait for Last Year*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Ubik*, the all-important battles are two-dimensional: the Earthmen fight the aliens, the inertials are trapped by the telepaths, and the bounty hunters track the androids. Dick's 'bosses' Gino Molinari and Glen Runciter are accepted without question by their subjects, and accepted with great difficulty by the reader.

The Mole would have been their leader at any time; at any stage in human society. And — anywhere.

But is there any evidence that our political leaders have ever exhibited signs of superhumanity? Has there ever been less mediocrity at the top than in any other stratum of society, or at any other time than the present?

If you wanted to present a case against Dick's work, it would most profitably proceed along these lines. Dick's mind is wide ranging and his interests far reaching — but there are whole areas of experience that he does not think about. But how many other SF writers think more clearly about sociopolitical matters than does Philip Dick? Only one or two, perhaps.

II

There are several explanations or excuses that might cover this credibility gap. At least these are the excuses that people drag up for the faults of all the other SF authors:

- (a) Many authors, within and without science fiction, have written 'impossible' novels. Perhaps all novels feature some elements that would prove impossible if applied rigorously to the evidence from ordinary experience. The most common reason authors advance for the deliberate distortion of perceived reality is that they wish to refine or provide analogies for particular areas of existence. We do the same thing with a microscope or a telescope. Are Philip Dick's novels allegorical of particular aspects of our world?
- (b) Could we say that Philip Dick is just another SF writer, dredging up all the old SF ideas, reusing them like flat soap suds? Are Dick's novels meaningless fantasies, like many works that superficially resemble them? Does Dick write about *only* two-dimensional distortions of misunderstood processes? (This is a false ploy, of course. If this were true, I would not have written this

article.)

- (c) Philip Dick likes to talk about politics, industrial warfare, and possible post-World War III worlds (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*). But are these elements so much scenery, as Ted Pauls suggests in a recent review? Are these novels private games, like Nabokov's more obscure efforts? Perhaps Dick has escaped from the normal pigeonholes that divide popular literature into such categories as realist, expressionist, or science fiction. If this is the case, how do we judge Dick's work at all, let alone understand it?

III

For the reasons that I have already outlined, the reader must admit that (a) is unlikely, for the same reasons that some readers might shrug off Dick's work with point (b). Dick features politics, interracial warfare, the society of an empty, radioactive world, etc. In *Now Wait for Last Year*, there are numerous parallels between the Earth–Lilistar–reegs conflict and the four-sided Vietnam War. Dick makes this war into an elaborate game where everybody gets hurt except the organisers; where huge numbers of civilians and cities are said to have disappeared, but Dick does not show us any signs of the process of disintegration. But, ultimately, these are asides: Molinari's comic ambiguity is nowhere near as comic or as ambiguous as, say, that of two presidents facing different public reactions, a local yokel who runs his state but lets everybody know how badly he is doing it, and a paternalistic communist whose influence increases in inverse proportion to the organisation of his troops and the strength of his supply lines. There is nothing as interesting or compelling in *Now Wait for Last Year's* allusions as the situation behind these headlines we yawn at every day. As for science and sociology in general, Dick gets them wrong. Quite often this is done with comic intent (as in *The Crack in Space*) but never with allegorical content.

Point (b) is more likely. In Dick's writing there is a neverending flow of original, grotesque or quaint SF gimmicks and variations on old 'ideas'. I had thought *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* had exhausted all the novel aspects of drugs, but *Now Wait for Last Year* tips over a whole new barrowful of tricks from the same source. We are sick to death of android stories and After-the-Bomb stories, but Dick manages to gloss over his Nexus-6 androids and his empathy boxes (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) so that we think that nobody else had ever used these ideas.

Who could resist the ever-present little can of *Ubik* that peeps from behind every doorway in the novel of that name? Every chapter begins with one of the virtues of *Ubik*, qualities presented by an advertising executive. The third chapter, for instance, carries the following cryptic message:

Instant *Ubik* has all
fresh flavor of just-brewed
drip coffee. Your husband
will say, Christ, Sally, I
used to think your coffee
was only so-so. But now,
wow! Safe when taken as
directed. (*Ubik*, p. 17)

The last line of each blurb gives the game away: the all-purpose aid to modern living must never exceed the limits, must be 'taken as directed'. *Ubik* is the saviour, but the novel that unrolls underneath these advertisements tells of a terror that

is past saving.

Before the reader has time to consider the significance of *Ubik*, its magical qualities taunt the mind. It springs up like a poltergeist in every situation. As Joe Chip's world deteriorates around him:

A hard-eyed housewife with big teeth and horse's chin replaced the cartoon fairy; in a brassy voice she bellowed, 'I came over to *Ubik* after trying weak, out-of-date reality supports. My pots and pans were turning into heaps of rust. The floors of my conapt were sagging. My husband Charley put his foot right through the bedroom door. But now I use economical new powerful today's *Ubik*, and with miraculous results. Look at this refrigerator.' On the screen appeared an antique turret-top GE refrigerator. 'Why, it's devolved back eighty years.'

'Sixty-two years,' Joe corrected reflexively.

'But now look at it,' the housewife continued, squirting the old turret top with her spray can of *Ubik*. Sparkles of magic light lit up in a nimbus surrounding the old turret top and, in a flash, a modern six-door pay refrigerator replaced it in splendid glory. (*Ubik*, p. 118)

but finally even *Ubik* itself seems to degenerate under the pressures of the processes unleashed upon the novel's characters:

There, on the seat beside him, rested the bottle which he had received in the mail. He picked it up —

And discovered something which did not really surprise him. The bottle, like the car, had again regressed. Seamless and flat, with scratch marks on it, the kind of bottle made in a wooden mold. Very old indeed; the cap appeared to be handmade, a soft tin screw-type dating from the late nineteenth century. The label, too, had changed; holding the bottle up, he read the words printed on it.

ELIXIR OF UBIQUE . . . A BENEFICENT AID TO MANKIND WHEN SEDULOUSLY EMPLOYED AS INDICATED. (*Ubik*, p. 131)

All this *might* have significance; but it certainly has comic point.

But are Dick's books nothing but highly entertaining conjuring tricks? Certainly the trickery is the reason why I find each book just as fascinating as its predecessor. Dick's pyrotechnics alone would assure him his place in the SF echelon. Some of Dick's earlier novels, such as *Dr Bloodmoney* (discussed in *SF Commentary* 1) could best be described as energetic romps.

But in the three novels under discussion, there is much prose that does not romp. Many passages of *Now Wait for Last Year* are very funny, but the jokes are hardly like those of Bob Hope's. As Harlan Ellison has noted, Dick's jokes read more like Harold Pinter's. When Eric Sweetscent (in *Now Wait for Last Year*) moves forward in time ten years, he is rescued from death by his ten-years-older self:

As Eric stepped from the MP patrol ship the man sprinted up to him.

'Hey,' the man panted. 'It's me.'

'Who are you?' Eric said; the man . . . was certainly familiar — Eric confronted a face which he had seen many times and yet it was distorted now, witnessed from a weird angle, as if inside out, pulled through infinity. The man's hair was parted on the wrong side so that his head seemed lopsided, wrong in all its lines. What amazed him was the physical unattractiveness of the man. He was too fat and a little too old. Unpleasantly gray. It was a shock to see

himself like this, without preparation; do I really look like that? he asked himself morosely. (*NWFLY*, p. 171)

A tremendous routine, you must agree, worthy of all the best absurdist writing, and certainly an improvement on Robert Heinlein's 'By His Bootstraps' and all those other time-paradox stories. At the same time, the joke wrenches: how would your fifty-years-old self like to see your forty-years-old self approaching you?

Many of the conversations in these three novels are ironically funny, but also feature agonised quibbling and wrangling. Two characters often cut away at each other, and the mental pain rivals that shown in the film *Accident*. National problems become personal battlegrounds. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* there is a brutal yet ironically pitched encounter between the two bounty hunters. Rick Decard hopes to 'retire' six Nexus-6 androids in a day, and Phil Resch, who has chased androids for years, now fears that he himself may be an android equipped with false memories.

'You're sure I'm an android? Is that really what Garland said?'

'That's what Garland said . . . This is necessary. Remember: they killed humans in order to get away. And if I hadn't gotten you out of the Mission police station they would have killed you. That's what Garland wanted me for . . . Didn't Polokov almost kill you? Didn't Luba Luft almost? We're acting defensively; they're here on our planet — they're murderous illegal aliens masquerading as —'

'As police,' Rick said. 'As bounty hunters.'

'Okay; give me the Boneil test. Maybe Garland lied. I think he did — false memories just aren't that good. What about my squirrel?'

'Yes, your squirrel. I forgot about your squirrel.'

