Scratch Pad 1

Contents

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

A talk written by Bruce Gillespie for the October 1990 meeting of the Nova Mob.
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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 totempole. 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 sniffy 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.' 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 Paul. 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 understated 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 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 clichéd 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.'

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 Phil 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 Phil 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.

By *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 seesawing 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 is] 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 we 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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The non-science fiction novels written by Philip K. Dick during the 1950s. This list gives details of editions sighted. I suspect the British editions were all preceded by Morrow or Ziesing editions, but have no way of checking at the moment.

Rating

1942: *Return to Lilliput.*
Juvenilia, lost manuscript.

1948–50: *The Earthshaker.*
Lost manuscript, perhaps never completed.

**** 1952–3: *Voices from the Street.*
published after this essay was written as *Gather Yourselves Together*
WCS Publishing 1-878914-05-7; 1994; 291 pp.

**** 1953-4: *Mary and the Giant.*
Victor Gollancz 0-575-04243-5; 1988; 230 pp.

1955: *A Time for George Stavros.*
Lost manuscript. Known to have been recast as *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland.*

1956: *Pilgrim on the Hill.*
Lost manuscript.

**** 1956: *The Broken Bubble of Thisbe Holt.*
As *The Broken Bubble.*
Morrow 1-55710-012-8; 1988; 246 pp.

**** 1957: *Puttering About in a Small Land.*
Academy Chicago Publishers 0-89733-149-4; 1985; 291 pp.

*** 1958: *In Milton Lumky Territory.*
Victor Gollancz 0-575-03625-7; 1985; 213 pp.
Also had a British paperback (Paladin?).

**** 1959: *Confessions of a Crap Artist.*
Entwhistle Books; 1975; 171 pp.
Had an American paperback release (1978, also from Entwhistle Books) and one British paperback release during the late 1970s or early 1980s.

*** 1960: *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike.*
Paladin 0-586-08563-7; 1986; 256 pp.
First edition (USA): Mark V. Ziesing; 1984 (this edition not sighted).

*** 1960: *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland.*
Victor Gollancz 0-575-03875-6; 1986; 199 pp.
No other edition sighted.

SF novels by Philip K. Dick closely related to the 1950s non-sf novels

***** 1958: *Time out of Joint.*
Penguin 14-002847-1; 1969; 187 pp. Continually reprinted.
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**** 1961: *The Man in the High Castle.*
G. P. Putnam's Sons; 1962; 239 pp.
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***** 1962: *Martian Time-Slip.*
Ballantine; 1964; 220 pp.
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*** 1978: *Valis.*
Bantam 0-553-14156-2; 1981; 227 pp.

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