

In the Mold of 1964: An Afterword

In December of 1961 the U.S. Defense Department announced a fallout shelter program aimed at establishing 235,000,000 fallout shelter spaces. At that time the entire population of the country had yet to exceed 200,000,000.

In October of 1962, Kennedy had his moment of macho glory when he declared a quarantine around Cuba, where the Russians were building missile bases. For a few days everyone was waiting for the bombs to fall. The sensation of dread and helplessness was just the stuff nightmares are made of. For those who had read more than the government's bromidic brochures on the subject of nuclear destruction and who were living at that time in a major (i.e., targeted) city, there was little to be done but figure the odds for survival. Fifty-fifty seemed the general consensus among the New Yorkers I knew. The poet Robert Frost, legend has it, reckoned doomsday even likelier than that, and when he appeared at a symposium at Columbia University, he declared himself to be delighted that now he would not die alone (he was then eighty-eight) but would take all humanity along with him.

A year and a month later, in November of 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated—probably as a quid pro quo for his earlier efforts to play a similar dirty trick on Castro. However, at the time we were asked to believe that the deed was accomplished by a single bullet fired by Lee Harvey Oswald. Earl Warren, having been admonished by President Johnson that continued doubts of the scapegoat's sole guilt could lead to nuclear war, was directed to write a scenario to this effect. The Warren Commission issued its report in 1964, the same year in which *The Penultimate Truth* was published. Neither was nominated for a Hugo, for indeed both books were much too hastily written to deserve such an honor. But as a snapshot of the angst that characterized that period—and of the blackly humorous emotional antidote to that angst—*The Penultimate Truth* is an essential document.

According to the records of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency, the outline for *The Penultimate Truth* was received in March of 1964, and the

Afterword to *The Penultimate Truth*, by Philip K. Dick.

completed manuscript in May. Conceptually it represented the splicing together of two short stories Philip K. Dick had written in the earliest years of his apprenticeship. The first of these, "The Defenders," appeared in the January 1953 issue of *Galaxy*. It duplicates, in miniature, the Nicholas St. James portion of the plot, in which all humanity has been tricked into believing it must continue living underground to escape the radiation and other dangers of a nuclear war. In this story it is the leadies (robots) that have perpetrated the deception in order to keep mankind from self-extinction, and the story's last wistfully liberal tableau represents two groups of escaped U.S. and Russian troglodytes blasting off into the sunset, reconciled by the rational leadies:

"It has taken thousands of generations to achieve," the A-class leady concluded. "Hundreds of centuries of bloodshed and destruction. But each war was a step toward uniting mankind. And now the end is in sight: a world without war. But even that is only the beginning of a new stage of history."

"The conquest of space," breathed Colonel Borodsky.

"The meaning of life," Moss added.

"Eliminating hunger and poverty," said Taylor.

The leady opened the door of the ship. "All that and more. How much more? We cannot foresee it any more than the first men who formed a tribe could foresee this day. But it will be unimaginably great."

The door closed and the ship took off toward their new home.

The second source story for the novel was published in *If* (August 1955), and its title, "The Mold of Yancy," was intended, in a slightly emended form, "In the Mold of Yancy," as the original title of the book. It concerns the conspiracy of the yance-men of Callisto, a satellite of Jupiter, to brainwash the guileless Callistotes into a condition of abject conformity by means of the televised speeches of a (nonexistent) home-spun philosopher who is a cross between Arthur Godfrey and George Orwell's Big Brother. The problem is resolved not by revealing the deception to the gullible population but by using the Yancy mannikin to inculcate a preference for Greek tragedy and Bach fugues among those who formerly were satisfied by Westerns and the songs of Stephen Collins Foster.