'If I'm an andy,' Phil Resch said, 'and you kill me, you can have my squirrel.' (*DADOES*, p. 117)

The joke is that Decard is bent on destroying creatures that he cannot recognise except with the aid of a purely mechanical test. Luba Luft 'posed' as an opera singer before the ambitious-boy-on-the-way-up, Rick Decard, shot her without a whimper from him. Several other androids 'pose' as a typical American family — but their attitudes and actions do not differ at all from that of the 'real' American family. And where have the 'real' people gone? They have ruined Earth with atomic bombs, and now do little except save money to buy the few remaining specimens of live animals left on Earth. Few novels pose the question 'What is humanity?' quite as sharply as does *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

But one may have just missed the irony in this passage in the excitement of Decard's chase. Only the blunt prose itself contains all the strands that make up the complex emotional response with which we should read this book. The androids appear as more human than the humans, and we have least sympathy for the boorish SS-like killer Rick Decard.

Some of the conversations in *Now Wait for Last Year* bite as deeply as those in the novels I have just looked at. Dick entertains us with the effects of [J]-180, but the reader remembers just as clearly the bitter exchanges between Eric Sweetscent and his wife, their separation, and the private quest for security that leads Eric right back to home base. Dick sets the tone early in the novel:

[Jonas] broke off, seeing that both the Sweetscents had a grim, taciturn cast about them. 'I interrupted?'

'Company business takes priority', Eric said, 'over the

creature pleasures.' He was glad of the intervention . . . 'Please scram out of here, Kathy,' he said to his wife, and did not trouble himself to make his tone jovial. 'We'll talk at dinner. I've got too much to do to spend my time haggling over whether a robant bill collector is mechanically capable of telling lies or not.' He escorted his wife to the office door; she moved passively, without resistance. Softly, Eric said, 'Like everyone else in the world it's busy deriding you, isn't it? They're all talking.' He shut the door after her.

Presently Jonas Ackerman shrugged and said, 'Well, that's marriage these days. Legalized hate.' (*NWFLY*, p. 15)

The tone is familiar. People in soggy American melodramas talk this way. But few authors catch the interrelationship so well — Kathy appears passive, welcomes Eric back, and the old fights break out. Dick cuts deeper than many writers who attempt the same thing. This is ironic comedy that contains no laughter, and Dick sees possibilities that many other authors could not think of. If they did, they would not be able to write scenes as cruel as this:

'I'll put you in the building's infirmary,' he decided, rising to his feet. 'For the time being. While I figure out what to do. I'd prefer not to give you any medication, though; it might further potentiate the drug. With a new substance you never —'

Kathy broke in. 'Want to know what I did, Eric, while you were off getting the Secret Service? I dropped a cap of JJ-180 into your coffee cup. Don't laugh; I'm serious. It's true, and you've drunk it. So you're addicted now. The effects should begin any time' . . . Her voice was flat and drab . . .

He managed to say, 'I've heard that about addicts in general; they like to hook other people.'

'Do you forgive me?' Kathy asked, also rising.

'No,' he said. (*NWFLY*, p. 135)

Eric has transferred his attention from his wife to the all-consuming Molinari. He misjudges his wife, and suddenly he collapses, hit from the most unexpected quarter. All he can say is, 'I've heard that about addicts in general; they like to hook other people.' His emotions are dislocated, almost lost. The rest of the novel tells of his rediscovery of the 'necessary' emotions: it is a story of personal salvation in a world that, like all Dick's worlds, comes apart as you watch.

But even these sharp observations do not form the centre of Dick's work — very few of his novels centre upon these close human relationships. Judged in the light of *Now Wait for Last Year*, all except a few of Dick's other novels are failures. But many of the other novels are *not* failures. We cannot explain Dick's work with chatter about the 'ideas'; we cannot justify them with talk about Harold Pinter dialogue. What have I left out?

IV

What I sought in the articles 'Mad Mad Worlds' and 'Contradictions', and did not find, was the centre of the wheel around which all of Dick's other ideas revolve. I've not read Kant, Zen Buddhism or theories about entropy, so I cannot spin a neat theory in terms of Philip Dick's self-acknowledged sources.

Instead, I want to go back to the passage from *Now Wait for Last Year* with which I commenced this article. Molinari (as we find out) is the only character in the novel who can control the drug JJ-180. He alone owns the antidote and can

control the time-alteration features of the drug at will. He can take the antidote at intervals to stave off immediate death. However, JJ-180 catches up with *all* its addicts — in Molinari's case, he takes on the symptoms of the terminal diseases 'projected' by other persons in the same building as he is in.

The question we ask ourselves is: how does the illness of one patient 'cause' the illness of Molinari? Why do we accept this 'miracle' as Dick relates it to us, and read on with scarcely a whimper of protest? What is it in Dick's writing that justifies his wholesale dislocation of events, and his evasion of the laws of evidence? Why do Dick's worlds work differently from ours, but still make sense to us?

In logic, there are two main types of statements: those that are logically provable or disprovable, and those that are only empirically provable or disprovable. 'I met a married bachelor' is a logically impossible statement, because of the terms of the definition of the word 'bachelor'. The statement is self-contradictory.

However, it is possible to imagine the situation 'The moon is made of green cheese' (or, 'Molinari exhibits the symptoms of the diseases of the people in the same building'). There is nothing in the idea of 'moon' that precludes the idea of 'green cheese'.

Our ordinary observations, and the laws of science, seem to indicate that there are certain states of existence that are impossible, and certain laws of cause and effect that are necessary. However, in the classic case that questions this assumption, David Hume gives the illustration of the two billiard balls. You hit one billiard ball with the cue; billiard ball A travels towards billiard ball B and makes contact with it; billiard ball B commences to move towards the opposite end of the table. We say that billiard ball A 'caused' billiard ball B to move. However, it is quite possible that, instead of moving towards the other end of the table, billiard ball B could have flown straight up in the air, stayed still, or disappeared altogether. In fact, we observe that in all cases billiard ball B moves in a particular direction when hit by billiard ball A.

It seems to me that Philip Dick does not 'explain' a large number of events in his novels, because he takes the philosophical view that many events in his novels do not have to be 'explained', even though they contravene accepted scientific 'laws'. All is possible (at least, all physical events are possible) because all is logically possible. The web of scientific laws is part of the common reality through which Dick tries to penetrate.

In *Now Wait for Last Year*, JJ-180 does not 'cause' people to move about in time. This would require scientific explanation, and Dick would merely have exchanged one tedious structure for a more acceptable tedious structure. JJ-180 is an agent that removes from the characters' minds and bodies their previous misconceptions about cause and effect. The reader (and the characters in the book) expect that the only way in which Molinari could exhibit the signs of (say) malignant cancer would be if he suffers delusions. But the symptoms of cancer actually appear in Molinari.

In the same book, we can see the same process at work when Kathy Sweetscent takes her second dose of JJ-180: (a) Kathy climbs into the robant cab. (b) The cut on her finger disappears . . . 'No break. No scar. Her finger, exactly as before . . .' (c) She notes down this occurrence on a scrap of paper, but even her writing disappears. (d) The cab 'forgets' that Kathy ever had a cut hand. (e) The cab and Kathy fade completely into the alternate future to which the drug has removed them.

But even with that last sentence I falsify Dick's writing. Philip Dick does not say that 'the drug did this': Kathy and the reader think that the drug 'causes' these events. The reader makes the intellectual connection between events, just as the observer sees the process of billiards in such a way that he thinks that the billiard player causes billiard ball B to move, via his cue and billiard ball A. Dick does not say that there are no, and should be no, scientific laws. He just reminds us that we made them up, not the universe.

V

So Philip Dick can do what he likes, and excuse all his mistakes with an airy wave of a philosophic hand? Not exactly. We would expect Dick to replace these thought forms he rejects with new thought forms by which he can control the structure of his novels. You cannot conceive of meaningful fiction without some structure.

Philip Dick's letter [in *SF Commentary* 9] provides many clues to this structure. Dick posits that a deepened view of reality will allow us to see past the self-consistent physical universe that surrounds us, and may allow us to observe another self-consistent reality. If we can find some way to throw off the delusion of 'normal' reality, we may 'dream dreams and see visions', as the New Testament puts it. Or, as Plato would have it, we would stop dreaming, and would turn from a world of shadows and look directly towards the 'sun' we had never seen before. As Philip Dick demonstrates in 'Faith of our Fathers' (*Dangerous Visions*) and in the afterword to that story, his quest is religious.

But Dick's novels are not religious, or at least, not in any conventional sense. Dick's novels do not melt into an un-differentiated sludge, as you might expect.

