

AFTERWORD

**A Stairway to Eleusis:
PKD, Perennial Philosopher**

BY RICHARD DOYLE

CASTING PHILIP K. DICK as a prophet of the information planet is of necessity an entirely retroactive story. Yet it is a fiction that emerges, like many of Dick's novels about simulation, as profoundly true. Dick read Marshall McLuhan and Teilhard de Chardin, his fellow Prophets of the Digital Age; they likely never heard of him. Yet what smacks of downright prophecy in PKD is not limited to the content of his fiction; it extends to the feeling of reality-distortion induced by reading his work. PKD's fiction taps into shamanic powers to shape and bend consciousness and the realities that project from it. This same feeling, of being directly addressed by a bard, a storyteller, and a deeply suffering and profoundly honest human being across space and time, is one the Exegesis has for us in spades. Dick teaches us what it can feel like to be in an infoquake, like those the twenty-first century provides in such abundance. He offers us thought experiments for "plugging into a galactic information network." To paraphrase Dick's contemporary Hunter S. Thompson, the going gets very weird indeed.

When you begin reading the Exegesis, you undertake a quest with no shortcuts or cheat codes. The Exegesis is almost nine thousand pages long. "Almost nine thousand pages" makes the verb "read" tremble and giggle. The question is: to whom is PKD writing this? An easy answer would be: himself. On one level, this is a perfectly sound answer: writing the Exegesis was Dick's epic quest for self-knowledge. Writing it, he was also rewriting himself and, just possibly, finding out who he was and what had happened to him.

But on another level—the one that may visit you between one line of this volume and another—it is equally unmistakable that Dick was writing to us. Not as a collective of future readers who would guarantee his immortality. Dick's success has come mostly after his death, and if you read his treatment of immortality and life extension in novels such as *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* or *Ubik*, you will see that Dick viewed such efforts as at best absurd and at worst the essence of darkness itself. Besides, when PKD believes in Eternity—and periodically he very much does—he hardly needs any of us to achieve it, for the Exegesis suggests again and again that the path to Eternity can be found through, well, exegesis.

In his ongoing practice of writerly contemplation, Dick discovers, again and again, the unity of all things, the level that integrates all of the fragments of our chaotic drama (what Dick, pointing to India, calls "maya"), and reveals our unique role in it. So too can we, perhaps through contagion, experience the same: the preposterous feeling that one gets when reading the Exegesis is that he is writing to each of us, uniquely and specifically. You were born to read the Exegesis, or at least some of it. This, he says, is the Mystery: "What I have experienced is initiation into the greater Eleusian mysteries, and these have to do with Dionysus . . . The AI voice now precisely defined itself and what it has revealed to me: the greater mysteries" (folder 53).

What are the Eleusian Mysteries? These took place in an annual ceremony in ancient Greece that dramatized the return of life each spring through the myths of Demeter and Persephone. Participants were sworn to secrecy, with violations punishable by death, but the Roman writer and politician Cicero wrote that the greatest achievement of ancient Athens was those "Mysteries by which we are formed and moulded from a rude and savage state of humanity; and, indeed, in the Mysteries we perceive the real principles of life, and learn not only to live happily, but to die with a fairer hope" (Dudley Wright, *The Eleusinian Mysteries and Rites*, 1919).

Why might initiates "die with a fairer hope"? The highest achievement of the Mysteries was for a participant to experience *épopteia*, or "contemplation." Contemplation derives etymologically from "the act of looking at," and what might be perceived is the true nature of the self in the context of Eternity. Dionysus, of course, is the god of drunkenness and vegetation and is frequently invoked by writers seeking to break the grip of our ordinary perception of fragmentation and chaos such that we might perceive "the real principles of life." In the Exegesis we become intoxicated by a massive flow of language. In fact, while the sheer quantity of text produced for the Exegesis makes it comparable only to Ibn Arabi's fifteen-thousand-page modern edition of *al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya* (*Meccan Openings*), Dick's arguments, diagrams, summaries, breakthroughs, and premature conclusions all put him, along with Arabi (a Muslim whose visions included Jesus and Moses) and the Mysteries, squarely within what Aldous Huxley called "the Perennial Philosophy": the "contemplative" traditions at the core of all world religions. Samuel Taylor Coleridge — whose "Kubla Khan" was, like VALIS, influenced by the mystic traditions of both West and East — describes this as "the criterion of a true philosophy; namely, that it would at once explain and collect the fragments of truth scattered through systems apparently the most incongruous." If the computer age "smithereens" us

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kling" of unity.

In other words, while the Exegesis is certainly a quantitative curiosity in the archives of our planet's extant philosophy and literature, the content and character of his quest are oddly traditional, and astonishingly effective. Dick's writing during this period is an act of courageous and absurd synthesis of the diverse and sundry traditions that make up Huxley's Perennial Philosophy as well as anthropologist Michael Harner's notion of "Core Shamanism": the global techniques of diverse religions and cultures that focus on dissolving the ordinary self such that we might get a glimpse of reality. Dick, writing through the psychedelic sixties and seventies and into the early eighties, seems to have discovered a way to alter our consciousness entirely through language, remixing the old esoteric traditions of alchemy, shamanism, contemplation, and prayer in his wacky cauldron of science fiction and metaphysics.

