

## Dick's First Novel

There are, by now, many science fictions, but for myself (for any reader) there is only one science fiction—the kind I like. When I want to find out if someone else's idea of sf corresponds significantly with mine (and whether, therefore, we're liable to enjoy talking about the stuff), I have a simple rule-of-thumb: to wit—do they know—and admire—the work of Philip K. Dick?

An active dislike, as against mere ignorance, would suggest either of two possibilities to me. If it is expressed by an otherwise voracious consumer of the genre, one who doesn't balk at the prose of Zelazny, van Vogt, or Robert Moore Williams, I am inclined to think him essentially un-serious, a "fan" who is into sf entirely for escapist reasons. If, on the other hand, he is provably a person of enlightenment and good taste and he nevertheless doesn't like Dick, then I know that my kind of sf (the kind I like) will always remain inaccessible. For those readers who require sf always to aspire to the condition of art Philip Dick is just too nakedly a hack, capable of whole chapters of turgid prose and of bloopers so grandiose you may wonder, momentarily, whether they're not just his little way of winking at his fellow-laborers in the pulps. Even his most well-realized characters have their moments of wood, while in his bad novels (which are few), there are no characters, only names capable of dialogue. His plots may limp or they may soar, but they don't hang together. In short, he is not a bard in fealty to Apollo, not a "literary" writer.

What sets Philip Dick apart and lets him transcend the ordinary categories of criticism is simply—genius. A genius, what's more, that smells scarcely at all of perspiration despite a published output, over the last twenty years, of thirty-one novels and four collections of stories. Perhaps I'm being unfair to an art that conceals art, but the effect of his best books is of the purest eye-to-hand first-draft mastery. He tells it as he sees it, and it is the quality and clarity of his Vision that make him great. He takes in the world with the cleansed, uncanny sight of another Blake walking about London and being dumbfounded by the whole awful unalterable human mess in all its raddled glory. Not always an enviable knack.

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Introduction to *Solar Lottery*, by Philip K. Dick.

Vision, if you're not well-trained in its use, is what bad trips are made of, and most of us, given the choice, will avoid the roads that tend in that direction. So, possibly, it is the very excellence of Dick's books that has kept readers away.

Not all readers, of course. There is a fair-sized and growing cult that faithfully buys each new book before it passes from the paperback racks into oblivion. But by comparison to the sf writers who have made a name for themselves in the Real World, who can be bought at the SuperValu and are taught in the trendier tenth-grade classrooms, by comparison to the likes of Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, or Vonnegut, Dick might as well be an avant-garde poet or a composer of electronic music. The Public hasn't heard of him.

It isn't fair. If he were guilty of metaphors or some such elitist practice that makes books hard to read, you could understand people being leery of him, but Dick is as democratic as Whitman, as demotic as Spillane. When he's at his best he is—even by "literary" standards—terrific. His prose is as plain and as sturdy as Shaker furniture, his characters as plausible as your next-door neighbors, his dialogue as authentic as a Watergate transcript, and his plots go rattling along with more ideas per paragraph than the College Outline Series' *Introduction to Western Philosophy*. He makes you laugh, he makes you cry, he makes you think, and think again: who could ask for more?

So what went wrong? Why have so many sf writers who are clearly his inferiors (naming no names) been so much more successful in the marketplace—and even in attracting the attention of academics, who, after all, are supposed to be able to recognize Quality? The simplest theory is just—that's the breaks. A careless agent sold his first books to the worst of all paperback houses, and for years he was stuck on a treadmill of speedwriting to meet deadline after deadline, world without end. The wondrous thing is that instead of being broken by this system and declining into a stumblebum twilight of hackwork, drunk on the Gallo burundy of fannish adulation (many the bright young writer who has vanished into that Saragasso!), Dick moved steadily from strength to strength with no other reward (excepting a single Hugo Award for *The Man in the High Castle* in 1963) than the consciousness of having racked up yet another Triple-Star Bonanza score on the great literary pinball machine in the sky.