Philip Dick feels free to write about the revelation of reality, but it is *his* reality. Dick's vision is despotic — the reader either accepts things as they come or he does not read any further. At the same time, Dick's purpose is not to promote an ecstatic religious vision. Instead, he shows us the frailty of our reality, and lets us catch glimpses of other mysteries only when appropriate. *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* remains the only novel in which Philip Dick has tried to detail a *vision*. More importantly, the drama of Philip Dick's novels flares out from the process of discovery, not that which is discovered. A blind man given sight looks at his surroundings with understanding before he tries to look at the sun.

Whatever Dick tries to do, the answering cry will be: 'But he's making it up! Dick's worlds are entirely imaginary — they are entirely subjective.'

But Dick can convince us that his quest is legitimate, and his discoveries are just as 'real' as our own observations. How does Dick break down this dichotomy between 'objective' and 'subjective'?

Ubik is almost a textbook illustration of the process that Dick describes in his letter. One fanzine reviewer sniffs that 'Dick has this wonderful world, but doesn't really use it'. But Dick's 'world' of 1992 centres around that implausible telepathic technology at which I looked earlier in this article. It is a world that has some unusual features, but Dick's characters live in it no more easily than any inhabitant of our time lives in our world. Joe Chip cannot afford to pay the vending machines that supply all the elements of existence. Glen Runciter, his boss, keeps in contact with his 'dead' wife, as they are still equal partners in the firm.

But the process of half-life is an analogue for the process of decay that sucks out all life from that secure universe that

we think is quite reliable. The Moratorium's half-alive patients lose more 'life' with each conscious act. As they move toward the final experience they lose the power to experience. It is a tragic situation, where each affirmation of life contains an equal amount of negation.

Again, this is not a 'explanation' of the processes set loose in *Ubik*. Dick sets it all before us, and expects us to fall in line, or at least enjoy the superficial aspects of the story. Why do we do it?

In *Ubik*, this group of inertials controlled by Glen Runciter travel to the Moon to interview their 'enemy' Hollis. The interview is a trap, and an explosion kills Runciter and leaves the others badly shaken. The group returns to Earth, attempts to pick up the pieces of the Runciter organisation, but find that the physical aspects of their world decay around them as well as the social aspects:

Joe said, 'Look at this cream.' He held up the pitcher; in it the fluid plastered the sides in dense clots. 'This is what you get for a poscred in one of the most modern, technologically advanced cities on Earth. I'm not leaving here until this place makes an adjustment, either returning my poscred or giving me a replacement pitcher of fresh cream so I can drink my coffee.'

Putting his hand on Joe's shoulder, Al Hammond studied him. 'What's the matter, Joe?'

'First my cigarette,' Joe said. 'Then the two-year-old obsolete phone book in the ship. And now they're serving me week-old sour cream. I don't get it, Al.' (*Ubik*, pp. 76-7)

The process cannot be stopped: this gives the feeling of despair that surrounds most of Dick's novels. The character becomes an observer in a world that peels away. Joe Chip protests, but the whole universe turns backwards. Joe tries to buy a tape recorder; he opens the back to find all the components burnt out.

Joe picks up the phone — he wants to patch up the remains of the Runciter organisation and cobble together some normality:

Joe hung up the phone and stood dizzily swaying, trying to clear his head. *Runciter's voice*. Beyond any doubt. He again picked up the phone, listened once more.

'— lawsuit by Mick, who can afford and is accustomed to litigation of that nature. Our own legal staff certainly should be consulted before we make a formal report to the Society. It would be libel if made public and grounds for a suit claiming false arrest if —'

'Runciter!' Joe said. He said it loudly.

'— unable to verify probably for at least —'

Joe hung up. I don't understand this, he said to himself. (*Ubik*, p. 88)

Runciter's voice drones on. On this first occasion it makes no contact, but it breaks through numerous crevices of the world to which Joe tries to readjust himself. Runciter reminds us of Palmer Eldritch, but Runciter is not the suffocating face of evil. He becomes a neutral figure, one of many in Dick's novels that try to send a feeble semaphore from another 'reality'.

Chip arranges a hotel-room rendezvous with another of the inertials. She does not arrive, and in the morning Joe discovers:

On the floor of the closet a huddled heap, dehydrated, almost mummified, lay curled up. Decaying shreds of what seemingly had once been cloth covered most of it, as if it

had, by degrees, over a long period of time, retracted into what remained of its garments. Bending, he turned it over. It weighed only a few pounds; at a push of his hand its limbs folded out into thin bony extensions that rustled like paper . . .

In a strangled voice von Vogelsang rasped, 'That's old. Completely dried out. Like it's been here for centuries. I'll go downstairs and tell the manager.'

'It can't be an adult woman,' Joe said. These could only be the remnants of a child; they were just too small. 'It can't be either Pat or Wendy,' he said, and lifted the cloudy hair away from its face. 'It's like it was in a kiln,' he said. 'At a very high temperature, for a long time.' (*Ubik*, p. 93)

On one level this is a mystery story — we want to know what happens next. We know already that there is no neat explanation at the end of it all: we want to discover the wide range of possibilities that Dick elucidates. Most importantly, every process is revealed clearly and precisely — there are no waste words. Chip exclaims in bewilderment, but each scrap of knowledge comes without exclamation. This is unimpaired sight — an experience transferred to the reader's nerve ends through the main character. We cannot detach ourselves from the process and say 'This is impossible'. It is not impossible — it is happening to us.

Dick has a surface explanation for the novel: that Runciter did not die, but was the only person left alive after the explosion on the Moon. The rest of the inertials lie in half-life, Joe Chip among them. Runciter succeeds in the projection of partial messages into the time-degenerating half-world, but he cannot reach through as he should be able to. Runciter appears on television in Chip's 'reality', and wields *Ubik*:

'Yes', Runciter's dark voice resumed, 'by making use of the most advanced techniques of present-day science, the reversion of matter to earlier forms *can* be reversed, and at a price any conapt owner can afford. *Ubik* is sold by leading home-art stores throughout Earth. Do not take internally. Keep away from open flame. Do not deviate from printed procedural approaches as expressed on label. So look for it, Joe. Don't just sit there; go out and buy a can of *Ubik* and spray it all around you night and day.'

Standing up, Joe said loudly, 'You know I'm here. Does that mean you can hear and see me?'

'Of course, I can't hear you and see you . . . This commercial message is on videotape . . .' (*Ubik*, p. 119)

The image of Runciter continually reappears, but Joe's reality still holds some continuity — Runciter cannot speak directly to Joe, but finds himself on a videotape recording. The image manages to direct Chip to Des Moines, Iowa. He arrives there just before all pre-World War II motor traffic

degenerates altogether. His post-World War II plane disappears into the form of an early model car.

There are no answers in this process — at the end of the novel the 'explanations' are there, but the tragedy of Joe Chip's new circumstances remains. The haunting desperation of *The Zap Gun*'s 'Enough is enough' remains in the last few chapters of *Ubik*.

The experience is total; the documentation complete. But this is a tour through Dick's experience, not a tour through our world, or the world over Philip Dick's back fence. This is a chute of metaphysical discovery, in which every one of our assumptions is tested. Sometimes the process is terrifying; at best it is also very funny.

Dick's fear of evil is here — but Dick does not run from it. He welcomes it as the only legitimate perception of a fully awakened mind, even though he knows this perception can only burn out the perceiving mind. Dick's characters are parts of himself. On the one hand they do not understand proceedings: they feel fear, panic or horror. But they also see clearly: their fear does not blind them, but only brings out the best in them. At the end of *Ubik*, Joe Chip watches himself deteriorate as he climbs the steps of the decrepit Des Moines hotel. There is no hysteria here — just direct, all-inclusive description that draws around us all the emotions that fit the situation:

He lay for a time, and then, as if called, summoned into motion, stirred. He lifted himself up onto his knees, placed his hands flat before him . . . my hands, he thought; good god. Parchment hands, yellow and knobby, like the ass of a cooked, dry turkey. Bristly skin, not like human skin; pinfeathers, as if I've devolved back millions of years to something that flies and coasts, using its skin as a sail.

Opening his eyes, he searched for the bed; he strove to identify it. The far window, admitting gray light through its web of curtains. A vanity table, ugly, with lank legs. Then the bed, with brass knobs capping its railed sides, bent and irregular, as if years of use had twisted the railings, warped the varnished wooden headboards. I want to get on it even so, he said to himself; he reached toward it, slid and dragged himself farther into the room. (*Ubik*, p. 168)

Action merges into perception; perception shows Joe his own alienness; this perception sets his mind and ours forever seeking the key to the pattern; action and perception settle into a kind of acceptance of the last resting place. There is despair in the scene, but also the kind of intelligence that seeks to understand even when all understanding seems to have disappeared. How better could I sum up the whole of Philip Dick's enterprise.