Both Huxley and Harner treat these core lineages of the Perennial Philosophy as traditions of practice. Initiates at Eleusius had to fast and prepare extensively for their ceremonies; one trains for the insights of these traditions with the intensity and intention of an aging boxer preparing for the fight of his life after a long layoff. The Exegesis offers a reader the sensation of being a unique and individual participant in what Dick, referring to the Roman writer Plotinus's formulation, called "the One." To experience "the One," one must do more than understand these maps of reality; one must in fact intentionally experiment with them oneself and seek to enact what Lethem and Jackson call "mind regarding itself." To achieve this "turnabout in the seat of consciousness" (Lama Govinda) Dick offers a cognitive and spiritual "workout" of epic proportions. Through the practice of writing thousands of pages, PKD was able to periodically dissolve himself into language — what he calls the Logos, the Greek term for both "speech" and "reason." The process reveals an "ecstatic" quality, akin to the union with the divine of Sufi dervishes who dance until they can't remember the difference between themselves and the dance. Core Shamanism, Harner writes, features practices designed to induce this experience of "union with the cosmos" wherein the cosmos itself seems to speak. Harner notes that

in about 90% of the world, the altered states of consciousness used in shamanism are attained through consciousness-changing tech-

niques involving a monotonous percussion sound, most typically done with a drum, but also with sticks, rattles, and other instruments. In perhaps 10% of the cultures, shamans use psychedelic drugs to change their state of consciousness.

Harner himself first learned of the possibility of these experiences in his fieldwork with shamanic intoxicants such as ayahuasca, undertaken in order to understand the worldview of his informants. This may suggest to us how PKD achieved his effects: in addition to "sticks, rattles and other instruments," one can work with the effects of words themselves, whether as a fragment of poetry or as a line of computer code, to shape consciousness and alter our view and experience of reality. In this sense it might be productive to treat the Exegesis as something that needs to be reenacted—simulated—in order to be properly understood. Or treat it as a nearly nine-thousand-page icaro, one of the shamanic songs of the Upper Amazon. Singing it at about three minutes per page would take over four hundred hours, about ten weeks of a full-time job of the sort that a Philip K. Dick character might be trapped within, working at home from his Martian hovel, reading it aloud while the surveillance tapes whirred.

And while the Exegesis is hardly "monotonous" in the sense intended by Harner, it is astonishingly persistent: each page offers some new variation on the theme of "aha." The theme is: total knowledge is only possible through the paradoxical acceptance of total mystery, an erasure of everything we think we know. Pointing to a mystery integrates PKD thoroughly into this lineage, with the Exegesis his "Stairway to Eleusis" remix of the Perennial Philosophy.

Following along with him, step by step, insight by insight, just might train us in contemplating our own inner voice as we learn to somehow share a planet on the brink. Twentieth-century British author Evelyn Underhill writes of the long lineage of this "voice" perceived in silence, which recurs through the history of the Perennial Philosophy—through William Blake's experience of the divine as an "intellectual fountain," through French contemplative Lucie-Christine's perception of a synesthetic voice that was at once a "Light, a Drawing, and a Power," through Julian of Norwich who heard and saw the godhead in the "smallest song of the birds." And with the voice comes ecstasy: the literal etymology of "ecstasy" is to become "beside oneself." PKD indeed writes in ecstasy—he is "beside himself" as in the Exegesis he externalizes his experiences into writing and contemplates them, in writing, a mind-regarding-itself. Is this his initiation into the Mysteries? Is it ours?

1. The tachyon is a hypothetical
2. Nikolai Kozyrev; see Gloss
3. Peter Fitting, a leftist literary Deconstruction of Bourgeois (1975).
4. Arthur Koestler (1905–1984). The quotation is from *Dn* 10:21, 12:1.
5. Francis Russell, *The Shadow* (1968).
6. A nineteenth-century Irish past-life regression in 1952;
7. (German) Yes, yes, there is
8. *The Robe* by Lloyd C. Douglas
9. The Exegesis is filled with
10. ment of the images selected (page number) in the origin
11. William Durant, *Caesar and*
12. Appolonius of Tyana was in Asia Minor around the time
13. Philip Purser, "Even Sheep" *graph*, July 19, 1974.
14. P. D. Ouspensky (1878–1948) studies of George Gurdjieff
15. *Jn* 3:3–8, a passage that records
16. "For it was fitting that we be filed, separated from sinners (standard Version).
17. "For it is attested of him Melchizedek" (New Revised
18. Acts 3:21.
19. Ellison is quoting the song
20. French filmmaker Jean-Pierre screenplay in 1974.
21. *Jn* 16:33.
22. 1 Cor 15:51.
23. 1 Cor 15:52.
24. Johannes Scotus Eriugena's platonistic thought and the neoplatonic