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# God and Human Beings in the Technologically-Mediated Living Condition: Philip K. Dick's Literary Theology in the *VALIS* Trilogy

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores Philip K. Dick's literary theology by studying his *VALIS* trilogy where men's technologically-mediated living condition is shown as a simulacrum of God's divine matrix, powerful but lacking in God's transcendental holiness. The first section, on God as Zebra, discusses God portrayed in Dick's work as a vast active living intelligence system (*VALIS*) containing its simulacrum, men's information network; hence His alias, Zebra, something made up of a blend of two apparently similar but essentially different systems. The mundane simulation of God inevitably obscures God's holiness and conceals his presence. However, as the second section on God's nature will show, despite their apparent similarity, the divine system and its counterpart can still be distinguished by two elements, namely love and God's/*VALIS*'s perpetual state of being living, both of which are significantly missing in men's technological system. The last section extends the thematic inquiry into God's nature by studying Dick's concealment of his Gnostic slant in the trilogy vis-à-vis God's absence from men. Considering the hermeneutic ambiguity in question, which may endlessly put readers' acts of interpretation on a par with divinity, this article reads Dick's trilogy more as a literary theology than simply as a Gnostic gospel.

**KEYWORDS** Philip K. Dick, The *VALIS* Trilogy, Gnosticism, technology, God as Zebra, literary theology

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## Introduction

As advances in technology make human control over the material world a reality where happiness, immortality, and even godlike powers—things that have been desperately desired and restlessly pursued throughout human history—finally become accessible to human beings, human civilization has come to a critical stage where, according to Yuval Noah Harari, we are witnessing the evolution of human beings into deities.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, by calling the new form of being “Homo Deus,” as thoroughly explored in his eponymous book, Harari conflates the power created by the function of technology with God’s nature. But as Martin Heidegger warns in “The Question Concerning Technology,” we should never confuse the effectiveness of technology with either God or truth because while God or truth embodies the full freedom mortal humans can never reach, the effectiveness of technology only simulates the freedom *partially* and prevents people from accessing its real essence, which Heidegger believes resides “in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *alētheia*, truth, happens” (295). That is to say, while the essence of technology may allow one to maintain a “free relationship” (287) with the world, or even with the use of technology itself as a means to reach godlike freedom, the effectiveness of technology in application can only manifest its essence *partially* in the most superficial form. Distinguishing the use of technology from its essence, Heidegger stresses in the beginning of his inquiry into the questions concerning technology: “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological” (287).

Moreover, since the apparent effectiveness of technology may not only reveal but also obscure or even conceal the essence of technology, Heidegger also warns us of the danger of *Ge-stell* (enframing) brought by the “ambiguity” or the double entente of the essence of technology. As he expounds in the same article, a slight misunderstanding of the power of technology can mislead one to the other side of its end, reducing (or challenging-forth) nature and human beings to mere instruments, or the *Bestand* (standing-reserve) of the world.<sup>2</sup> To fully

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<sup>1</sup> See Harari.

<sup>2</sup> In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger points out that “the essence of technology is in a lofty sense ambiguous” and that “such ambiguity points to the mystery of all revealing, i.e., of truth” (314). That is because the use of technology, particularly in its effective application, manifests its essence by creating a sense of godlike freedom, on the one hand, but, on the other, also eclipses or at least obscures its essence by reducing itself to a mere instrument, existing only for another end, not for itself—hence the limited freedom. As for the term *Bestand*, or “standing-reserve,” according to Heidegger, “it designates nothing less than the way in which everything presences that is wrought upon by the revealing that challenges. Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object” (298).

open human existence to the essence of technology, he urges us to understand God more properly and save Him from being explored merely “in the light of causality,” which makes God “sink to the level of a cause, of *causa efficiens*” and “lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance” (307-08). To achieve this, Heidegger not only criticizes modern technology for its instrumental orientation to the world, but also calls on the readers to seek “the saving power” (310, 316) from the realm of art.<sup>3</sup> As he explicitly points out in the article, since “the essence of technology is nothing technological,” one can approach it only through “a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it” (317). And apparently, for him, “such a realm is art” (317): the realm of “the poetical” that “brings the true into the splendor of what Plato in the *Phaedrus* calls to *ekphane-staton*, that which shines forth most purely” (316).

Like Heidegger, Philip K. Dick is also aware of the double entente or the “ambiguity” of technology and its relation to the mystery of truth or God. As a sci-fi writer, Dick approaches this issue through his *VALIS* trilogy, which may in a sense seem more Heideggerian, considering the writer’s conscious or unconscious response to Heidegger’s call to seek the saving power in the *poiēsis* (making) of art.<sup>4</sup> To see how Dick undertakes the theological inquiry in the form of sci-fi literature, or in the making of art, this article will study his trilogy with focus placed on God’s concealment and unconcealment in the bewildering world depicted in the novels. To outline the project more specifically, in the first section, “The Trope of God, or the Zebra,” this article will deal with what the *godlike* and yet bewildering living condition is like: what makes the bewilderment of the simulated world, and how this bewildering semblance of simulated reality makes God indistinctive in the present world, even to the extent of becoming invisible or fading into oblivion for human beings. In the second section, “The Theme of Love and Being Living,” it is God’s true nature as well as his way of manifestation in the trilogy that will be induced and contrasted with its simulacra, or the information system of the modern world that may both reveal *and* conceal its divine origin. Moreover, it is found that the inquiry into God’s special presence in

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<sup>3</sup> In his exploration of the ambiguity of technology, particularly in terms of the mystery of its nature of revealing, Heidegger borrows two lines from Friedrich Hölderlin’s poem “Patmos,” a poem starting by describing God’s power as well as His mystery: “But where danger is, grows / The saving power also.”