— Bruce Gillespie, 1969

The following article is my most successful piece of writing. Not that I've ever earned any money for it, but after its first appearance in **brg** No. 1, October 1990, it won the William Atheling Award, and was reprinted in several places, including *Critical Wave*. More interesting, however, is an article by Josh Lukin that appeared in the April 2001 issue of *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. His article, "This Sense of Worthlessness": Ideals of Success in Philip K. Dick's *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*, makes a much stronger case for Dick's non-SF novels than I would. It also shows better than I can the reasons why Dick had little chance of publishing his non-SF novels during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Non-Science Fiction Novels of Philip K. Dick (1928–82)

A talk prepared by Bruce Gillespie
for the October 1990 meeting of the Nova Mob

I

What *are* the non-SF novels of Philip Dick? As happens often when discussing Dick's life and career, it is not easy to give a simple answer.

The books that I want to concentrate on during this talk comprise a series of novels that Philip Dick wrote during the 1950s with the aim of launching a career into the mainstream of American literature. For this reason, they might truly be called 'mainstream' novels, much as I dislike the term. None of these novels was published during the 1950s or 1960s, and only one, *Confessions of a Crap Artist*, appeared during the author's lifetime. In his biography of Philip Dick, *Strange Invasions*, Lawrence Sutin shows that this lack of success was a constant, inconsolable disappointment to Dick until he died. In 1960 he wrote that he was willing to 'take twenty to thirty years to succeed as a literary writer'. This dream had virtually died by January 1963 when the Scott Meredith Literary Agency 'returned all of Phil's unsold mainstream novels in one big package that was dumped on his doorstep . . . These rejections coupled with the ray of hope of the Hugo [for *The Man in the High Castle*], made it official. After seven years, Phil's mainstream breakthrough effort was formally at an end.' These 1950s manuscripts were later stored at the library of the University of California at Fullerton, and remained largely unread, except by scholars like Kim Stanley Robinson, until after Dick's death in 1982.

But Phil Dick's dream of mainstream success never left him. He had fond hopes that *The Man in the High Castle* would be a general literary success as well as a Hugo winner. This has not happened. In his last years, he begged Dave Hartwell at Timescape Books to market *The Divine Invasion* and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* as general novels. This happened, but removing these books from the science fiction category seems merely to have deprived them of sales within the genre.

Other novels of the 1970s and 1980s are so much based on Phil Dick's day-to-day experience that they might also be

counted as non-SF novels. *A Scanner Darkly* is the most obvious example. Set slightly in the future of the year in which Dick was writing it, and containing only one SF device, it tells in a almost documentary way the story of the young drug addicts who shared Phil's house during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In the Bibliography I also mention four novels as 'closely related to the 1950s non-SF novels'. These novels, which are *Time out of Joint*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *Martian Time-Slip* and *We Can Build You*, begin with highly realistic settings and characters that might just as well have been lifted from any one of the 1950s non-SF novels.

II

Philip Dick, born in 1928, died in 1982 of a massive stroke. He spent most of his life in southern California, especially around Berkeley and San Francisco. He appears to have held only two regular jobs in his life, and by 1950 was doing his best to become a full-time writer, especially as he was no good at anything else. He had an early success in marketing science fiction short stories, and began to succeed with SF novels during the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1963 he won the Hugo award for *The Man in the High Castle*. This boosted his reputation, which had grown slowly during the 1960s, and slowly he gained fame, both within and without the SF field, during the 1970s. Helped immensely by several film options and the completion of *Blade Runner*, loosely based on his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, he was just beginning to gain his first real financial rewards when died in 1982.

Philip Dick didn't do as well from SF as Isaac Asimov or Arthur Clarke, but he did better than most of his contemporaries. Given that Dick enjoyed an SF career that produced about 40 novels and about 80 short stories, why was he not content with success within the science fiction genre? Why was he so absolutely determined to become a mainstream literary writer, and why was this the one ambition of his life that was denied him absolutely?

The answers to these questions lie partly in the Sutin biography (I haven't seen the Rickmann biography yet) and other recent memoirs of the man, but much more obviously in the texts themselves.

III

Part of the answer is undoubtedly that it was very easy for Philip Dick to write successful science fiction. He turned to it a bit too naturally. Like many of us, he began to read science fiction when he was twelve years old. Unlike many young SF readers, he was at the same time reading his way through the rest of world literature. By the time he began glimpsing a career for himself as a writer, his ambition was to become an American Maupassant or Balzac. His technique of interleaving chapters, each chapter based on a different set of characters, was based more from the great nineteenth-century European novelists than the works of anyone in science fiction. But before he could have any success in literary fiction, he met Anthony Boucher, editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, who published his first story — a science fiction story — in 1951. Phil Dick had just been married for the second time, had no job, was highly ambitious as a writer, and found himself with the need to find money fast. Between that sale and the end of 1954 he wrote and sold 63 science fiction short stories, and wrote two SF novels and sold one of them (*Solar Lottery*).

But, as I've mentioned, during all this activity Dick did not see himself as an SF writer, except under protest. For a long time he ignored the SF fans entirely, and met very few other SF writers. At parties he would find ways of avoiding telling people that he wrote science fiction for a living. As the bibliography shows, he still put a lot of time into writing non-SF novels, even while continuing to churn out torrents of SF short stories.

One fellow Berkeley SF writer with whom Phil formed a close bond was Poul Anderson . . . Together, they could talk over the facts of SF life: editors chopping stories, lousy royalties, no recognition outside of fandom. Recalls Anderson:

I bitched, and so did everyone else. You have to remember that in those days a science fiction writer — unless he was Robert Heinlein — was really at the bottom of the totem pole. If you wanted to work in the field you had to make the best of what there was. But we didn't feel put upon. . . . Okay, you get shafted this time, but there was always more where that had come from.

But when Dick's second marriage, to Kleo, broke up in 1958, he found himself living with Anne, a lady with expensive tastes. After they married, there was a child. During the mid-1950s Kleo had worked, helping to bolster Dick's ambition to become a mainstream novelist. Married to Anne, Phil had to work flat out to make a living. The only way to guarantee this income was to write science fiction novels, which sold — but never gained advances of more than \$2000 each. Even *The Man in the High Castle*, which was a Hugo winner and Book of the Month choice, made only \$7000 at the time. By the early 1960s, SF was the only work that Phil could sell, but writing it condemned him to a life just above poverty level. The later breakup of his third marriage didn't help, either. No wonder that Philip Dick clung to his lifelong illusion: that those non-SF novels of the 1950s would someday be discovered and published, or that one of his new novels would be recognised by critics for *The New York Review*

of Books.

IV

So much for why Phil wanted to write his non-SF books. Why should any of us read them? This is a difficult question, one I can't answer to my own satisfaction, let alone yours.

During the early 1980s, Kim Stanley Robinson read them in manuscript, well before Dick had died or anybody had shown an interest in publishing them. Robinson's verdict, in his otherwise excellent book *The Novels of Philip K. Dick*, is uncompromising. Robinson's charges are that:

- (1) 'All of the realist novels are prolix in a way that is utterly unlike Dick's mature work. Every scene, no matter how important to the novel, is dramatized at equal length, in a profusion of unnecessary detail.'
- (2) They are humourless: 'A uniform tone of deadly seriousness is only occasionally replaced by attempts at black comedy that go awry.'
- (3) There is 'an uneasy mix of realism and the fantastic. Despite making a very serious commitment to writing realist works, Dick's interest in the arcane and the peculiar crops up everywhere in these works, without being fully integrated into them.'
- (4) 'They are dull.'

The result, as Robinson summarises his own argument, is 'an artistic personality split down the middle. On the one hand were long, serious, turgid realist novels, not one of which sold; on the other hand were short satirical stories, which were very successful — within the bounds of the science fiction community.'

These are strong words, guaranteed to raise the hackles of any true fan of all the works of Philip Dick. Also, they did not square with my impression of the few non-SF novels that I had read before this year. I volunteered to give this talk so that I could refute these foul accusations, and persuade you to read the recently published lost masterpieces. In doing the research for this talk, I destroyed my own thesis. Philip Dick's 1950s non-SF novels are certainly nowhere near as interesting as his best SF novels, but not for the reasons given by Kim Stanley Robinson.

V

Robinson's needling comments were not the only reason for wanting to investigate the non-SF novels. My other stimulus derives from the mid-1960s, when I persuaded a friend of mine to read some of my favourite Phil Dick SF novels. He had obviously not read any SF before, and still had the rather snuffy attitude to SF which one usually finds among otherwise well-educated Australian readers. His reaction was of cautious admiration, but he also said: 'If it were not for the SF gimmicks in these books, you would not be able to stand the view of reality that they show you.' Okay, I'm paraphrasing, but that's the gist of what he said. Since then I've often asked myself: what would Phil Dick's books have been like without the science fiction superstructure? Could you bear to read them, regardless of their literary quality? Would you be so appalled that you would never be able to finish such a novel?

