

The Library of America interviews Jonathan Lethem about Philip K. Dick's Later Novels

In connection with the publication in Summer 2009 of [*Philip K. Dick: VALIS and Later Novels*](#), edited by Jonathan Lethem, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

([Click here](#) to read the previous interview with Jonathan Lethem, conducted in May 2007 on the occasion of the publication of the first Philip K. Dick volume published in The Library of America.)

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VALIS and Later Novels, the third Library of America volume of novels by Philip K. Dick, collects A Maze of Death (1970) and his last three novels, VALIS (1981), The Divine Invasion (1982), and The Transmigration of Timothy Archer (1982). What connects these four novels and how do they differ from his earlier work?

The latter three are his last three composed novels, and the last three published during his lifetime. They're most strongly linked for that reason, even beyond the deep thematic crosscurrents among them, and it's worth pointing out that nowhere else in the LOA volumes have I happened to select three books in a row from this very, very prolific writer. These three have come to be known as "The VALIS Trilogy," a notion Dick consented to at least in passing (though he was awfully prone to contradicting himself on such matters), and they're all closely related to the background of theological study and speculation that dominated the latter part of his life. Let's get back to this aspect of his work later.

A Maze of Death is a significantly earlier novel, and somewhat of a dark horse in general—rarely listed among his greatest by critics, or heavily studied

Lethem on Philip K. Dick (Later Novels)

in academia. It's probably the furthest afield I've gone from the "canon" within Dick's work, apart from *Now Wait For Last Year*. Aside from the fact that I like it a lot, I chose it for the relationship to these later books, which are too often taken as an anomalous part of Dick's career by those who favor the 1960s' work. In *Maze* we see Dick exploring motifs of "paranoid theology" (to coin a phrase), many years before his interest in these matters is supposed to have begun. And then there's the luck—an editor's luck, I'd call it—of the mention of Bishop Pike in the author's note, which seems to tie things together.

As with Ubik and Eye in the Sky, A Maze of Death uses the classic science fiction motif of following a group of colonists arriving on a planet and being tested physically, psychologically, and philosophically by their experiences. But it's also equal parts murder mystery and cosmic meditation. How would you compare what Dick accomplishes here with his other efforts with this plot device?

Yes, in some ways it makes a third entry in a secret trilogy of novels, doesn't it? The design is reminiscent of Agatha Christie's archetypal *And Then There Were None*. And if *Eye* is the friskiest and freshest version, typical of Dick at the start of his career, and *Ubik* the most committed and somber and disorienting, characteristic of his '60s peak, *Maze* may in some ways signal a degree of exhaustion and cynicism in his approach—though the book is nothing if not mordantly hilarious. Several critics have pointed out that it appears that Dick is attempting to do away with his usual cast of characters, as if he's frustrated with them—not unlike Kurt Vonnegut in *Breakfast of Champions*. In both cases the writer in question would never write in exactly the same way again afterwards.

The narrator in VALIS delivers the disturbing and often-quoted line, "It is sometimes an appropriate response to reality to go insane." He then says, "I am Horselover Fat, and I am writing this in the third person to gain much-needed objectivity." But he doesn't write in the third person. The "I" converses with Horselover Fat and together they explore the concept of a "Vast Active Living Intelligence System," or VALIS. Does Dick want us to believe that the narrator is insane—or is this dual-personality Dick's way of getting the many contradictory voices inside his head into the novel? It's unsettling and oddly intimate at the same time.

Well, I'm not sure I can account for the skewed narrative strategies in the book any better than you've just done, but "unsettling" and "intimate" are cer-

Lethem on Philip K. Dick (Later Novels)

tainly good words for it. What's amazing is how natural the method can seem to a sympathetic reader who's not struggling to find some framework for the approach—it's more than intimate, I'd call it weirdly congenial. And, of course, as a method for drawing us into material that's more than outlandish in its conspiratorial and reality-shattering implications, it's terrifically sly. Dick disarms our skepticism by outflanking it: you sometimes find yourself rooting for Horselover Fat to prove the narrator wrong.

You mention in your notes that Dick wrote VALIS in a “mere two weeks in November 1978, but its composition had a longer foreground” and that it incorporates material that Dick has “rehearsed in his ‘Exegesis,’ an extensive journal project.” I gather that the “Exegesis” spanned some 8,000 pages upon Dick’s death. How does the material in it differ from what he includes in his novels? Is VALIS the only novel that includes work from it? Will all of it ever be published?

To take the simplest question first: *VALIS* is the only novel that includes language from the 8,000 (largely handwritten, unstructured, repetitive, digressive, and often dull) pages called the “Exegesis”—and, in their clarity and compression, these passages are far from typical of the whole. Some other (still comparatively “finished”) sequences from those pages are collected in *In Pursuit of VALIS*, edited by Dick biographer Lawrence Sutin. The challenges in organizing and transcribing the lion's share of this material are being slowly approached by the Dick estate, with the help of some conservators and scholars, even as we speak. So, if you're really excited about the prospect of reading the entirety, for the first time there's a project to root for. But be warned: it shows no prospect of being some “lost masterwork,” nor even particularly readable.

Anyone hearing the plot of The Divine Invasion—A hapless recluse shepherds the MS-afflicted virgin mother of Yahweh’s son to Earth so that he can reclaim Earth from the evil Belial, but the savior is born with amnesia . . .—would suspect this to be a comic novel. Yet Dick writes this sequel to VALIS in full earnest. Dorion Sagan has hailed it as having “instantiated Gnosticism in fiction with entertainment and story-telling acumen, imparting lodes of theological information along the way where others have failed.” Do you see Dick the philosopher and Dick the storyteller being in harmony here or at odds?

