

## Talking with Jesus

A week ago, as I first sat down to write this column, Jesus appeared to me in a burst of glory and said, “Wait a minute, Thomas. You’ve got a new assignment.”

I was not a little taken aback, being unused to divine visitations. The occasional epiphany is about my limit—hints, portents, glows, tremblings—but never before a direct one-to-One communication.

After He’d dimmed His radiance enough for me to look at Him without blinking, I began rather defensively to explain the idea for the column I’d already begun. It was to have been about five books just on or well outside the border between sf and the mainstream, but all, nevertheless, possessing a distinct appeal to the sensibility of the Ideal Reader of the genre.

“Yes, I know what you intended,” said Jesus, “and some other time you can write that column. But now I want you to write about these books.” He reached under his robe and took out five books, which He placed on my desk. “You see,” He said, with a look no reviewer could have resisted, “these are about Me.”

“Oh,” said I.

“So obviously,” He went on, “they should take precedence over other books. The role I’m assigned varies in its meatiness from book to book, but that I should appear onstage, as it were, in five so different works must be accounted a trend. And isn’t that what reviewers are always trying to spot—‘trends’?”

I looked at the spines of the books He’d given me and discovered they were the same books I’d already started to review. No miracle could have come more welcomingly, for I’m a slow reader and my deadline was upon me.

“May I ask which of the five is Your favorite?”

He shook His head and smiled. “On the Day of Judgment I’ll reveal who My favorites are—not till then.”

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Review of *Jesus Tales*, by Romulus Linney; *Valis*, by Philip K. Dick; *Scripts for the Pageant*, by James Merrill; *White Light*, by Rudy Rucker; and *Their Immortal Hearts*, edited by Bruce McAllister.

“Then could You say something about the possible significance of the trend? Could it be a sign that we’re entering a new Age of Faith?”

“No, almost the contrary, I fear. It indicates, to Me, that all too many writers regard my gospels as little more than fabrications on a par with their own trashy novels, and regard Me as a character, like Santa Claus or Sherlock Holmes, no longer safeguarded by copyright laws and fallen into the public domain.”

“It seems to me, Jesus, that You fell into the public domain when You were born.”

“Very funny.”

“Seriously. Have you read Elaine Pagels’s *The Gnostic Gospels*? Some of those Gnostic scrolls are as old as any of the synoptic gospels. The trend goes back two thousand years.”

“Apocryphal tales!” He snorted. “Jokebooks!”

“But aren’t jokes, in a sense, the primal form of Wisdom? Didn’t You speak in parables by preference? For example. There’s a story in here”—I opened Romulus Linney’s *Jesus Tales*—“in which You and St. Peter spend the night drinking with a couple of Basque hillbillies called Jacques and Jeannette. They fall to telling all sorts of wild tales, including some lulus about Jesus Himself, which He enjoys so much that when He leaves the next morning He performs a miracle for His hosts. He tells them, ‘What this morning you first begin will not stop until tonight.’”

“And then what happens?” Jesus asked, pulling up a chair to the desk and helping himself to coffee from the pot on the warmer.

“Well, Jeannette takes in washing for a living, so she starts in on that, and more and more clothes keep coming out of the tub, as though it were bottomless. But that isn’t the end of the story. The rich farmers down in the valley get wind of what happened, and when Jesus and St. Peter are passing through their town five years later they put on a spectacular party for them, expecting to reap a similar reward. But instead—here, let me read it from the book:

The farmers hardly waited until Jesus and Saint Peter were off down the road before they all gathered around the richest farmer.

“You all know what to do,” he said. “Everybody has his purse. You start right now, counting money out of your purses. The money, like those clothes, will keep coming out, all day long. Everybody ready?”

They all were. But the farmer stopped a minute, and thought.

“Wait,” he said. “We should all go into the woods and relieve ourselves first. That way we won’t have to stop later, or waste any time counting money.”

So the farmers take his advice—and you can guess how they spend the rest of the day.”

Jesus guffawed.

It turned out that Jesus hadn't read Linney's book, so I went on to retell more of the *Jesus Tales*, and threw in a couple of jokes I'd just heard from my brother in Minnesota about Jesus and St. Peter golfing.

“Well, I hope the book as a whole is as good as that sample,” said Jesus, in His mellowest humor.