This remained a theoretical question until, many years later I heard that Dick had actually written and failed to publish several non-SF novels. Now, thanks to publishers like Ziesing, Morrow, Gollancz and Paladin, you and I have gained the chance to read them. Here, surely would be the answer to my question. The trouble is that the answer does not answer the question.

VI

Back to Kim Stanley Robinson. It occurs to me that all works of fiction are much less interesting to read in manuscript form than they are on the printed page. That's the only reason I can see why he would think the non-SF novels are humourless or that they contain too much realistic detail. Perhaps, holed up in a university library reading manuscripts, Kim Stanley Robinson's eyes nodded over the odd page or three.

Let me refute Robinson by looking at the novel that least resembles the science fiction novels. According to both Robinson and Sutin, *Mary and the Giant* is one of the very first of Dick's non-SF novels. To me it is the best. Like all the non-SF novels and some of the best SF novels, it tells of ordinary people living in a small town that is big enough to feel like a city, but which is basically only a commuter suburb of San Francisco. The time is mid to late 1953. The main character is Mary Anne Reynolds, described here in what is perhaps Phil Dick's best paragraph:

In the tired brilliance of late afternoon she walked along Empory Avenue, a small, rather thin girl with short-cropped brown hair, walking very straight-backed, head up, her brown coat slung carelessly over her arm. She walked because she hated to ride on buses, and because, on foot, she could stop when and wherever she wished.

Here is a girl with no special talent or features except she is good-looking and has a spiky sense of humour. She has a certain independence and flair, a need to run her own life in a small town where everybody else just obeys the rules. Mary Anne is young, restless, clever but not very well educated. She is, in short, the first of the young dark-haired girls who became the main obsession, both of Dick's fiction and his life, during later years.

Mary Anne Reynolds is jaunty in everything. She insists on hanging around the local bar, although she is under age, because jazz music is played there. Two of the performers, a white pianist named Paul Nitz, and a black singer named Carleton Tweany, become involved in her life. At the same time, the new man in town, a tall middle-aged urbane chap named Joseph Schilling, falls for her immediately when she applies for a job at his newly opened classical music store. Into this small town also arrive Schilling's ex-lover, Beth Coombs, and her husband Danny. In turn, they have in tow a vapid chap named Chad Lemming. Beth and Danny are trying to get Schilling's support to launch Lemming's recording career.

The young man had now emerged. His hair was crew-cut; he wore horn-rimmed glasses; a bow tie dangled under his protruding Adam's apple. Beaming at the people, he picked up his guitar and began his monologue and song.

'Well, folks,' he said cheerily, 'I guess you read in the papers a while back about the President going to balance the budget. Well, here's a little song about it I figured you might enjoy.' And, with a few strums at his guitar, he was off.

Listening absently, Mary Anne roamed about the room, examining prints and furnishings. The song, in a bright metallic way, glittered out over everything, spilling into everyone's ears. A few phrases reached her, but the main drift of the lyrics was lost. She did not particularly care; she was uninterested in Congress and taxes.

The weird sense of the ludicrous is shown in an under-

stated way. Chad Lemming is an entirely new phenomenon, the 1950s folk singer, but he comes over as a nice dill. Mary Anne is mainly concerned about leaving the Coombses' apartment to go over to Tweany's. The other people in the room are promoting themselves in one way or another. Even Flaubert could not give a more accurate portrait of small-time people trying to be big-time. From our point of view, the main interest is that Dick is writing about people he knew well. Our other accounts of the 1950s in fiction tend to be in long hindsight. Phil Dick committed himself to putting on paper the life of his own time — and nobody wanted to publish him.

In *Mary and the Giant*, Dick's humour works on a number of levels: the straightforward satire of people like the Coombses and Chad Lemming, but also the humour that you get by pitching the viewpoint of a naive original such as Mary Anne against the viewpoint of people who think they are in the intellectual swim.

When all these unbalanced people go over to Carleton Tweany's grotty apartment, at two o'clock in the morning, they find Carleton still awake:

Tweany, still wearing his pink shirt and hand-painted tie, was sitting at the table eating a sardine sandwich and drinking a bottle of Rheingold beer. In front of him, spread out among the litter of food, was a smeared copy of *Esquire*, which he was reading.

Carleton Tweany is a thorough original: cheeky, musical, sexy — he goes against every cliched view of black people held by whites at the time. He and Jim Briskin (a black character from several later novels, including *The Broken Bubble* and *The Crack in Space*) must have been based on some very impressive black person Dick must have met in Berkeley during the 1940s. Sutin does not identify this person, but the power of his personality is so impressive that some future biographer should find out who he was. Certainly, by the 1950s Phil Dick scoffs at his fellows' racial prejudices.

At Tweany's place, the group begins a party, which quickly degenerates into one of the great party scenes in American fiction. It is entirely different from anything in Dick's other fiction because here the characters really interact. All of the characters in all of Dick's other books are so fundamentally isolated that they can only interact in anger, alarm or despair. In *Mary and the Giant*, and to a lesser extent in the next non-SF novel, *The Broken Bubble*, people actually enjoy being with each other:

Suddenly Beth leaped from the piano. In ecstasy she seized Lemming by the hand and dragged him to his feet. 'You too,' she cried in his astonished ear. 'All of us; join in!'

Gratified to find himself noticed, Lemming began playing wildly. Beth hurried back to the piano and struck up the opening chords of a Chopin Polonaise. Lemming, over-powered, danced around the room; throwing his guitar onto the couch, he jumped high in the air, whacked the ceiling with the palms of his hands, descended, caught hold of Mary Anne, and spun her about . . .

'They're nuts,' Nitz said. 'They're hopped in another dimension.'

Needless to say, this spontaneous ecstasy degenerates quickly, as happens at so many parties, into a dark experience. Nitz, flaked out in the bathroom, falls and hits his head. Everybody else is going crazy. 'The bull rumble of Carleton Tweany never abated, rising and falling, but contained within the frenzy of the little old piano'. Dick spins

his themes ever closer together. Beth Coombs sheds her clothes. Paul Coombs, who turns out to be the only one of them who is really nuts, is suddenly outraged that Tweany, a black, should see his wife naked. The police arrive; they've been called by the woman who lives downstairs. Mary Anne escapes before the police arrest the lot of them. The last sentence of the chapter is 'Outside, in the darkness, a bird made a few dismal noises. In an hour or so it would be dawn.'

VII

This episode contains in it much that makes Philip Dick's non-SF novels refreshingly different from his SF novels.

(1) All the action springs from the personalities of the characters, not from exterior menacing forces. Only in Dick's non-SF novels do we find *collections* of interesting characters. In the science fiction novels there are isolated memorable people such as Tagomi and Robert Childan in *The Man in the High Castle*, Arnie Kott in *Martian Time-Slip*, and Joe Chip in *Ubik*, but the non-SF novels are composed of nothing but people. There are, for instance, the two couples, the Lindahls and the Bonners, in *Puttering About in a Small Land*; the memorable black characters, such as Tweany in *Mary and the Giant*, Jim Briskin in *The Broken Bubble*, and Tootie Doolittle in *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*. There is the wonderfully sad Milton Lumky the salesman from *In Milton Lumky Territory*. There is the great Jim Fergesson going on his last pilgrimage in *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*.

(2) Ordinary people, looked at with the steady and sardonic gaze of Philip Dick, are funny most of the time. In other words, the non-SF novels are continually funny, not humourless, as Robinson asserts. But the humour springs from the inconsistency between the way people see themselves and the way they seem to other people and, of course, the much-amused author and reader. These novels contain very few ha-ha jokes.

The humour of incongruity can be seen most clearly in the novels where Dick puts up versions of himself, then shoots them down. *Mary and the Giant* includes an older idealised version of himself in Joe Schilling: obsessive about music and young, dark-haired girls. He gets the girl, but only for a few minutes and in circumstances that are equally humiliating to both of them. In the end he achieves dignity by leaving her to work out her own life. In *Puttering About in a Small Land*, Roger Lindahl finds himself drawn into an love affair, almost without meaning to, with Liz Bonner, his sexy and over-demanding neighbour. Faced with his wife's wrath, he can do nothing more decisive than hiding naked under the sheets of the bed. Since Philip Dick's private life was in a particularly chaotic state when he was writing this novel, I suspect that much in *Puttering About in a Small Land* is drawn from memory.

(3) This is the truth of life in the 1950s in California as one person saw it. Dick is determined to be as truthful as possible. The urban landscape of the 1950s is often a major subject of the non-SF novels. For instance, a quotation from the first page of *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*:

As he drove, Jim Fergesson rolled down the window of his Pontiac, and, poking his elbow out, leaned to inhale lungfuls of early-morning summer air. He took in the sight of sunlight on stores and pavement . . . All fresh. All new,

clean. The night machine, the whirring city brush, had come by, gathering up; the broom their taxes went to. . . .

