

## **Chapter Eight: What's Going Down: The Lessons of Philip K. Dick's Short Fiction for the Post-9/11 World**

One American cliché since the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Center is that ‘everything has changed.’ The Earth is more dangerous; we can never sleep in the safety we had previously imagined. However, if we take a look back at the short stories of Philip K. Dick from the 1950s and 1960s, we may learn that the world has not, in fact, changed at all—not in any basic way, at least. If anything, the world we live in now is even more like the worlds Dick imagined—and presented as reflections and comments on his time—than were the 1950s. Perhaps the new cliché would be better replaced by an old one: ‘the more things change, the more they remain the same.’ The people of our world, the common men and women, are certainly as abused and confused as they ever were.

To many political philosophies behind contemporary governments, this is of little matter—even when the rules they govern under espouse the virtues of democracy. One of these is the neoconservative viewpoint (heavily influenced by the writings and lectures of Leo Strauss) now so influential in the United States. One of its core tenets is that Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince* still provides the fount of both political wisdom and political philosophy for the modern world. Like Machiavelli, the neocons concentrate on the needs and duties of the rulers, seeing the political world almost exclusively from that perspective and not, as Dick does, from the points of view of the masses. Important neocons currently or recently in American government include Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense; Richard Perle, Consultant to the Secretary of Defense; Kenneth Adelman, former US Ambassador to the United Nations; and Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. Clearly, their influence is substantial.

The neocons always look up. Peter Berkowitz quotes Strauss himself as saying to a class on the occasion of Winston Churchill's death, "We have no higher duty, and no more pressing duty, than to remind ourselves and our students, of political greatness, human greatness, of the peaks of human excellence" (14). Dick, on the other hand, constantly looked around. For most of his career he was no more than a journeyman writer of science fiction struggling (sometimes not very successfully) just to support himself and various wives and children; given his own position, it is not surprising that he saw the world from the point of view of the everyman. To him, the elites were both alien and dangerous. To him, the focus of vision and of political debate should never be on the rulers, but on the little person, the shopkeeper, the mechanic. This, he would say, is our real 'higher duty.' For, as he has one of his characters say in "The Hood Maker" (1955), "*Nobody* should lead mankind. It should lead itself" (*Second Variety*, 245). True greatness and excellence, in his view, lies in the actions of the unheralded, not of the famous. And this remains as true today as it did in the 1950s, Dick's peak years of short-story writing.

Nobody should set out to do things *for* the masses; the masses, after all, are more than capable of doing for themselves. In "Autofac" (1955), machines have been established to take care of all the needs of humans. The people want to take care of their wants on their own; yet, when they try to stop the autofacs from supplying everything for them, they are stymied. "We're licked," Perine gasped in wretched agreement, "like always. We humans lose every time" (*The Days of Perky Pat*, 3). Humanity loses not only to the machines it has created to take care of it, but to any people it has set up to rule—or who set themselves up to rule it.

In "Null-O" (1958), a group of brilliant but deviant paranooids is assuming control of Earth:

"Incredible. I can scarcely believe it, myself. You're utterly logical. You've completely cast off all thalamic emotion. Your mind is totally free of moral and cultural

bias. You're a perfect paranoid, without any empathic ability whatever. You're utterly incapable of feeling sorrow or pity or compassion, or *any* of the normal human emotions."

Lemuel nodded. "True."

Dr. North leaned back, dazed. "It's hard even for me to grasp this. It's overwhelming. You possess super-logic, completely free of value-orientation bias. And you conceive of the entire world as organized against you."

"Yes."

"Of course. You've analyzed the structure of human activity and seen that as soon as they find out, they'll pounce on you and try to destroy you." (*The Father Thing*, 137)

This, to Dick, is the view of the masses by any elite. No elite can ever completely trust the people it governs. This natural paranoia is why the people are always in danger when guided by any group distinct from them.

Humanity also loses when it is forced to fight to 'protect' what it has. In "Some Kind of Life" (1953), more and more of the population is called to military service to fight wars over resources:

"Men first. Then children. Now women. It seems to take in everybody, just about."