That's one theory. The theory I prefer is that Dick's books have failed to win a mass audience precisely because of their central excellence—their truth to life. Not that Dick (or any other sf writer, for that matter) is in the Prediction Sweepstakes. Forecasting the future is best left to Jeane

Dixon and the Rand Corporation; sf has better things to do. The truths of sf (in its platonic form) and of Philip K. Dick are prophetic truths in the Old Testament sense, home truths about here, now, and forever.

Also, they're dark truths. Any reader with the least proclivity toward positive thinking, anyone whose lapel button shows a sappy grin, anyone, in short, who still believes in the essential decency, or even feasibility, of the System, is liable to experience one of Dick's novels as a direct assault on his sanity. Indeed, that, in a nutshell, is the plot of what many hold to be his most mindbending novel, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

For all that, Dick isn't really one of that infamous Brotherhood of Blackness that includes Swift, Beckett, Burroughs, and the suicide brigades of modern poetry. There is too much of the sunlight and wine of California in him to let Dick qualify for the deepest abyss of Literature.

Perhaps the problem is his evasiveness, the way his worlds refuse, iridescently, to stay in any kind of unequivocal moral focus. (As against the clear blacks and whites of Heinlein's homilies, or even the subtly graduated grays of Ursula LeGuin's.) Guys you thought were on Our Side end up acting like monsters—even, or especially, such guys as God. Dick is slippery, a game-player whose rules (what is possible, and what isn't, within the world of his invention) change from book to book, and sometimes from chapter to chapter. His adversary in these games is—who else?—the reader, which means that as fun as his books are, as smooth as they are, they are also surprisingly strenuous.

There is a form of Monopoly called Rat in which the Banker, instead of just sitting there and watching, gets to be the Rat. The Rat can alter all the rules of the game at his discretion, like Idi Amin. The players elect the person they consider the slyest and nastiest among them to be the Rat. The trick in being a good Rat is in graduating the torment of the players, in moving away from the usual experience of Monopoly, by the minutest calibrations, into, finally, an utter delirium of lawlessness. If you think you might enjoy Rat a bit more than a standard game of Monopoly then you should probably try reading Philip Dick.

Where to begin?

Not, in fact, with the book in hand, *Solar Lottery*. While it is far from being one of his downright losers (by all accounts *Our Friends from Frolix 8* takes the cake in that category), neither is it a book by which converts may be won. In this respect it is like the early work of many titans-to-be.

Few readers approaching Shakespeare by way of *Titus Andronicus* and *Henry VI* would feel awfully impelled to plunge on. Similarly, Henry James's first novel, *Watch and Ward*, does not represent the Master at his most enticing. First novels are interesting, usually, as grindstones for the

sharpening of hindsight. They show us the size and shape of the still-unfaceted diamond, but to appreciate them properly one must first have some notion of the diamond in its polished state.

So, if there are readers of this introduction who are as yet unacquainted with Dick's masterpieces, I'd advise them to begin with two or three of those and then return to *Solar Lottery*. (An alternative course, and not necessarily a worse one, if you possess unbounded faith, is to begin with *Solar Lottery* and read all the rest in sequence.) Having read *The Man in the High Castle*, *Martian Time-Slip*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and the novella "Faith of Our Fathers," which are my nominations for Dick's quintessential and all-time classics, one may then return to *Solar Lottery* with an eye for all the excellences that exist here in, as it were, an embryonic state.