Nice sky, he thought. But won't last. Haze later on. He looked at his watch. Eight-thirty.

Stepping from his car he slammed the door and went down the sidewalk. On the left, merchants rolled down their awnings with elaborate arm-motions. . . . By the entrance of the Metropolitan Oakland Savings and Loan Company a group of secretaries clustered. Coffee-cups, high heels, perfume and earrings and pink sweaters, coats tossed over shoulders.

This is not merely description, because the rhythm and chatter of the prose sweeps along the reader, convincing us that we are caught up in the busy deliciousness of a new day. Since we know Philip Dick, we also guess that he is setting up his character for a perfectly ghastly day.

But there is more. Notice that 'nice sky'. I wonder how long it is since there has been a clear sky in San Francisco in eight-thirty in the morning? Readers could well drink up these novels in the same way that one drinks up the details of a historical wide-angle photo of one's own town.

(4) This telling the truth extends far beyond the details of buildings and food and roads and hills. In *Mary and the Giant* we find a sub-political world, largely untouched by Senator Joe McCarthy and the forces he was unleashing at the time, but in which people are fighting many of the battles that would dominate American life during the 1960s. In trying to find the reasons why the non-SF novels of Philip Dick remained unpublished in the 1950s, Kim Stanley Robinson fails to mention the obvious: their undisguised frankness on matters sexual and racial. In the 1950s there are two American battlegrounds, Dick seems to be saying: the bedroom, between male and female; and the street, between black and white.

As Dick's own emotional affairs became more chaotic during the 1950s, the battles between men and women in his non-SF novels become more ferocious. In *Mary and the Giant*, Mary Anne Reynolds likes to be involved with large, powerful men, but she is frigid. Sex was, to her 'very like the time the doctor had stuck his metal probe into her nose to break off a polyp'. But Mary Anne herself, with her cheekiness and willingness to break the stuffy old rules, is the heroine of her novel. She achieves a kind of balance between sexual and emotional needs.

Puttering About in a Small Land, written only four years later, the two characters who represent aspects of the author are in retreat before the demands of vivid, purposeful female characters. A battle is raging. In one brilliant scene, Dick describes what would now be called rape within marriage. In a scene of quicksilver emotional parries, he shows the mixture of confusion and joy as the man achieves sexual ecstasy for the first time in months as he has his way, the fury of the woman as she realises she has failed to put on her diaphragm and is likely to become pregnant, and the see-sawing emotions as both parties try to justify their actions, then berate themselves. There is even a strange and temporary truce at the end of the scene. No American novel could have said so much, so clearly, with so little moralising, before the late 1960s or early 1970s.

(5) In *The Novels of Philip K. Dick*, Kim Stanley Robinson concentrates on only one major theme of the non-SF

novels. Since he covers it well, I quote him:

Another abiding concern of [Dick's] the effect, in American postwar capitalism, of business relations on the personal relations between employer and employee, and indirectly on all personal relations. Dick believed this effect to be profoundly destructive. . . . In *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike*, Dombrosio assaults his boss when his boss hires his wife. He becomes estranged from his wife after he is fired, and eventually tries to hoax his neighbor, with whom he once was friendly. In *Mary and the Giant*, Mary works in a record store for a disturbed owner and she is forced to conduct a sordid affair with him to keep her job. And in *In Milton Lumky Territory* this theme is expressed most fully. The protagonist, Bruce Stevens, marries his fifth-grade teacher of years before and takes over her business, a typewriter sales and repair shop. Business difficulties make the marriage a perpetual battle, and as the business nears bankruptcy Stevens becomes obsessed, and one by one destroys all of his personal relationships.

These business relations give much of the special character to the non-SF novels, since all are based on the very few jobs that Dick took before he became unemployable. These jobs were working in a small repair shop and the music shop. Over and over again, in both the SF and the non-SF novels, Dick introduces the employee who is highly dependent upon the whims of a fundamentally worthwhile but often capricious or even dictatorial employer. As Robinson shows in another part of his book, Dick's meagre experience of paid work made him both admire the manual worker as the epitome of the American good guy, and pity him for being stuck in a lowly job.

VIII

I think I've proved that Kim Stanley Robinson is wrong in the reasons he gives for dismissing Philip Dick's 1950s non-SF novels. These books are indeed funny, although you need a sense of the sardonic and ironic to get the best out of them. They are not over-detailed: their detail is of the kind that the current breed of American writer — the so-called 'dirty realists' — have accustomed us to. Dick's non-SF novels are certainly less romantic than those of, say, Larry McMurtry or Richard Ford or any of those people, but he does not have the lyrical gifts of, say, Anne Tyler or Raymond Carver. Like other American realists, Dick assumes that so-called ordinary people are always extraordinary, even gothic, if looked at with any insight.

However, if I have persuaded you that these novels have none of the faults pinned to them by Robinson, have I persuaded you that they are worth reading? Probably not. Yes, if you are interested in novels written about the 1950s where the viewpoint is not clouded by nostalgia or faulty memory. Yes, if you like novels about people being people. Yes, if you like well-written realist novels. All of these books are better written, in any formal sense, than most of the science fiction novels — hence, perhaps, Robinson's impatience with them.

But would you — could you — ever prefer them to Dick's best science fiction novels? This, if you remember, is the premise of Michael Bishop's cheeky but unsuccessful recent novel *Philip K. Dick is Dead, Alas*, which appeared in America as *The Secret Ascension*. In an alternate world, Dick has just died. He is known for the kind of novels I've been talking about. He also wrote a small number of SF novels, known

only to aficionados. Etcetera. I don't believe it, as I don't believe Bishop has grasped the fundamentals of Dick's style or approach.

In the late 1950s, Philip Dick wrote three ambitious SF novels as well as some potboilers. The first two SF novels that we still value are *Solar Lottery* and *Eye in the Sky*. With *Time Out of Joint*, the third of them, Dick became a master of the SF field — but he couldn't have written that novel without writing the non-SF novels I have just been discussing.

The beginning of *Time out of Joint* seems to be set in exactly the same small town that we enter in most of the non-SF novels. It has a downtown, and lots of shops and houses, and a public transport system, and lots of people, but basically it is quiet. Everybody knows everybody else. Business chunters along.

The scene shifts to Ragle Gumm, who is a bachelor sharing an ordinary house with his sister Margo and brother-in-law Vic Nielsen. Their neighbours are the Blacks, Bill and Junie. You can predict already that Ragle will have an affair with Junie. Ragle Gumm is the only bloke in town who does not fit in: the only man who does not go out to work every morning. Every day he sits and solves the Where Will the Little Green Man Be Next? contest. It comes in the paper every morning, and Ragle Gumm has been the national champion for three years running. Solving the puzzle each day obsesses him: 'Spread out everywhere in the living room the papers and notes for his work formed a circle of which he was the centre. He could not even get out; he was surrounded.'

At this point the book begins to diverge slightly from the pattern set in the non-SF novels Dick was writing at the same time. Why is this man filling in these puzzles every day, apart from the fact that his constant wins provide him with a modest income? More mysteries slip into the story. Why, when Vic Nielsen reaches for the light switch, does he suddenly feel as if he should be reaching for an overhead light cord? Why, when walking up the two steps up to the front door, does he step up the third step, which isn't there?

These puzzles aside, for several chapters *Time out of Joint* stays very much in the pattern of the non-SF novels. Compare it with, say, *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*, which features Al Miller, the most completely failed small-time character of all Dick's small-time failed characters. 'I'm a bum', he says of himself. 'He absolutely lacked the ability to see how things really stood.' In *The Man whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike*, much of the action takes place because one of the characters finds himself stuck at home while all worthwhile American males are out making a crust. This also happens to Roger Lindahl towards the end of *Puttering About in a Small Land*. And in *Time Out of Joint*, sure enough, here is Ragle Gumm: 'Stunning desolation washed over him. What a waste his life had been. Here he was, forty-six, fiddling around in the living room with a newspaper contest. No gainful, legitimate employment. No kids. No wife. No home of his own. Fooling around with a neighbour's wife.'

As readers of the Sutin biography will realise, all you need to do is substitute the term 'writing' for 'newspaper contest' and you have the exact way in which Dick saw himself at the time. Not only was writing very badly paid, but it somehow made him less of a redblooded American male than anybody else. The consequences of this perception — 'I'm a bum' combined with an awareness of the quality of his writing — played havoc with his third and fourth marriages.

The point I am making is that *Time out of Joint* is more autobiographical than the obviously autobiographical non-SF novels. This is because Dick no longer feels the need to

stick to the surface facts of ordinary life. Behind ordinary life in an ordinary American town lies something else altogether.

Gumm has several extraordinary visions of his little town. In one of them, he walks up to a soft-drink stand, which seems to dissolve before his eyes.