"Kind of does, I guess. Well, there must be a reason. We have to hold these fronts. The stuff must be kept coming. We've got to have it." [...]

"But who will be left?" Joan asked again. "Can't you tell me? Will anyone be left?" (*Second Variety*, 115)

Of course, no one is, finally. Aliens visit Earth some time later and find all the things needed for a perfect life—but no one left to live it. The people have been sacrificed to 'the greater good' of their society.

This theme is returned to from another angle in "Souvenir" (1954):

“You’ll destroy us to avoid war?”

“We’d destroy anything to avoid war. We can’t permit our society to degenerate into bickering provinces, forever quarreling and fighting—like your clans. We’re stable because we lack the very concept of variation. Uniformity must be preserved and separation must be discouraged. The idea itself must remain unknown.”  
(*Second Variety*, 362).

The needs of the whole—its very survival, according to the ruling elite—precludes variation within it. To Dick, there are few attitudes more dangerous than this.

Yet, for all his concern for the people, Dick understood the motivations of the neocons of his day (long before the movement had a name, it existed among the elites of the United States and elsewhere) and of Machiavelli’s prince—and even empathized with the problems rulers face (witness Gino Molinari in *Now Wait for Last Year* and Felix Buckman in *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*)—but he felt that neo-Machiavellian attitudes and foci, no matter how well-meant, are ultimately nothing more than recipes for failure. For, though it may be easy to identify tyrannies elsewhere, Dick might have argued, it is almost impossible to recognize the (just as deadly) tyrannies one creates oneself.

So it is not surprising that, even twenty years after his death, Dick remains an important influence within science fiction—and on the world beyond (especially the film world). Like all good science fiction, his work throws light on the contemporary society, exposing the frailties and misconceptions of our rulers through both irony and analogy to fictional “future” situations. In the political climate of our time, however, where (in the common Western perception) irrational, hate-filled enemies destroy our planes and buildings and blow up our trains, Dick can play an even more important role: he can show us where the real enemy hides.

Though Dick’s novels often deal with these same themes and problems, his short fiction can also be used—sometimes with even greater clarity—to illuminate the political crises

now buffeting all of us. Sometimes his stories seem eerily prescient. Take, for example, this description of a primary opinion-molder from “The Mold of Yancy” (1955), one that could be of George W. Bush: “A middle-aged man in his late fifties, his face sunburned, neck slightly red, a good-natured smile on his face, squinting because he was looking into the sun” (*The Days of Perky Pat*, 53). In fact, “The Mold of Yancy” can now be seen as a chilling preview of what is becoming modern political reality and of the dangers of the misuse of what Strauss calls “noble lying” (35). On the moon of Callisto, society is lulled into passive acceptance by a man who tells the populace what it wants to hear, providing a constant patter of small truths along side of much more insidious grand lies and smokescreens:

“But,” Yancy continued staunchly, “I feel a planet must be strong. We must not surrender ourselves meekly... weakness invites attack and fosters aggression. By being weak we promote war. We must gird ourselves and protect those we love. With all my heart and soul I’m against useless wars; but I say again, as I’ve said many times before, a man must come forward and fight a *just* war. He must not shrink from his responsibility. War is a terrible thing. But sometimes we must...”

As he restored the tape, Taverner wondered just what the hell Yancy *had* said. What were his views on war? (61-62)

Of course, politicians have always engaged in such obfuscation and logical-sounding nonsense, but with Yancy something more is happening: Yancy has been created specifically to promote simplistic attitudes that can allow the ‘trading syndicates’ to get their profitable way without popular opposition, even to the point of accepting war:

“They’d actually start a war. It would be worth a war, to them.”