“It's a delight. I intend to give it a rave review. And if You'd like to add a little testimonial of Your own . . .” I hinted.

“Oh, I couldn't possibly do that. This visit has to be unofficial. That's why I came to you. As a fiction writer, and an sf writer at that, people will assume, if you mention any of this, that you're just making it up. Or”—He smiled slyly—“that you've gone off your rocker. Like our friend here”—He tapped His finger on the cover of *Valis*—“Mr. Philip K. Dick.”

“Not to change the subject, but do You know the poem by Jacapone da Todi called (I can't remember the Italian) ‘It Is the Highest Wisdom to Be Considered Crazy for the Love of Christ?’”

Jesus nodded, and quoted the first line in a rich Tuscan accent: “Senno me pare e cortesia, empazir per lo bel Messia.” Then, for my benefit, He translated: “It's plain good sense and common courtesy to drive yourself crazy for Christ's dear sake.”

“Thus spake da Todi, and likewise William Blake,” I put in, unable to resist an easy rhyme. “I mentioned that poem because it seems to me that Dick is carrying on in that tradition. Also, like La Todi, and like Blake too, he's aware of the paradoxes involved, he knows he sounds nuts, and the situation fascinates him. There's a passage I underlined on page 26; let me read it to You:

You cannot say that an encounter with God is to mental illness what death is to cancer: the logical outcome of a deteriorating illness process. The technical term—theological technical term, not psychiatric—is theophany. A theophany consists of a self-disclosure by the divine. It does not consist of something the percipient does; it consists of something the divine—the God or gods, the high power—does.

At that point Dick goes on to speculate how to distinguish between a genuine theophany and a hallucination. And of course there is no certain way to distinguish, unless God discloses some information that one couldn't possibly know by any other means. Which is rarely, if ever, the case.”

Jesus nodded. “Yes, that's the basic theory We work on. What would

become of human freedom if everyone knew for a fact that heaven is always, as it were, on patrol? The Age of Miracles is over.”

“Except in novels. In novels (as in the Scriptures) miracles are easy to arrange. The peculiar fascination of *Valis* is that for much of its length it’s not exactly a novel. Dick did have his own honest-to-God theophany back in 1974, and on the one occasion I met him, some time afterward, he gave me an account of that experience that follows the ‘plot’ of *Valis* fairly closely.”

“And did you believe him?” Jesus asked.

“I believed that he believed that he’d been in touch with something supernatural. Indeed, I was a bit envious, having never had a theophany of my own. Until,” I thought to add, “this afternoon.”

Jesus smiled enigmatically.

“I hope Dick won’t think I’m betraying his confidence mentioning that; he’s discussed the same experience in his interview in Charles Platt’s *Dream Makers*, and in *Valis* itself the hero is called ‘Philip K. Dick,’ though he also appears in the form of an alter ego called ‘Horselover Fat’ (which is his own name, rendered from Greek and German). The fascination of the book, what’s most artful and confounding about it, is the way the line between Dick and Fat shifts and wavers, Dick representing the professional novelist who understands that all these mystic revelations are his own novelistic imaginings, while Fat is the part of him that receives, for a while, and believes, a little longer, messages from . . . You, Lord.”

“Oh, I’m not the half of it in *Valis*. Wagner, Ikhnaton, UFOs, the Roman Empire, Richard Nixon—they all are conflated into one thick Jungian stew. When I do appear in person, so to speak, I’ve been transmogrified into a two-year-old girl.”

“Mm, that was a good scene.”

“And the book as a whole? Do you honestly think Dick has made a novel of that mish-mash of theology and psuedo-science? You, the esthete, the skeptic, the Doubting Thomas?”