*Solar Lottery* is also illuminating with regard to all that Dick had in common with his predecessors and his peers in that long-ago year of 1955. Even the highest and loneliest artists are engaged in a communal endeavor. Art is a vineyard in which all contemporaries—Kyd and Shakespeare, James and the myriad manufacturers of penny-dreadfuls, Dick and . . . whoever—work side by side, in a perpetual condition of reciprocal influence and aid. Dick's influence on later writers is clear enough. It seems highly unlikely that Ursula LeGuin would have written *The Lathe of Heaven* without an example of such earlier adventures in solipsism as Dick's *Eye in the Sky* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. What his inspiration may have been is less evident, especially if one's acquaintance is limited to the works of his maturity, in which early influences have either been assimilated or eliminated. In *Solar Lottery* this is not the case, and it offers us an ideal middle ground from which to view both the heights of what is to come and the common grounds from which these were to spring.

*Solar Lottery* appeared in 1955 as half of a thirty-five-cent Ace Double Novel, and it is from the plates of that edition that the present book has been photographically reproduced. (A mutilated edition of the book appeared the next year in England from Rich & Cowan, under the title *World of Chance*. Its copy editor showed unerring literary tact in eliminating, wherever possible, all of the book's more inspired passages. Truly, a monument to what may be achieved by patient mediocrity!) Unlike the novel on the flipside, Leigh Brackett's *The Big Jump*, *Solar Lottery* was not published serially. A yellow blurb above the red-and-white title declares: "FIRST PRIZE WAS THE EARTH ITSELF!" (This, if inaccurate, does try to make sense of the title, a task that the novel itself never undertakes—probably because the title was not of the author's choosing.) The cover art shows a

man in a spacesuit hurling a red boulder at a speck of a man (unsuited) below him on a cratered plain of celadon green. For a wonder, this scene does derive from the novel (the close of chapter 12), right down to the paradoxical detail of the person walking about on the moon without so much as a snorkel. There is this further Oddity, that the threatened figure is the villain, his threatener one of the minor heroes, and it is he who is actually in danger at this moment. Even this early, things aren't what they seem in a Dick novel.

What is being promised by such a cover, and what Dick in fact delivers (if somewhat grudgingly), is an action-adventure set in the Far Future (and Outer Space), a story with heroes and villains, a beginning, a middle, and an end. By comparison to almost any of his later books *Solar Lottery* seems conservative in dramatic conception and (except for the rare flare-up) restrained, even perfunctory, in execution. A journeyman space opera. It is, after all, the first published book of a young man who cannot know, at this point in his career, the degree to which he may be permitted to depart from the established ceremonies of an Ace Double.

The nature of that ceremony and the requirements it places on its celebrants are very much at issue here. As with other rigid dramatic forms, such as the Western or the Requiem Mass, the artist must find how to be sincere within the narrow bounds of the form given him. Most pulp sf never gets off the ground because most hack writers write cynically, parroting the early, genuine successes of the genre without tracing them back to their emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic sources. (Ditto for Westerns and Requiem Masses.) But it is always possible. Witness the Westerns of Bud Boetticher and Sergio Leone. Witness the requiems of Mozart (a Freemason) and Verdi (an atheist). Witness the science fiction of Philip Dick.

I've written at length elsewhere (in "The Embarrassments of Science Fiction") concerning the emotional dynamics of pulp sf, the ways in which the needs of the sf audience dictated the form and content of classic space opera. In that essay I maintain that through most of its history science fiction has been a lower-class literature that purveys compensatory power fantasies specially aimed at readers sensitive to their social and educational shortcomings. At its most intense and obsessive, in sf fandom, this purpose becomes so overriding that fans may well be likened to Jehovah's Witnesses, whose millennialist theology is likewise calculated to feed the insatiable hungers and nurse the unhealing wounds of those among the oppressed who would still resist their despair. If this is so, one may better understand why ordinary literary criteria are not only a matter of indifference to readers of sf but are actually

a matter of alarm: the sheer urgency of their need is so great that so long as the need is satisfied nothing else signifies. The clarity that Art brings represents an unwanted degree of illumination. Some actions are best performed in the dark.