“You’re damn right it would. And to start a war, they have to get the public lined up. Actually, the people here have nothing to gain. A war would wipe out all the small operators—it would concentrate power in few hands—and they’re few enough already. To get the eighty million people here behind the war, they need an indifferent, sheep-like public....” (64)

Unlike a standard politician, however, Yancy has no purpose at all beyond propaganda. In fact, Yancy does not even exist as a real human being; he is completely and only a media construct. Even so, Yancy is but the logical extension of what many politicians have become, merely appeasers of the populations, and front men for monied interests. Some would argue that George W. Bush, in fact, is not so far removed from Yancy (and Bush is not the only one: Yancy’s given names are ‘John Edward,’ evocative of John Edwards, another contemporary feel-good American politician).

Another story showing the ‘noble lie’ is “The Defenders” (1953), though here Dick—surprisingly—seems to agree with Strauss about its efficacy. The story takes place on an Earth where the entire human population has been moved underground as a result of surface destruction through a cataclysmic war. The population is kept on a war footing, making arms and robots (‘leadies’) intended to continue the fight on the surface. But it is all a hoax:

“Eight years. We were tricked. There was no war. As soon as we left the surface—”

“Yes,” an A-class leady admitted. “As soon as you left, the war ceased. You’re right, it was a hoax. You worked hard undersurface, sending up guns and weapons, and we destroyed them as fast as they came up.”

“You created us,” the leady said, “to pursue the war for you, while you human beings went below the ground in order to survive. But before we could continue the war, it was necessary to analyze it to determine what its purpose was. We did this, and we found that it had

no purpose, except, perhaps, in terms of human needs. Even this was questionable.[...]" (*Beyond Lies the Wub*, 80)

Here, the leadies have saved mankind—again, an unusual outcome in one of Dick’s stories. The ‘noble lie’ has served its purpose. But this is an extremely early story and Dick had not yet clarified his own world view—and the story does end on an anti-Straussian note: “I see what the leadies mean about diplomacy becoming outmoded,’ Franks said at last. ‘People who work together don’t need diplomats. They solve their problems on the operational level instead of at a conference table” (*Beyond Lies the Wub*, 85). It is not the elites who are important, but the people.

One of the scariest passages in “The Mold of Yancy,” from a contemporary perspective, concerns an aspect of political reality, expressed by a ‘Police Director’ on Earth, that seems to have been lost on modern political discourse, where a fear of terrorism (in the United States, at least) is leading people to willingly sacrifice control for a “safety” with a totalitarian touch:

“Don’t confuse a totalitarian society with a dictatorship,” Kellman said dryly. “A totalitarian state reaches into every sphere of its citizens’ lives, forms their opinions on every subject. The government can be a dictatorship *or* a parliament, *or* an elected president, *or* a council of priests. That doesn’t matter.” (*The Days of Perky Pat*, 55)

The American ‘U.S.A. Patriot Act,’ passed in the feverish days directly after 9/11, allows unprecedented governmental intrusion in the lives of United States citizens—and has been accepted without murmur by the majority of Americans. The beauty of what Yancy is employed for, and what George Bush and what other great propagandists aim towards, is just this, that their successful enterprise eliminates some of the more troubling aspects of the totalitarian state:

Torture chambers and extermination camps were needed only when persuasion failed. And persuasion was working perfectly. A police state, rule by terror, came about when the totalitarian apparatus began to break down. The earlier totalitarian societies had been incomplete; the authorities hadn't really gotten into every sphere of life. But techniques of communication had improved. (*The Days of Perky Pat*, 62)

Exactly as is happening in many contemporary societies, including the United States.

As in "The Defenders," Dick presents a society that had been run by robots (who represent the elites of twentieth-century society) in "The Last of the Masters" (1954). Here, though, he writes more in keeping with his later beliefs. As he wrote in 1978 (a comment which explains the gulf between this story and "The Defenders"), an "ambiguity hangs over the morality of this story. Should we have a leader or should we think for ourselves? Obviously the latter, in principle. But—sometimes there lies a gulf between what is theoretically right and that which is practical" (*The Father Thing*, 374-375). Though he recognizes the dangers of relying on an elite or a government, Dick was more than aware of the problems at the other extreme.