It is clear, even in that early story, that Dick's interest in the premise is more with the secret power exercised by hidden persuaders, such as advertising copywriters, speechwriters, and filmmakers, than with the

moral question of the legitimacy of such persuasion. It's less clear whether, as he wrote "The Mold of Yancy," Dick recognized his personal fascination and identification with the yance-men of Callisto, but surely by the time he had decided to rework that old material into a novel, he knew himself to be a yance-man—albeit one employed in the lower echelons of the power structure—as a hack writer producing sci-fi paperbacks. By way of signaling that fact and of sharing it with the unhappy few who could be counted on to read his hack novels as a phantasmal form of autobiography, Dick gave the Agency that is responsible for this global deception the then-current address of his own literary agent, Scott Meredith, at 580 Fifth Avenue.

What it meant, for Dick—as for his novel's protagonist, Joseph Adams—to be a yance-man was that he knew, as most of his fellow citizens did not, that the real sociopolitical function of the cold war and the arms race was to guarantee comfortable "demesnes for corporate executives and other officials of the military-industrial establishments." Only as long as there was the menace of an external enemy would a majority of people agree to their own systematic impoverishment. But if one's "enemy" was in the same situation with respect to its captive populations, then a deal could be struck to keep their reciprocal menace ever-threatening—not at all a difficult task with the unthinkable power of the nuclear arsenals both sides possessed.

In another novel, *The Zap Gun*, conceived and written in the same few months of spring 1964 that produced *The Penultimate Truth*, Dick hypothesized a very similar conspiracy between the superpowers. The hero of that novel, Lars Powderdry, is a weapons fashions designer whose imposing but impotent creations are derived, telepathically, from an Italian horror comic, *The Blue Cephalopod Man from Titan*. The moral of both novels is clear: government is a conspiracy against the people, and it is maintained by the illusion of a permanent crisis that exists, for the most part, as a media event.

Such a view of world affairs was much less common in the early sixties than it has become since Watergate, but it was surely not original to Philip Dick. Its most forceful expression is probably found in George Orwell's 1984, in which a perpetual state of war and shifting alliances among the three superpowers provide the basis for totalitarian rule, and in which the head of state is, like Talbot Yancy, a chimera. Many critics have pointed out that 1984 is intended, not as a prediction or a warning against some dire possible future, but rather as a nightmarishly hyperbolic picture of the actual state of affairs at the time it was being written, a meaning concealed in the title: 1984 = 1948.

The great difference between Orwell's world-nightmare and Dick's is that the possibility of nuclear holocaust has not yet informed Orwell's vision, while it dominates Dick's—and often obscures it. Never mind that the future Dick has imagined could not come into being, that the radiation released by a nuclear war would have had far more awful and widespread consequences than the singeing represented in *The Penultimate Truth*. The emotional basis of the inability to comprehend nuclear reality has been compellingly discussed by Jonathan Schell in *The Fate of the Earth*, where, after demonstrating the virtual certainty of human extinction as a result of a large-scale nuclear war, he argues:

It thus seems to be in the nature of extinction to repel emotion and starve thought, and if the mind, brought face to face with extinction, descends into a kind of exhaustion and dejection it is surely in large part because we know that mankind cannot be a "spectator" at its own funeral, any more than any individual person can.

Might not the congruent sense of "exhaustion and dejection" pervading the first chapters of *The Penultimate Truth* be symptomatic of Dick's natural inability to think the unthinkable—that is, to imagine the aftermath of nuclear war in plausibly dire terms?

Of course, Dick never intended to write a plausible, realistic post-holocaust novel. Readers who want a verismo version of their own future deaths might read *On the Beach* (novel, 1959; movie, 1959). Dick has another zeitgeist to summon, a new wisdom that is at once happier and blacker, the Spirit of '64. He simply denies that the cold war is happening.

It is a denial we all learned to make, having passed through the twin crises of 1962 and 1963: the Missile Crisis and the Assassination. Robert Frost died alone, after all, and the rest of us, by and large, survived. If we'd never bothered listening to the news, there'd have been no reason to be fussed. Life went on. The Beach Boys produced new and better songs. Ditto Detroit and cars. That segment of the entertainment industry devoted to politics had an election, Johnson versus Goldwater, and the plot was that Goldwater would lead us into war. So we voted, by and large, for Johnson.