The sf writers who most perfectly fit the above description are L. Ron Hubbard and A. E. van Vogt. Hubbard left sf relatively early in his career to found his own religion (one which precisely occupies the interface of fandom and millennial religion). Van Vogt simply wrote. And wrote simply: his books make the productions of such other founding fathers of proletarian pulp as Hammett and Chandler look like mandarin poetry. His prose rises above the laws of rhetoric and approaches the condition of phatic noise, the direct communication of emotional states by means of grunts and groans.

Now, if there is a single writer who may he said to have exerted a form-ing influence on the author of *Solar Lottery*, it is A. E. van Vogt. It is possible, as well, to hear echoes of more sophisticated voices, specifically those of Bester and Kornbluth-and-Pohl. Like *The Demolished Man*, *Solar Lottery* is about a crime that must be carried out despite a corps of telepathic guards. Like *The Space Merchants*, it presents a world of systematic and ironic reversals, as in the contrast between the random choice of a world president and the convention called to elect that leader's assassin. (This Erewhonian procedure would reach its apotheosis in the geopolitical ingenuities of *The Man in the High Castle*.) Yet it would be several years before Dick could be said to have rivaled or beaten Bester and Kornbluth-and-Pohl at their own game. While in the case of van Vogt, Dick has certainly done just that. In a sense, *Solar Lottery* is van Vogt's best novel.

The opening of *Solar Lottery* is substantially identical to that of van Vogt's most characteristic work, *The World of Null-A*. In both books a down-and-out hero is on his way to what seems a cross between a final exam and a job interview. Though suffering momentary doubts as to his ability to Get Ahead, it is suggested that each hero's apparent lack of success so far has been due to bad luck and, possibly, lack of effort. But this time, the story promises, the hero will try, and he does, and as a result he ends up in the last chapter as President of the Universe. It is the plot skeleton of the *Brave Little Tailor* and a hundred fairy tales besides. But with this difference, that the readers of sf may be presumed to be older and to have a somewhat solider grasp on reality (where fantasies of infantile omnipotence don't stand much of a chance). Some reason, however spurious, must be offered for the hero's success. He is surrounded not only with rockets and blasters to tickle the reader's sense of wonder but also with such plausibilities as coffee cups and contemporary (to 1955)

urban landscapes, like this one: “Across the street a looming hotel shielded a motley family of parasitic stores and dilapidated business establishments: loan shops, cigar stores, girl houses, bars.” Further, pseudoscience is called on to explain the hero’s specialness. In *The World of Null-A*, the hero, by his mysterious command of the non-Aristotelian logic of the title (an elusive discipline borrowed from a once faddish movement called General Semantics), is destined to triumph over those ignorant sods and highbrow Establishment Scientists still mired in the old-fashioned Aristotelian logic of either/or. In fact, not much is ever really made of Null-A logic, for the sufficient reason, I would think, that not much can be.

The *real* reason a van Vogt hero wins through is that his innate genetic superiority (and the author’s predestining hand) has thrust greatness on him. *Slan* is the supreme example in his work of paranoid racism, while the Null-A books offer his most full-blown Superman. The political implications of these traditional sci-fi themes have been exhaustively and hilariously dealt with in Norman Spinrad’s satire, *The Iron Dream*. Dick, in 1955, could not be so audacious as Spinrad in the seventies. He was committed to producing a novel of van Vogtian intrigue that would provide its readers with their traditional vicarious satisfactions. That he has found a way to do so that no longer need offend a liberal sensibility is no mean achievement.