The soft-drink stand fell into bits. Molecules. He saw the molecules, colourless, without qualities, that made it up. . . . In its place was a slip of paper. . . . On it was printing, block letters.

SOFT-DRINK STAND

In the second incident, he is sitting in a bus:

The sides of the bus became transparent. He saw out into the street, the sidewalk and stores. Thin support struts, the skeleton of the bus. Metal girders, an empty hollow box. No other seats. Only a strip, a length of planking, on which upright featureless shapes like scarecrows had been propped. They were not alive. . . . Ahead of him he saw the driver; the driver had not changed. The red neck. Strong, wide back. Driving a hollow bus. . . . He was the only person on the bus, outside of the driver.

The exact status of this vision is never made clear in the story. Is it purely hallucination, or some supernatural view of the town? But its status in Dick's mind is made clear when we read in Sutin's biography that Dick actually had several such visions early in his life, long before he wrote this book. His distrust of his own perception of the world made him a virtual prisoner in his own house at various times in his life.

What we find in *Time Out of Joint* is that the bits and pieces of a science fiction superstructure, which gradually invade Ragle Gumm's consciousness, are actually more autobiographical, more real to the author than the accurately drawn worlds he presents in the non-SF novels. It is for this reason that the non-SF novels fail, not because of any intrinsic demerits.

In *Time out of Joint*, Dick finds metaphors for the very real paranoia which afflicted him from time to time. The miracle is that he finds coherent metaphors that he can use to construct an exciting story. Ragle Gumm happens to hear a broadcast that makes him aware that the world outside this town is very different from what he had imagined, and that Ragle Gumm himself is totally important to that world. When he tries to leave town, in what is one of Dick's most brilliant pieces of action writing, he is captured and sent home. On his second attempt, he travels from the world of 1959 to a totally alien and very frightening world of the year 2000. A war is on, between the 'lunatics', colonists on the Moon and throughout the solar system, and the One World Government. Ragle Gumm's job had been, through the contest, to predict each day's strike from weapons sent from outer space. The town he had lived in was entirely a fake,

with only a few people around him also sharing the illusion.

So here at last is the truth that Dick could not allow himself to write in the non-SF novels. In the end, they failed to sell because in them Dick was constantly pulling back from what he really wanted to say. This constraint improved his formal style, and the non-SF novels have little of the melodramatic flourishes that threaten to destroy so many of the SF novels. But having learned his craft, of showing the underlying reality of things through surface appearances, Dick had trained himself to write the SF novels, in which he could tell his own truth. The penalty for that was feeling that he had failed as a writer and as a man; yet, paradoxically, he came to feel that he was the centre of the universe, that what he was telling people was more important than truths they could find anywhere else.

IX

When I first tried reading *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike*, I could not get past page 70. I was constantly reminded of that statement made by my friend more than twenty years before. Without the metaphors of science fiction, Dick's intensely detailed account of the battle between two families, the Runcibles and the Dombrosios, seemed too painful to read. One feels that there should be a filter between such emotional reportage and the reader. It's not a matter of entertainment merely; it's the fact that no general truth can be derived from such painful separate truths. In the science fiction novels, Philip Dick would put into his words his feeling that there is something generally wrong with the world. The non-SF novels have to take the ordinary world as a given. In the end, Dick felt this was untrue, and he was untrue to himself by portraying the world thus. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the so-called ordinary world became increasingly ghastly to Dick. He felt that we are all lonely stick figures out there on a plain, and vast distances separate us. Our only hope is to find out our individual realities and perhaps achieve some fragile fellow-feeling with some other human being. This feeling pervades the non-SF novels, but Dick cannot find an adequate way to express it. Give him a loony SF plot, plus the small-town setting that he uses in some of his best SF books, and the Phil Dick mind suddenly bursts into life. Paradoxes, ironies, and brilliant visions burst upon us. This is the real Philip Dick; the writer of *Time Out of Joint* and *Martian Time-Slip* and *The Man in the High Castle*.

What a terrible pity that he could never quite accept his greatness in the SF field, and never realised why the non-SF novels failed to establish him as a literary figure. The non-SF novels are enjoyable enough to read, and often brilliant, but they are important only because the point us to the real talents of Philip Dick, who never quite saw his own strengths.

— Bruce Gillespie, 1 October 1990

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Penguin 14-002847-1; 1969; 187 pp.
- Bluejay Books 0-312-94427-6; 1984; 264 pp.
Continually reprinted
- 1961: *The Man in the High Castle*.
G. P. Putnam's Sons; 1962; 239 pp.
Vintage 0-679-76167-5; 1995; 272 pp.
Continually reprinted.
- 1962: *We Can Build You*.
Daw No. 14; 1972; 206 pp.
Random House 0-679-75296-X; 1994; 246 pp.
- 1962: *Martian Time-Slip*.
Ballantine; 1964; 220 pp.
Vintage Books 0-679-76167-5; 1995; 272 pp.
Often reprinted.
- Basically non-SF novels lightly disguised as SF**
- 1973: *A Scanner Darkly*.
Doubleday 0-385-01613-1; 1977; 220 pp.
Vintage Books 0-679-73665-4; 1991; 275 pp.
- 1978: *Valis*.
Bantam 0-553-14156-2; 1981; 227 pp.
Vintage Books 0-679-73446-5; 1991; 240 pp.
- 1980: *The Divine Invasion*.
Timescape 0-671-41776-2; 1981; 239 pp.
Random House 0-679-73443-7; 1991; 238 pp.
- 1981: *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*.
Timescape 0-671-44066-7; 1982; 255 pp.
Random House 0-679-73444-9; 1991; 256 pp.
- References**
- 1989: *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick*.
by Lawrence Sutin.
Harmony Books 0-517-57204-4; 1989; 352 pp.
Carol Publishing 0-806-51228-8; 1991; 352 pp.
- 1982/1984: *The Novels of Philip K. Dick*.
by Kim Stanley Robinson.
UMI Research Press 0-8357-1589-2; 1984; 150 pp.
- 1987: *The Secret Ascension (Philip K. Dick Is Dead, Alas)*
by Michael Bishop.
Tor 0-312-93031-3; 1987; 341 pp.
Tor 0-312-89002-8; 1993; 341 pp.

BOOKS READ

since February 2001

Ratings

** Books recommended highly.

* Books recommended.

☞ Books about which I have severe doubts.

** **OUT ON THE CUTTING EDGE** by **Lawrence Block**
(1989; Orion 1-85797-064-0; 260 pp.)

A mystery so subtle that until three-quarters through I wasn't sure it was anything but an excerpt from Matt Scudder's life and times. It is a realistic description of how the not-so-well-off lurch along in New York. A host of trivial incidents eventually resolve themselves into a tight plot featuring a lady whose company Scudder rather enjoys.

** **THE WOODEN SEA**

by **Jonathan Carroll** (2001; Tor 0-312-87823-0; 302 pp.)
There has been some useful discussion in *Acnestis* recently, especially from **Penny** and **Chris H.**, about Jonathan Carroll. They make the worthwhile point that Carroll's shock-surprise tactics don't quite work because they undermine the main characters as entities. In *Kissing the Beehive* and *The Marriage of Sticks*, the effect Carroll is aiming for dissipates because in the end you can't quite tell what he was trying to do artistically. It's possible that Carroll fans will say the same about *The Wooden Sea*. It lets off more fire crackers than a Guy Fawkes night celebration, yet in the end it has (for Carroll) a straightforward solution. I can't discuss that without giving away spoilers. Enough to say that *The Wooden Sea* has a feeling of freshness and edge-of-the-seat excitement that I didn't find in the two previous novels.

* **AN INFINITY OF MIRRORS**

by **Richard Condon** (1964; Heinemann; 307 pp.)

Littered throughout the book shelves of our house are 'doubtfuls', books that we suspect we should sell or give away, but cannot — either or both of us must read them first. Some of them I found in secondhand shops or bargain basements anything up to 35 years ago. I bought *An Infinity of Mirrors* 30 years ago. Now I can throw it out. It's quite readable, and it even has something to say. But it shouts at the top of its voice, and the characters are unbelievable. A pity. At the obvious level it's about the destruction of the Jews in Europe during the 1930s and early 1940s. The main female character is a Jewish princess (who is not only an heiress, but the most beautiful, talented and richest heiress ever . . . it's that sort of book). Her husband is a German aristocrat with an army career, a man who is suckered by Hitler. Condon is good on Big Subjects, such as the methods Hitler used to win over the German army, or the way in which Germany ran France through bribery, corruption and theft. Condon can write well about individuals, as he showed in *Winter Kills*, but in *An Infinity of Mirrors* the people disappear into the melodrama.

** **FATHER AND SON:**

A STUDY OF TWO TEMPERAMENTS

by **Edmund Gosse**

(1907; Penguin Modern Classics; 224 pp.)