But that's getting ahead of the story, since this cannot chronicle the entire unreality of the nuclear era, but only the particular slice represented by *The Penultimate Truth*—spring of 1964.

Consider our presidents. Up to the age of fifteen, Dick would have known but one, FDR, and he would undoubtedly have shared in the idol-

atry accorded Roosevelt in the war years, Dick being eleven years old in 1941. It can be maintained (and often has been) that two of the next three presidents—Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy—achieved their success because of the image they projected rather than through some special competence. Indeed, Eisenhower's nomination in 1952 was denounced by Taft's supporters as a triumph of showbiz over politics, while, with the benefit of hindsight, Kennedy's entire career seems a pageant choreographed by the yance-men about him—Schlesinger, Bradlee, even Mailer. Christopher Lasch writes, in the October 1983 issue of *Harper's* magazine: "Never was a political myth so consciously and deliberately created or so assiduously promoted, in this case by the very people who had deplored Madison Avenue's participation in President Eisenhower's campaigns." As Norman Mailer wrote in his account of the 1960 Democratic convention, which helped to fix Kennedy's image as an "existential hero," the "life of politics and the life of myth had diverged too far" during the dull years of Eisenhower and Truman. It was Kennedy's destiny, Mailer thought (along with many others), to restore a heroic dimension to American politics, to speak and represent the "real subterranean life of America," to "engage" once again the "myth of the nation," and thus to bring a new "impetus . . . to the lives and the imaginations of the American."

If this is how one of the man's vassals speaks of him, in public, in his lifetime, Lasch's case—and Dick's—seems fairly unassailable. Of course, those intellectuals who promoted Kennedy for his mythic potential felt with a certain complacent knowingness that they were privileged to see the reality beyond the myth (for that is a yance-man's greatest reward). Mailer begins his teasingly self-revealing, self-concealing *An American Dream* (which first began to appear, serially, in *Esquire* in January 1964) with a paragraph calculated to make all true yance-men swoon with envy:

I met Jack Kennedy in November, 1946. We were both war heroes, and both of us had just been elected to Congress. We went out one night on a double date and it turned out to be a fair evening for me. I seduced a girl who would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz.

In every respect but one *An American Dream* is a more accomplished novel than *The Penultimate Truth*, but that one respect is crucial to its (failed) ambition. *An American Dream* does not succeed as an evocation of the zeitgeist of the dawn of the assassination era—for the sufficient novelistic reason that Mailer has murders to discuss much closer to his own heart. However, both novels share the same courtier's fascination with

the intrigues presumed to be the reality behind the myth of Camelot/Talbot Yancy, and both find something glamorous in the ruthless exercise of power by well-placed criminals.

It must be admitted, however, that the hugger-mugger surrounding the Machiavellian schemes of the smarmily villainous Brose and the Byronic David Lantano is the central weakness of *The Penultimate Truth*. Brose's plot for entrapping Runcible is so unnecessarily preposterous, and involves such needless multiplication of hypotheses, and is at last so irrelevant to the outcome of the story, that one might wonder at Dick's willingness to permit such an obvious blemish to remain, except that one knows, from his own admissions and from other internal evidences, that Dick's method of work was to plunge on ahead and never look behind. If he'd been Orpheus, Eurydice would have had nothing to worry about backwards-looking-wise (as Dick would say).