Consider Dick’s use of game theory. Though not so questionable a discipline as van Vogt’s General Semantics, it was being used in the fifties as a kind of intellectual smokescreen for U.S. foreign policy decisions that would have appeared much more unseemly without such scholastic trappings. In an author’s note in the frontmatter of the Ace edition, Dick writes: “I became interested in the Theory of Games, first in an intellectual manner (like chess) and then with a growing uneasy conviction that Minimax was playing an expanding role in our national life. . . . Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union employ Minimax strategy as I sit here. While I was writing *Solar Lottery*, Van Neumann, the co-inventor of the Games Theory, was named to the Atomic Energy Commission, bearing out my belief that Minimax is gaining on us all the time.” This is certainly alarming, but then no more is made of Game Theory until well into the penultimate chapter of the book, when there is a flurry of Minimax terminology followed by some hugger-mugger between the leading ladies. There is a lottery by which the Quizmaster (President of the Universe) is selected, but it is the simplest kind of lottery, and in no way requires Game Theory to be understood. Game Theory, in short, has about as much to do with Dick’s story as the logic of Aristotle, or its refu-

tation, has to do with *The World of Null-A*. It is a bit of legerdemain calculated to give the guileless reader a sense that the book is about Something Important, a name to drop if not a whole idea. The difference is that in van Vogt such hocus-pocus is associated with the Good Guys; in Dick (as in real life) it is associated primarily with the Bad Guys.

Consider the social landscape of *Solar Lottery*. Like van Vogt, Dick is writing for the proverbial “little man,” for readers who will feel an instant bond of kinship with the elderly Cartwright when he is challenged by the villain in these terms: “You can’t operate this [the post of Quizmaster/President]. This isn’t your line. What are you? I examined the records. . . . You had ten years of nominal school in the charity department of the Imperial Hill. You never excelled in anything. From high school on you dropped courses that dealt with symbolization and took manual shop courses. You took welding and electronic repair, that sort of thing.” And here is Dick’s epic catalogue of the unks (people who lack “classified” ratings, i.e., proletarians) who set off in a rickety ore freighter on a quixotic quest for the Flame Disc (the utopian planet promised to them by their prophet John Preston): “A bewildering variety of people crowded anxiously around [Cartwright]: Mexican laborers mute and frightened, clutching their belongings, a hard-faced urban couple, a jet stoker, Japanese optical workmen, a red-lipped bed girl, the middle-aged owner of a retail goods store that had gone quack, an agronomy student, a patent medicine salesman, a cook, a nurse, a carpenter. . . . These were people with skill in their hands—not their heads. Their abilities had come from years of practice and work, from direct contact with objects. They could grow plants, sink foundations, repair leaking pipes, maintain machinery, weave clothing, cook meals. According to the Classification system, they were failures.” These are the Good Guys, clearly.

There are two Bad Guys, the super-rich multinational corporation director, Reese Verrick, whom Dick allows to glow with the glamour of power, a glamour entirely denied to the sub-villain, Herb Moore, who is obliged to represent so many of the things that Dick dislikes (the servility of the Organization Man, the desexed rationality of a behavioral scientist, etc.) that he never coheres as a character. Moore creates a kind of golem for Verrick, the purpose of which is to assassinate the usurping (but benevolent) Cartwright. Which is to say: Money rules the world and shores up its power, whenever threatened, by its control of Science (a Science that is, for that reason, dehumanizing). That is far from being the sole or even a primary “meaning” of *Solar Lottery*, but it is surely one of the book’s underlying assumptions. The chief difference between then



(1955) and now (1976) is the degree to which, then, left-wing sympathies of any consistency had to be disguised and “translated” into politically neutral language. (Compare, in *The Space Merchants*, of 1953, one of the models for *Solar Lottery*, the authors’ clever substitution of the imaginary “Consies” [Conservationists] for the dreaded “Commies.” An uncannily correct extrapolation.) Again, Dick’s use of the Pellig/superman figure may be contrasted to the work of van Vogt, in which the golem/superman is there precisely to afford his readers an unequivocal vicarious delight: If only it were me!

*Solar Lottery*, along with most of its successors, may be read as a self-consistent social allegory of a more-or-less Marxist bent. As such Dick’s books are unique in the annals of American sf, whose brightest lights have either been outspokenly right-wing, like Heinlein, or blandly liberal in the manner of Asimov or Bradbury, or else they’ve back-pedaled after a fire-eating youth, like the post-Kornbluth Pohl. Doubtless this is what has enabled Dick to be excepted from the anathemas of Stanislaw Lem, the Polish sf writer and critic. But Dick’s political imagination, though powerful, is not, I believe, his central strength.