In "The Last of the Masters," a popular anarchist revolt demolished a government run by robots:

"They were without a government a whole month. The people saw they could live without a government!"

"The marches started it," the black-haired girl corrected. "That was the first time they started pulling down the government buildings. In East Germany and Poland. Big mobs of unorganized workers."

"Russia and America were the last," Tolby said. "When the march on Washington came there was close to twenty million of us. We were big in those days! They couldn't stop us when we finally moved." (*The Father Thing*, 82)

Afterwards, to insure that no government could be re-established, members of an Anarchist League (aware of the contradictory nature of their organization) roamed the world.

One of the ruling robots, however, managed to survive, and started a new, organized movement hidden away in a mountain valley. At one point, the robot converses with one of his maintainers about why no one in the valley would want to disable the robot, though they could:

“But what would you gain? You know I’m the only one who can keep all this together. I’m the only one who knows how to maintain a planned society, not a disorderly chaos! If it weren’t for me, all this would collapse, and you’d have dust and ruins and weeds. The whole outside would come rushing in to take over!”  
(*The Father Thing*, 85)

The world outside is depicted as poor and dirty, quite different from the opulent organization of the valley. The problem with this becomes apparent just a few pages later:

“We have weapons!” Green shouted excitedly. “In an hour there’ll be ten thousand men ready to fight. We have jet-driven ships. Heavy artillery. Bombs. Bacteria pellets. What’s the League? A lot of people with packs on their backs![...]”

“How can they do anything? How can a bunch of anarchists organize? They have no structure, no control, no central power.”

“They have the whole world. A billion people.”

“*Individuals!* A club, not subject to law. Voluntary membership. We have disciplined organization. Every aspect of our economic life operates at maximum efficiency. We—you—have your thumb on everything. All you have to do is give the order. Set the machine in motion.” (*The Father Thing*, 89)

And so it is. But: “There was only one hitch. No army opposed them. A mistake had been made. It took two sides to

make a war, and only one had been resurrected” (*The Father Thing*, 95).

Though the anarchists triumph, Dick does not vindicate them, keeping it clear that the robot had certainly accomplished something in that valley, though it had eventually gone too far.

In a recent neo-Straussian text, *The Modern Prince: What Leaders Need to Know Now*, Carnes Lord writes that, even in the face of the external threats from rogue states and terrorist groups, “the real problem facing the modern prince is not the barbarians at the gate; it is the barbarians within” (227). Dick would certainly have disagreed, but not in any way one would necessarily expect. For, to him, it is rarely *either* the barbarians without *or* within who are the problem—but is more likely the very people who want to protect us from them: the modern princes. The American neoconservative paranoia evinced by Lord is diametrically opposite to Dick’s more Orwellian fears—and though the neocons have come to political importance long after the science-fiction writer’s death—Dick’s fiction still sheds light on them, and can help us understand why so much of what they are now attempting is both frightening and doomed to failure. Very quickly, concern for barbarians without and within turns to concern for maintenance of power (if it were not, in the first place). In every case, concern for preservation of the regime leads to the seeds of its own destruction, for such concern ignores the strength of the people through its focus on the importance of the elite.

Where Lord makes a distinction between the external and internal threat, Dick recognized this as merely an artificial distinction, one most often created for the purposes of the rulers. Often, neither one is really a threat, but is merely made to be perceived as one. In “Martians Come in Clouds” (1954), Dick illustrates the basic misunderstanding in almost any culture of the alien outsiders. Here, it is Martians who are brutally attacked and destroyed each time they appear on Earth. All they want, it turns out, is permission to live on the seas, where there are no humans. One of them finally man-

ages to communicate with a young boy: “It wanted him to say, to answer, to give his permission. It was waiting to hear, waiting and hoping—imploring[...]” (*Second Variety*, 124). But the boy, inundated with anti-Martian attitudes, cannot comprehend the veracity of the request, and so this Martian, too, is killed. The internal threat, to Dick, is no more real than this.