I'd like to intrude a long parenthesis here concerning the faults of the book, which are, pretty obviously, the result of Dick's chosen manner of writing, a manner comparable to downhill racing. The results can be spectacular, though often the spectacle provided is one of disaster. But rather than appearing to guess at Dick's technique of composition on the basis of internal evidence, let me quote his account of the matter, written to an editor at Harcourt, Brace early in 1960:

I wonder why you say I write so much; that is, produce so much. My anxiety is that I produce too little—that if I bore down I could produce a lot more. Most of the work, for me, lies in the pre-typing stage, in the note-taking. I generally spend five to six months doing no typing, but simply outlining. At best I can now bring forth no more than two novels a year. . . . Under certain conditions, however, I can write very fast, even without notes. The Lippincott book was written in two weeks, proofread and then retyped in two more. . . . My work tends to force a pace on me; I'll do forty to sixty pages a day for days on end, until I'm exhausted, and then not uncover the machine for several months.

I wait until I am sure of what I want to put down, and then away I go.

After winning a Hugo for *The Man in the High Castle* in 1963, Dick was actually able to increase his rate of production to a little better than three novels a year, a rate he maintained almost to the end of the sixties.

The downhill-racing style of novel-writing is not uncommon in science fiction or other genres, and when it is brought off well, there is a fizziness and exhilaration to such books that is not to be found in more carefully wrought novels, however favorably they might otherwise be

compared. Often, however, speed-written novels run out of steam sporadically. Forty to sixty pages a day means a week's continuous work for a novel the length of *The Penultimate Truth*, and it is difficult to scintillate virtually nonstop for an entire week. Often it is all that bleary eyes and weary fingers can do to type coherent sentences. Take as a for-instance chapter 14, four labored pages of dialogue in which two minor characters rehash a situation the reader is already well aware of, arrive at no conclusions, and can't refrain from dropping hints right and left as to how low Phil Dick is feeling at that late hour, after his seventeenth cup of coffee: "A Yance-man, female, named Arlene Davidson, who has a demesne in New Jersey; the Agency's top draftsman. Died of a massive coronary during the past weekend. Late Saturday night. . . . She may have been given a deadline, for something major; overworked. But that's conjecture." And then, a page later: "Still shuffling his documents, trying to come up with something of use, trying and unhappily failing, the abstract-carrier Footeman said, 'I wish you good luck. Maybe next time.' And he wondered if, for Runcible, there would be a further report. This inadequate—admittedly so—one today might well be the last. . . ."

The wonder is how often Dick was able to produce work of real interest and wit in these marathons of typewriting. For readers who read at a pace proportioned to his speed of writing (as most sf fans learn to do, or else cease being fans), the dull patches disappear into a haze of white powder as they careen down the slopes of the narrative. It is the ideas they are after, and Dick always provides more than a sufficiency of these.

Indeed, for slower readers like myself, who are so old-fashioned in their tastes as to demand some kind of consistency and continuity in the plot of a book, this profusion of ideas often is a bigger stumbling block to the enjoyment of Dick's lesser novels than the chapters written on automatic pilot. Take the way Dick picks up, and throws away, and again picks up, the idea of time travel in *The Penultimate Truth*. First he posits a "time scoop" that can propel objects back into the past, a device Brose intends to use to plant false archaeological "proofs" of an extraterrestrial invasion of fifteenth-century North America. Brose's plot comes to nothing, though several chapters are devoted to its preparation. Then, fudging the explanation like mad, Dick asks us to believe (1) that one of the yance-men, David Lantano, is actually a Cherokee Indian who has managed to ride the (now two-way) scoop back into the twenty-first century; (2) that in a manner never fully explained this Lantano's physical age oscillates between young manhood and old age, when he becomes the real Talbot Yancy; and (3) that he has taken a few starring roles in the intervening five centuries.