Let's call it a high-wire act. I do think there's a fascinating tension as Dick

Lethem on Philip K. Dick (Later Novels)

attempts to ground so much of his obsessive theological material in terms that (somewhat) resemble his indigenous storyteller's instincts, and most particularly in the pop-iconography of his science fiction. What's so interesting to me is how little *Divine Invasion* really resembles Dick's own SF—it's more like an image of how his work might have developed if he'd been more committed and lucid in his use of those materials all along. That's to say, in reaching for an adequate container for the "VALIS" materials in this, his third attempt (that's counting *Radio Free Albemuth*, which we'll get to), he's begun to remember the kind of more grounded and prosaic fiction he'd set out to write in the 1950s—the realist novels. And this reaches an even fuller fruition with *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*.

Many articles have been written about Dick's fascination with Gnosticism. The term Gnosticism encompasses the beliefs of many Judaeo-Christian sects from the first centuries of the Common Era. Most of them share a belief in what William Irwin Thompson calls an "inversion of Hebrew mythology" where the world is created by a demiurge and "the serpent in the garden is the Savior." Gnostic elements recur in VALIS and The Divine Invasion. Was Dick any more committed to Gnostic beliefs than he was to Taoism (with his frequent use of the I Ching) or Buddhism or Hinduism?

A discussion of Gnosticism is where, alas, you plumb very definite limits in my knowledge. Most of what I know about Gnosticism I learned through the very peculiar means of reading Dick's novels, his letters, and the studies of his work that bring that information to bear on it. Dick's "commitment" is another matter—no testimony has ever persuaded me that his commitment to a given belief system was ever embracing or permanent—it seems he tried them on and off as frequently as he changed clothes. I didn't know Dick personally, but from the accounts of his friends and family, it wasn't any easier to pin him down in person than it is as a reader.

The Transmigration of Timothy Archer is unusual in several ways: Where most of Dick's novels follow the stories of several characters via a third person narrator, Transmigration tells its story through a single narrative voice—and it's female. Why did Dick chose this form for his last novel?

He barely ever used the first-person voice. The only other prominent example is *VALIS*, where that use is, as you've pointed out, deeply complicated. Dick's notion of what fiction could do, what it was meant to do, was tied up in

Lethem on Philip K. Dick (Later Novels)

the idea of multiple subjective perspectives on reality. *Transmigration* is a great last-minute departure and, I believe, a triumph of both craft and wisdom—grace, if you will. How in the world he arrived at this simple formal choice, which enabled the book in so many ways, is a complete mystery to me. Certainly the narrator is one of his greatest characters, bar none, and the fact that she's female is a real gift for those readers uncomfortable with Dick's depictions of women even in some of his finest works (there are many of us).

The Episcopal Bishop of California, James A. Pike, was a close friend of Dick's and Transmigration is based in part on Pike's life. A charismatic televangelist, Pike famously died searching for Gnostic scrolls in the Israeli desert in 1969. What drew the two men together and why did Dick choose to use Pike for a basis of a character more than a decade after Pike's death?

From what I understand there were very few conversationalists who could fully contend with Dick's full obsessional outpouring of scholarship, imaginative leaps, and bullshit gambits; James Pike was obviously one who could, and so it was a match made in heaven. As for Dick's decision to portray him in a *roman à clef*, I can't testify as to Dick's thinking, but in a sense such a choice is a fairly typical one for a 20th-century novelist (think, for instance, of Saul Bellow, whose sources for characters among his most charismatic and famous acquaintances are often very easily discernible). So, perhaps we can agree that this was Dick reaching for a relatively traditional method.

Some time over the next year a new movie, Radio Free Albemuth, starring Alanis Morissette, is due to be released. The movie is based on a novel Dick wrote before VALIS and originally entitled VALISystemA (it was published after his death as Radio Free Albemuth). The novel VALIS includes references to a science fiction movie "Valis," which recapitulates the plotline of Radio Free Albemuth. Did Dick intend for all of these works to be intertwined? Can you help us sort the threads?

I'm not familiar with the movie project, apart from what you've heard, so I can't predict how faithful or satisfying it might be for readers of *VALIS* or the other related works. The novel that the movie takes as its source, *Radio Free Albemuth*, is an odd duck in Dick's shelf of published works in the sense that it was actually an earlier draft of the *VALIS* material, submitted for publication by Dick and then reworked so completely in the writing of *VALIS* that it appeared to his posthumous editors as a legitimate work of its own. It has champions—

Lethem on Philip K. Dick (Later Novels)

some who even prefer it to *VALIS*. I can't agree, myself. It seems a fairly pedestrian and cautious feint at the material—readable, perhaps, but not essential. *VALIS*, meanwhile, is one of Dick's great masterpieces, so I'm awfully glad that *Radio Free Albemuth* was written, if only to be rejected and rewritten.

You have a new novel coming this fall, Chronic City, and many of its themes—paranoia, drug use, alternate realities—echo those of Dick more than any of your recent novels. Did editing the three Library of America volumes influence your writing—or is Dick's influence like a centrifugal force that becomes simply irresistible at some point?

Good spotting. I've certainly had a very full refresher course in Philip K. Dick over these last few years, and that's unmistakably had its effect on *Chronic City*, yes. Yet I think your image of a "centrifugal" influence is also right, and it feels to me that I'd been swinging back in this direction for a long while—and I'd conceived of many of the images and sequences that would become *Chronic City* as much as ten years ago. The odd thing about writing novels if you write them as slowly as I do (as opposed to the breakneck speed of Phil Dick) is that you often can barely remember their point of origin by the time you've finished them.