In “The Little Black Box” (1964), a woman named Joan Hiashi is placed under arrest:

“By the United States Government,” Mr. Lee said. “I have read your mind and I learn that you know that Ray Meritan is a prominent Mercerite and you yourself are attracted to Mercerism.”

“But I’m not!”

“Unconsciously you are attracted. You are about to switch over. I can pick up your thoughts, even if you deny them yourself.[...]” (*The Little Black Box*, 11)

Meritan is Hiashi’s boyfriend and has just publicly announced his adherence to Mercerism, a movement that has yet to show any overt hostility to the government. Yet Hiashi is to be charged with “Political agitation inimical to the safety of the United States” (*The Little Black Box*, 13). The movement, not understood by the government, is seen as a threat—as a barbarian within.

In one of his saddest stories, “The Hanging Stranger” (1953), Dick uses a image of the threat from within gone wildly wrong to depict a threat from without. A man sees another hanging dead from a lamppost—a lynching—yet no one else seems bothered.

“See it?” Ed pointed into the gathering gloom. The lamppost jutted up against the sky—the post and the bundle swinging from it. “There it is. How the hell long has it been there?” His voice rose excitedly. “What’s wrong with everybody? They just walk on past!”

Don Fergusson lit a cigarette slowly. “Take it easy, old man. There must be a good reason, or it wouldn’t be there.”

“A reason! What kind of a reason?” (*The Father Thing*, 14)

Why? Because all of the other people, including Fergusson, have been taken over by aliens and the hanging bodies will only be commented upon by the few humans who have been missed. Their reactions to the lynchings make them easily identifiable—then easily strung up themselves. Dick’s message here is that it can be something other than the barbarians without or within, but the barbarians in the majority who threaten.

No, the threat is not really from the barbarians, not in Dick’s view of thing. It comes from the people who arrest Hiashi, from those who take on the task of protecting people from the barbarians, who always have a hidden agenda for maintenance of their own power. In “The Hood Maker” Dick tries to explain how this happens through creation of a world where ‘teeps’ (telepaths) keep order by reading the minds of the population:

Before the teeps, loyalty probes had been haphazard. Oaths, examinations, wire-tappings, were not enough. The theory that each person had to prove his loyalty was fine—as a theory. In practice few people could do it. It looked as if the concept of guilty until proved innocent might have to be abandoned and the Roman law restored. (*Second Variety*, 238-239)

The ostensible purpose of the teep probes seemed laudable; more draconian methods did not have to be employed, after all, and those with nothing to hide had nothing to worry about. The teeps, however, want to be more than tools; they want to rule:

“The teeps are no different from the Jacobins, the Roundheads, the Nazis, the Bolsheviks. There’s always

some group that wants to lead mankind—for its own good, of course.”

“Do the teeps believe that?”

“Most teeps believe they’re the natural leaders of mankind. Non-telepathic humans are an inferior species. Teeps are the next step up, *homo superior*. And because they’re superior, it’s natural they should lead. Make all the decisions for us.”... (24?)

When people find a way of thwarting the teeps through hoods that keep their thoughts private, they have to be destroyed, the teeps decide, for the good of *everyone*. Once more, it is the barbarian within that is seen as the threat—while it is really the elite who are dangerous.

After recognizing the truth of part of Dick’s attitude, that elites “may oppress,” Lord goes on to say that they “may also demonstrate farsighted leadership, engage in heroic self-sacrifice, and provide competent and honest administration of the public business” (55). Dick saw them differently, presenting his most horrific vision of them in “Faith of Our Fathers” (1967), concentrating his fears and his wrath on their leader, who is not even human:

It was terrible; it blasted him with its awareness. As it moved it drained the life from each person in turn; it ate the people who had assembled, passed on, ate again, ate more with an endless appetite. It hated; he felt its hate. It loathed; he felt its loathing for everyone present—in fact he shared its loathing.[...] He saw the trail of stepped-on, mashed men and women remnants behind it; he saw them trying to reassemble, to operate their crippled bodies; he heard them attempting speech. (*The Little Black Box*, 217)

This most horrifying vision is also of a population drugged (literally) into believing in the benevolence of its leaders—who not only have disdain for humanity, but who actually hate it.