“I’ll admit that as a novel, as a *whole* novel, I thought it went off the rails sometimes. But the first half holds together wonderfully, considering how much there is to be held together. If you read it as a realistic, confessional novel, in the sad-mad-glad vein of Plath’s *The Bell Jar* or (better) Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *Valis* scores, oh let’s say 8.416 on a scale of 10. Even its wilder flights of fancy fall into place, not as a system of belief to be considered on its merits, but as components of the self being confessed. Dick has always had the most hyperkinetic imagination in science fiction. His plots have often played elaborate

games with the mechanics of suspended disbelief. In those ways *Valis* is the new logical aesthetic step. Where it went wrong, for me, is when Dick, Fat, and their friends go off to see a movie called *Valis*. *Valis*-the-movie is a bore, and it is also, significantly, the moment when the book shifts from a confessional, psychological mode into sf. That is, the world of the novel ceases to be the world of everyday common consensus and begins to conform to Horselover Fat's imaginings. Suddenly the dialectic tightrope goes slack, and Dick almost falls into the net. But not quite. In fact, his recovery is masterful."

"From your description of *Valis*, Thomas, I don't think its own author would recognize it. I think Dick is more than half-persuaded that his syncretistic ruminations—that long appendix he calls *Tractates Cryptica Scriptura*—are the God's truth. I think, in short, that he's a heretic!"

"And James Merrill?"

"Another heretic."

"*Scripts for the Pageant* is the last book in a trilogy, as You know. Have you read the two preceding, *Divine Comedies* and *Mirabell*?"

"To be perfectly frank, Thomas, I don't have the patience for most poetry. A little Milton, long ago, and some Dante before that. Merrill's book seems to aim at enlightenment more than entertainment, and being a major source of enlightenment myself. . . ."

"You're not alone in feeling that way, but I don't think it's a valid antithesis. Why can't Truth be amusing? Think of Castaneda, or Pirsig, or *Valis*, for that matter. If novels can aspire to the condition of Holy Writ (and still be fun), why not poetry?"

"In theory I agree. But modern poetry has become so abstract. Dante, by contrast, was first and foremost a marvelous storyteller."

"So is Merrill, though the story he tells is admittedly rather sedentary. Merrill and his friend David Jackson begin to receive messages on a ouija board from an otherworldly figure called Ephraim, who puts them in touch with the hierarchy of elemental spirits and with many of their own lately deceased friends and culture heroes. It's like Dante without the geography, but with all the great cameo performances."

"Including a libelous twelve-line role for Yours Truly."

"You don't figure very largely in Merrill's scheme of the afterlife, that's so, but in a pluralistic society and a secular age. . . ."

"I should be happy to receive so much as a footnote? Mohammed, by contrast, rates a full scene of his own, and his verses are much more vividly written. What's more, he's introduced, by the Master of Ceremonies, as 'the one still very much alive force in that crowd.' The crowd, namely, of Buddha, myself, Mohammed, and Mercury. Do you really

think Christianity deserves being relegated to the status of Roman mythology?”

“Of course not, Jesus. Merrill is referring only to the demographic strength of Islam, to the fanatic loyalty it can still command. I do think this is a side issue. Poets are entitled to some poetic license, and—”

“We’ll see what Merrill is entitled to on the Day of Judgment, shall we? (And it won’t be another Pulitzer or NBA, I can assure you.) Meanwhile, tell me this—do you think science fiction readers will want to read three volumes of ouija messages in heroic couplets?”

“Not all sf readers, no. But those who aren’t shy of a bit of intellectual exercise can enjoy his poem in exactly the way they’d enjoy Dick—as an imaginative experience of the first order.

‘Enjoy’ is such a tame word for it, though. The trilogy as a whole may well be the finest large-scale poem any American has ever written—lots of knowledgeable critics are already saying so—and it’s certainly more polished, more integrated, and just plain more fun than any of the contenders. *The Cantos*, say, or *Paterson*. But its specific appeal for sf readers is the way Merrill turns the dry straw of science textbooks into poetry of pure spun gold. Everyone is always saying that that’s what modern poetry should be doing, but most poets today are scientific illiterates. Merrill is—”

“The Messiah, by the sound of it!”

“We’re never going to agree about this, Jesus. Tell me, what did you think of *White Light*?”

“From a strictly Christian point of view, it seemed the least libelous. I’m represented quite orthodoxly as contesting with Satan for the soul of a departed spirit. That scene, however, is almost the only part of the book that offers a traditional view of the afterlife. Most of the action takes place in a kind of non-Euclidian Heaven called Cimön, where everything, even single blades of grass, is infinite. Being infinite Myself in many ways, I can appreciate the difficulty of the task Mr. Rucker set himself. By and large I thought he carried it off rather well.”