I talked about this last time, so I won't repeat myself. I keep thinking of it as a novel, because Gosse creates the characters of his father, mother and himself as if they were great fictional characters. But it is a memoir. Little has changed in fundamentalist Christianity since the middle of the nineteenth century, and Gosse takes an acerbic, ironic view of growing up that reads more with twentieth-century fiction than with Victorian autobiography.

* **COUNTRY OF THE BLIND**

by **Christopher Brookmyre**

(1997; Abacus 0-349-10930-3; 404 pp.)

Thanks to Elizabeth and Paul for sending me this, the second Brookmyre mystery novel. A pity I can't respond with the enthusiasm I felt for *Quite Ugly This Morning*. The new novel is at least 200 pages too long, and it feels that way because it's badly organised. A really interesting situation — the seemingly watertight conviction of a group of rather amateurish thieves for a murder that happened during a raid on a country house — is at first made more interesting, as it's shown that these men could not possibly have committed the murder. Slowly the interest level lowers. From near the beginning of the novel, Brookmyre tells us who dun it, then stretches out what should have been an exciting chase sequence and makes the second half of the book tedious. A story like this should have been short, sharp and mysterious. But crime novels must be 400 pages or longer these days, and obviously Mr Brookmyre cannot say no to his publisher.

** **THE HEREAFTER GANG**

by **Neal Barrett Jr**

(1991; Mark V. Ziesing 0-929480-54-6; 348 pp.)

This may not be the oddest novel I've read, but I'm struggling to think of one that's odder. (Leonora Carington's *The Hearing Trumpet* leaps to mind, but that's nothing like *The Hereafter Gang*.) I may be real dumb, like Doug Hoover, the main character of this book, but only the title gives much idea of what is happening here — Hoover spends much of the novel dead. The trick is to guess at which point he leaves what is usually called 'life' and enters the 'hereafter' (which is some kind of limbo, not heaven). Hoover, who sets out on the roads of Texas after leaving his wife, has never been well connected to ordinary reality. An amazing combination of grog, weed and other substances keeps him in perpetually wired. When he enters a limbo Texas, accompanied by the sexiest woman he's ever met, it never occurs to him that things might have changed. It didn't to me, either, until towards the end of the book, when he settles in a little town. He keeps meeting dead people, live acquaintances he hasn't seen for years, and legendary Western folk heroes. Even his cat turns up.

(The cat is the real hero of the book.) This would all be tedious for the reader if Neal Barrett Jr were not a brilliant writer. The book is very funny until near the end. Texas, rich and tawdry, is as much the main character of the book as any of its humans. Perhaps that's not quite accurate; the real hero is the Texan language. Did Barrett set out to write a Texan *Finnegans Wake*? I suspect so.

* **IN THE MIDST OF DEATH** by Lawrence Block
(1976; Orion 0-75283-701-X; 184 pp.)

This is the least interesting Lawrence Block novel I've read. Perhaps that's because it's an early title. Scudder hasn't yet gone on the wagon. As one of the blurb writers says, this novel is as much about alcoholism as about solving a crime. The mystery element is very offhand, but the novel is memorable because of one incident, during which Scudder's alcoholism lets him down and puts a friend in extreme danger.

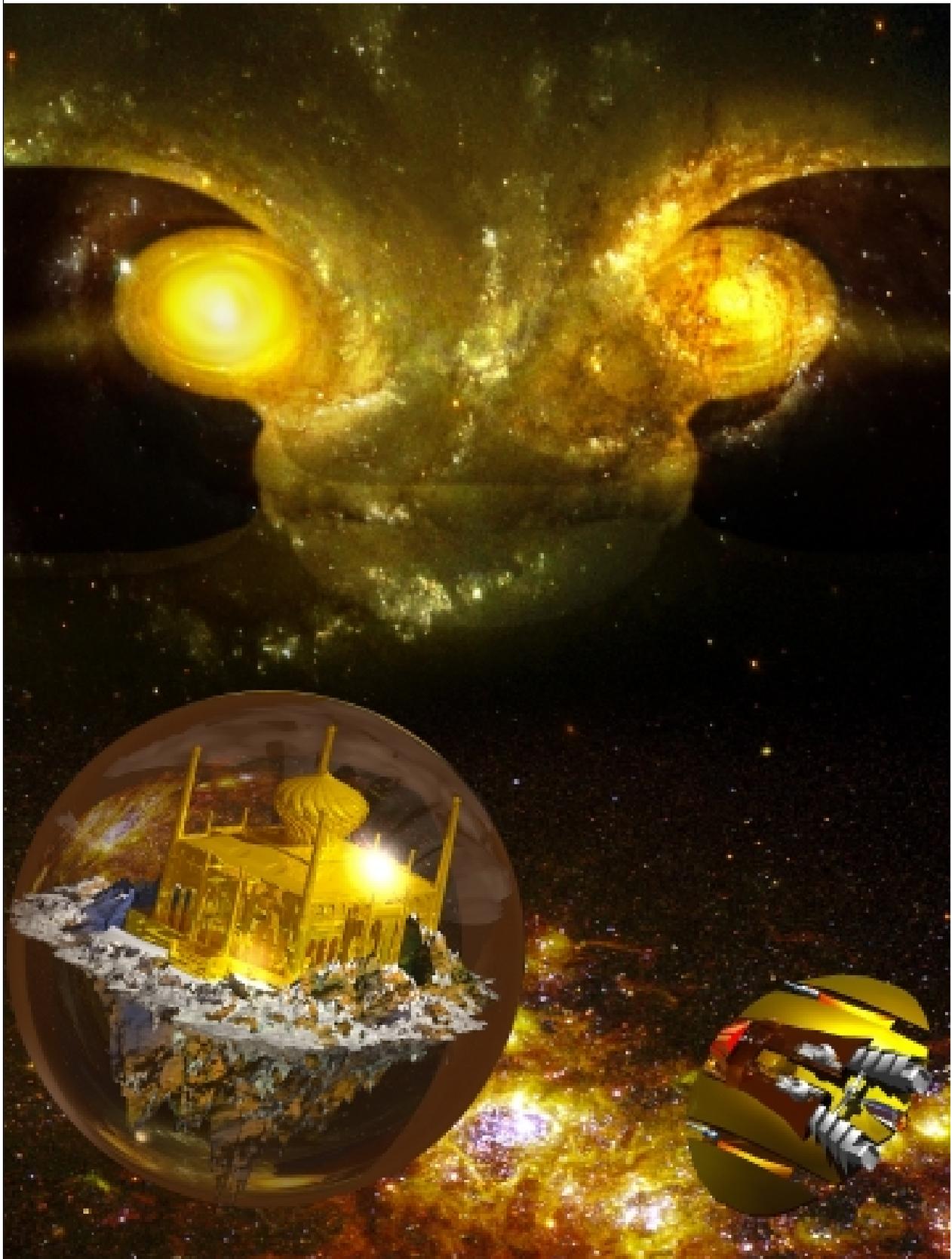
☞ **THE MUSIC OF RAZORS**
by Cameron Rogers

(2001; Penguin 0-14-028078-2; 289 pp.)

Penguin sent this to me laden with publicity material, and went to a lot of trouble to round up people for the book launch at Reading's on a late Friday afternoon. I interrupted my apa reading schedule to read it. I went to the book launch. Cameron Rogers is young, dresses in black and leather boots, and looks like a young Bono. He already has a group of fans/friends/groupies, who comprised most of the crowd. Nearly all of them dress

in black. Rogers speaks glibly. His editor at Penguin introduced him, saying that the book is the result of two years of editing. In short, everybody at Penguin Australia *believes in* Cameron Rogers. The company has spent lots of money on him. The book has a superb cover, and feels good when you open it. It's only as you read past page 100 that you realise that it just doesn't work. *The Music of Razors* begins startlingly enough, with the fall of Lucifer at the beginning of time, then introduces us to some interesting characters, one of whom has been on life support for twenty years. (His spirit is lively enough, but never gets around to reanimating his body.) Somewhere lurking is a third angel, neither Lucifer nor God, but only recently resurrected from being outside of time itself. The characters of the book are the teenagers who are affected by this resurrection. At first, the novel reads like a sprightly Young Adult fantasy. The imagery is vivid, and Rogers knows how to turn a phrase. By the end, everything has fallen apart. I don't have a clue what Rogers thinks he's doing. The novel has none of that twisted sense of underground logic that Jonathan Carroll might invested in the same material. I suspect that Rogers and/or Penguin had a Big Idea, but nobody knew how to bring it to life. Still, there is little else happening in Australian SF or fantasy at the moment, so I'll take a look at Rogers' second novel, if ever it appears.

— Bruce Gillespie, 26 May 2001



'Dagon'
by Ditmar
(Dick Jensen)