Dick’s big theme, the one that consistently calls forth his finest and most forceful work, is transcendence—whether it’s possible, what it feels like, and whether that feeling ultimately represents wishful thinking or some larger reality. He is constantly torn between a rationalistic denial of the ultimate reality of transcendent experience and a (still ironic) celebration of the brute fact of it.

Viewed in the light of this concern, many of his themes take on shades of meaning that sort oddly with strict dialectical orthodoxy, or even any known variety of revisionism. Why, for instance, does he celebrate “people with skill in their hands—not their heads”? Not just because they’re underdogs who perform vital work and are denied adequate recompense or recognition. Handicraft, for Dick, is a spiritual discipline, somewhat in the way it was for Shakers, whose motto, “Hands to work and hearts to God,” might well be his own. The most fully developed of Dick’s craftsmen/heroes is Frank in *The Man in the High Castle*, a maker of modern silver jewelry. Much of that novel’s plot centers around the specifically spiritual quality of Frank’s jewelry, a spirituality that in one instance allows another character than Frank to transcend the terrifying Nazi-dominated world of that novel (by, ironically, escaping into our own).

The Prestonites’ voyage in quest of the Flame Disc and their discovery, en route, of the seemingly resurrected John Preston represent *Solar Lottery*’s initial sounding of this typical theme. It is not one of the stronger things in the book, in part simply because it is scanted in Dick’s pell-mell

rush to get the second half of his advance. But it may also be that the Flame Disc sequences fail because they haven't been sufficiently transformed from orthodox Christian eschatology. Dick is not about to make a declaration for Christ, though he always seems to be flirting with the possibility, symbolically. However, his confessional impulse is invariably contradicted by dramatic events of much greater emotional suasion. In *Solar Lottery* the exhumed body of John Preston proves not to be alive, as expected, but a simulacrum. Through all his novels Dick entertains the possibility that creatures of flesh and blood are all essentially robots, mechanical monads obeying laws of a mechanistic creation. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is his single most compelling vision of man's unredeemably material nature, but there is one moment in *Solar Lottery* when the later book's dark paradoxes are powerfully prefigured. It occurs on page 138: to say more would spoil *Solar Lottery's* finest *coup de théâtre*.

This essay cannot begin to enumerate all Dick's characteristic motifs, much less to analyze their complex interactions. The best I can do is to suggest a context in which Dick's work may be viewed more fruitfully than that of other science fiction stories, and that is the context of Romantic poetry, especially the poetry of Blake and Shelley. Both were political radicals whose circumstances prevented them from translating their convictions into political action. Both demonstrated a profound and prophetic understanding of those realms that lay beyond the Age of Reason. Both were artists of process, prevented by the very urgency of their apprehensions from creating works of classic amplitude and concinnity of form.

This is not to say that readers will find no formal pleasures in Dick's novels, that it is all a matter of snuffling about for truffles of Meaning, as I've been doing here. But his commitment to an aesthetic of process means that, by and large, whatever he writes is what we read. There is no turning back to rethink, revise, or erase. He improvises rather than composes, thereby making his experience of the creative process the focus of his art. This is not a novelty, of course. It is the wager of Scheherazade, too, that she can be interesting and authentic absolutely all the time, and this tradition of the novel is as old and as honorable as the more Flaubertian idea of the novel-as-prose-poem that presently holds sway in academia. Within this tradition Dick is one of the immortals by virtue of the sheer fecundity of his invention. Inevitably there are dull patches, days when his typewriter refuses to wake up, but on the whole these are few and the stretches of song, when they come, are all the more remarkable for being, so visibly, the overflow of a spirit . . . that from Heaven, or near it, pours its full heart in profuse strains of unpremeditated art.