“Sounds almost like a Judgment to me.”

Jesus smiled. “Well, after all, it’s only a story, so I feel I can be charitable. *White Light* doesn’t make any claims, as Dick’s book does, or Merrill’s, on a reader’s literal Faith. Besides, I like a story with an orderly plot and characters who get their just desserts. Call Me old-fashioned, but I thought it was a damned good read. You can quote Me if you like.”

“Mm. I don’t know if Rucker—or, indeed, most readers—would consider *White Light* ‘old-fashioned.’ There haven’t been many sf novels that use pure mathematics as the basis for constructing an alien world. Flat-

land, a couple short stories by Norman Kagan, and . . . what else? And the tone of the book is as singular as its conceptual framework, a sort of cross between Raymond Chandler and Lewis Carroll (another mathematicizing fabulist) with a tip of the hat along the way to Franz Kafka, who appears, in beetle form, as Virgil to the narrator's Dante. Old-fashioned?"

"Your perspective on Time naturally differs from Mine. I think too much is made of whether things are new or old. Good and bad, intelligent and dumb, powerful and weak—those are surely more relevant standards of Judgment than pure novelty and timeliness."

"I'd have to agree, and I'd add that *White Light* is a good, intelligent, powerful novel, and the most auspicious debut in the sf field since . . . Well, considering it's his first novel, since I don't know when."

"I hope you won't, when you review it," said Jesus, "give away too much of the plot. There's a special circle in hell for reviewers who spoil a story's best surprises. And with that word to the wise, I'd really best be on My way. This has been an awfully long theophany."

"Wait, wait—there's one more book."

I took out *Their Immortal Hearts* from the bottom of the pile. It was an anthology in three parts: "Cold War Orphans," a novelette by Michael Bishop; the title novella of eighty pages, by Bruce McAllister (who is also the book's publisher); and a novella of forty pages by Barry Malzberg, "La Croix." It is the Malzberg story that includes Jesus among its dramatis personae. Of the five treatments of Christ, Malzberg's is in some ways the most reverent—or, at least, the most anguished—but also the most skeptical. Like Ingmar Bergman, like Graham Greene, like a lot of us, Malzberg seems hungry for his own theophany, and yet one can't escape the feeling that even if God spoke to him directly from a burning bush he'd immediately suspect someone else of having set the fire. I was anxious, therefore, to know Jesus's opinion of so representative a modern instance.

Jesus rifled the pages of *Their Immortal Hearts*. "Oh yes. Mm—hm. Well." He closed the book with a sigh. "The Bishop story was rather strong, I thought. Who would expect a writer his age to capture so vividly the atmosphere of an Air Force base in Turkey in the 1950s? I wouldn't call it sf, but there's no sin in that. As for the McAllister novella, dear Me, what can I say? I thought it was dull, and certainly much too long. Writers who need editors shouldn't publish their own work. But I daresay many sf readers will enjoy it more than any of the other books we've been speaking of. Doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible, 'If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all?'"

“That’s from Bambi.”

“It’s still a good maxim.”

“Jesus,” I insisted, even as He started to fade away, “what did you think of Barry Malzberg’s story?”

“Oh yes, ‘La Croix.’” His voice faded to a whisper, thence to a hallowed silence. I thought I could see tears forming in His eyes. Just before he disappeared altogether He took a pencil from the breast pocket of His robe, flipped open James Merrill’s *Scripts for the Pageant*, and drew a line beside the following passage. (I still have the copy He marked for anyone who may doubt the veridical truth of this narrative.) This is the passage Jesus scored:

But, after all, we bookish people live  
In bondage to those reigning narrative  
Conventions whereby the past two or three  
Hundred years have seen a superhuman  
All-shaping Father dwindle (as in Newman)  
To ghostly, disputable essence, or  
Some shaggy-browed, morality-play bore  
(As in the Prologue to *Faust*). Today the line  
Is drawn esthetic. One allows divine  
Discourse, if at all, in paraphrase.  
Why should God speak? How humdrum what he says  
Next to his works: out of a black sleeve, lo!  
Sun, Earth and Stars in eloquent dumb show.  
Our human words are weakest, I would urge,  
When He resorts to them. Here on the verge  
Of these objections, one does well to keep  
One’s mouth shut.