In “The Hood Maker,” the point is that there is something more behind even the most hideous attitudes of the elite: that

need for the elite to perpetuate itself. Without that ability, it cannot even exist in the present, let alone in another generation. Its public-spiritedness, then, always comes from a more nefarious agenda. This can be seen in the attitude towards those wearing the hoods (who have received them, apparently at random, through the mails):

“ [...]There’s a reason why hoods are sent to these people. They’re not picked out at random.”

“Why are they picked?”

“They have something to hide. Why else would hoods be sent to them?”

“What about those who *do* notify us?”

“They’re afraid to wear them. They pass the hoods on to us—to avoid suspicion.”

Ross reflected moodily. “I suppose so.”

“An innocent man has no reason to conceal his thoughts. Ninety-nine per cent of the population is glad to have its mind scanned. Most people *want* to prove their loyalty. But this one per cent is guilty of something.” (*Second Variety*, 238).

‘If he was arrested, he must be guilty of something.’ This infantile view of the workings of government and the world has been exploited for millennia—and continues to be so.

Though he was concerned with the machinations of the elite and the repression of the populous that invariably results (unless the populous rejects the elite), Dick’s greatest fears were for what could result from the manipulations deemed necessary for staying in power. Generally, these lead to war—war that had been encouraged by the elites. In “Breakfast at Twilight” (1954), he expresses his fear that war, once started, cannot be contained:

“How did the war begin?” Mary asked faintly.

“Begin? It didn’t begin. You remember. There was war seven years ago.”

“The real war. This.”

“There wasn’t any point when it became—this. We fought in Korea. We fought in China. In Germany and Yugoslavia and Iran. It spread, farther and farther. Finally the bombs were falling here. It came like the plague. The war *grew*. It didn’t begin.” (*Second Variety*, 212)

If he were alive now, he might well wonder if Iraq weren’t a real step in the fictional progression he outlined so many years ago.

If he were alive now, Dick would likely be watching the neocons with grave concern. Though he was a deeply religious man at the end of his life, his religion was one based on a personal mysticism, not one with a political program. It all boils down to the personal vision, and to respect for the intelligence and ability of even the most insignificant person, to Dick. Anything else smacks of an incipient authoritarianism that will eventually squash the individual spirit—both in the oppressor and the oppressed. In response to the Straussian belief that “opinion is partisan, fragmented and partial; philosophy by contrast, is total, integrative and comprehensive” (Susser, 503), Dick might argue that even the apocalypse, ultimately, is personal and subjective. Furthermore, reflecting one of Dick’s favorite lines, from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore*, “Things are seldom what they seem,/ Skim milk masquerades as cream,” he would argue that it is impossible to attain the certainty Strauss imagines for philosophy—and that presumption of such of certainly leads only to totalitarianism.

Rejecting the idea that there are “only two choices: nihilism or the belief in an accessible, transhistorical, universal absolute” (Susser, 499), Dick sought another way, one that, at the end of his life, he based on the mystical concept of a personal relationship with God—for even God, to him, was not an absolute. Dick’s God is a guide (and an imperfect one, at that), not an answer, but still an effective guide that can keep the individual from falling into either trap, that of nihilism or that of absolutes.

Instead of providing the simple escapism of a certain type of science fiction and, indeed of some (but not nearly all) fantasy and horror, Dick, like Horace and Sir Philip Sydney, wanted his stories to both delight and instruct. He had a vision of the world and the way it either should or could be that developed and clarified through the 1950s and 1960s, but that was fairly unified, even from the beginning. The fact of his continued popularity and influence testifies to the power and relevance of that vision. Clearly, Philip K. Dick is no simple curiosity of the past, but a writer who shows where contemporary science fiction, if it is to retain relevance, must continue to go.