None of which has much to do with what the book set off to be about, nor does it impinge very much on the resolution of the plot. Yet, it is clear from scattered footprints, broken twigs, and other spoor of the downhill-racing novelist what Dick would have liked this stew of impossibilities to accomplish. Lantano first appears as the yance-man most likely to succeed—and to succeed the hero, Joseph Adams, as the Agency’s most accomplished speechwriter. Adams envies the way Lantano, in one of the speeches he has written for the Yancy simulacrum, is able to “openly discuss the fact that those tankers down there are systematically deprived of what they’re entitled to.” Here is how Dick, using the mask of Lantano (who is using the mask of Yancy), describes the characteristic deprivation of the tankers’ (i.e., working-class) lives:

Your lives are incomplete, in the sense that Rousseau had meant when he talked of man having been born in one condition, brought into the light free, and everywhere was now in chains. Only here, in this day and age . . . they had been born onto the surface of a world and now that surface with its air and sunlight and hills, its oceans, its streams, its colors and textures, its very smells, had been swiped from them and they were left with tin-can submarine—figuratively—dwelling boxes in which they were squeezed, under a false light, to breathe repurified stale air, to listen to wired obligatory music and sit daylong at workbenches making leadies for a purpose which—but even Lantano could not go on here.

But Lantano’s place in the scheme of the novel isn’t limited to his rhetorical abilities. He is meant to be the redeemer of a humanity not simply downtrodden but buried, a Christ figure whom Nicholas St. James, his evangelist, at once recognizes as such, murmuring when they first meet, “He was oppressed and despised,” a misquotation that Lantano himself corrects to “despised and rejected of men.” However, about the only way that the Cherokee Lantano resembles Christ is in having been appointed the task of harrowing hell—that is, of being the agent by which the subterranean tankers will win release and inherit the earth. Yet, the means Lantano adopts resemble those of Danton much more than those of Christ, for Lantano proves to be the sneakiest and most ruthless of the book’s sundry schemers, and in this he represents Dick’s own ambivalent—and unformulated—feelings on the question of how human liberation is to be achieved.

The same ambivalence is mirrored—but more coherently—in the opposition between the two chief protagonists of the novel. Nicholas St.

James is an ideal proletarian, the “president” of his ant tank, resourceful, courageous, and a dupe. Joseph Adams has only one thing going for him, apart from a certain ineffectual “liberal” goodwill—the fact that he is not a dupe. Dick admires Nicholas St. James, but he identifies with Joseph Adams (who is, accordingly, the only character in the book with an intermittently plausible inner life).

With regard to plot construction, therefore, Lantano is an unnecessary complication, a *deus ex machina* whose powers prove almost as illusory as those of the figurehead of Yancy with which he is identified. At the end of the novel, as a result of Lantano’s coup, humanity is to be released from its bondage, but this has been accomplished without any recourse to Lantano’s special characteristics as a time-traveling, Christ-like Cherokee warrior.

What, then, was the purpose of such “ideas”? Were they no more than a kind of conceptual padding, a way to pump up the premise of the original stories to novel length? After the fact, perhaps yes, but in the pell-mell of writing I think Dick’s throwaway ideas represent a kind of self-pitched curve ball that he honestly hopes to knock over the stadium wall. There are similarly transcendental elements in the plot of another novel from 1964 (and one of his best), *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

If Dick had stopped to think (but that’s something a downhill racer can’t do), he might have realized that there was an essential dramatic disparity between the two stories he was trying to weld together. The Yancy part of the plot generated a story about dirty tricks in high places, a genre for which Dick possesses little flair (compare Le Carré and his better imitators), while that element of the story that all readers remember, after the lapse of however many years, is the notion of the human race imprisoned in underground factories because they’ve been tricked into believing that a nuclear war has destroyed the world. It’s an extraordinarily resonant idea. One thinks of the dwellers in Plato’s cave who know nothing of the reality but the shadows cast on the wall; of the similar destiny of Wells’s Morlocks; of the prisoners in Beethoven’s *Fidelio*; and of ourselves, living in the shadows of a nuclear threat that is only bearable when we pretend that it does not exist. To have recognized that our situation is a kind of madness (“What, me worry?” sang the *Titanic*’s passengers) has not helped us toward a solution, for our situation with respect to the bomb is not much different in 1983 than it was in 1964. And for that reason *The Penultimate Truth*, for all its flaws, remains a book that can speak to the terror that is the bedrock of our social order.