<sup>4</sup> The *VALIS* trilogy, including *VALIS* (1981), *The Divine Invasion* (1981), and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1982), is Dick’s last and most important literary creation, which according to him in his last interview with John Boonstra, “constellat[es] around a basic theme” concerning his lifelong “preoccupations” (Boonstra). “VALIS” is the acronym for vast active living intelligence system. It is also the form of God described in the first two novels of the trilogy; hence the series title.

the trilogy may also shed a new light on the textual mystery encoded by Dick with his ambivalent voices in the novels. Though Dick has explicitly admitted *outside* the trilogy his holding of “Gnostic ideas,”<sup>5</sup> he has never acknowledged such a commitment *inside* the trilogy except when mentioning Gnosticism as an intractable mystic sect oppressed by such institutions as the Roman Empire, or opposed to the fictional religious Christian-Islamic Church, one of God’s adversaries on Earth, in *The Divine Invasion*. In fact, from Angel Archer’s criticism on Timothy Archer’s obsession with “The Other Side” in *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (12),<sup>6</sup> a Gnostic term for a better world, we may even infer Dick’s doubt about Gnosticism at least *inside* the novel. In light of God’s meaningful concealment in the technological world, Dick’s elusiveness with regard to his religious attitude *inside* this trilogy, thus, may well be taken as an artistic device as meaningful as God’s concealment. To extend our thematic research on God’s concealment in the trilogy to its formal parallel, namely Dick’s creation of the trilogy as a work of art, the last section of the article, “Gnosticism? Or Literary Theology?”, will engage with the author’s true concern camouflaged in the textual labyrinth. From the thematic analysis of God’s special presence in the trilogy to the formalist investigation into Dick’s scheme, this article aims to demonstrate the ingenious synthesis of theology with aesthetics in Dick’s sci-fi work.

In fact, in connecting Dick’s self-effacement in the trilogy with God’s special presence in the world, this study engages with Dick’s trilogy in light of theology, treating literature as a textual divine construction made up of signs encoding the author’s/God’s message, where the act of decoding may allow readers to experience divinity. To justify the juxtaposition of literature and theology in treating both as sign-decoding systems, this article will also discuss the phenomenological aspect of Gnosticism and its relation to hermeneutics, thus grounding our argument about Dick’s divine construction in the seemingly dualistic but essentially dialectical nature of Gnosticism.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, this article will ex-

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<sup>5</sup> In “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later,” Dick admits to “holding Gnostic ideas,” 264.

<sup>6</sup> *The Other Side* is also the title of a book written by Bishop James Pike, the prototype of Timothy Archer. Published in 1968, this book recounts the bishop’s experiences with paranormal phenomena following his son’s suicide by gunshot in New York city in 1966. New York: Doubleday, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> In *What Is Gnosticism?* Karen L. King addresses Gnosticism’s phenomenological aspect when she introduces Hans Jonas’s contribution to the study of Gnosticism in the same approach: “Gnostics were variously characterized as alienated rebels, nihilistically opposed to the world-affirming values of their day, as immoral and impious perverters of divine Scripture, or as individualistic elitists who thought they were spiritually superior to everyone else and hence need not obey the priests and bishops” (8). King also points out that it is Jonas who asserts that Gnosticism “arose from the existential experience of human

amine Dick's self-effacement in the trilogy within an aesthetic *and* theological framework where his ambivalent attitude toward Gnosticism can be justified. Just like the "syncretism" (or "the intermingling of given ideas and images") Dick may find in Gnosticism, which according to Hans Jonas not only bespeaks the sect's goal to reach the supreme spiritual amplitude and its staunch resistance to being institutionalized by any specific authority, but also accounts for its ability to "transcend ethnic and denominational boundaries,"<sup>8</sup> the special literary and theological framework this study attempts to formulate should also be noted for its broadest semantic capacity and the ensuing possibilities of blissful reading experiences. In fact, with the least definite meaning fixed to the text, through which the freest reading of the text and the freest relationship with the revealing, with truth, or with God can be allowed, the special framework in question may well be taken as Dick's vast active living intelligence system where diverse possibilities of realities can be endlessly generated. In this sense, Dick's science fiction can be studied as more than a literary genre. Indeed, it can be treated as God's matrix of intelligence system. This article explores this problematic under a new scope dubbed "literary theology" constructed through the interplay of readers' diverse interpretations and the divine experiences they may gain from the process of literary imagination.

### **The Trope of God, or the Zebra**

In his famous speech "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later," Philip K. Dick spells out his ultimate concern in writing: "the two basic topics that fascinate me are 'What is reality?' and 'What constitutes the authentic human being?'" (260). In philosophical terms, Dick's lifelong quest in writing encompasses almost all the metaphysical issues a speculative writer will confront. But where most metaphysical thinkers may find their philosophical pursuits on a solid theoretical ground, Dick undertakes the same work the other way round. To inquire into what reality is, for example, Dick sets many of his novels in the context of perplexing multiple realities where, in Charles Platt's words, "everything is a matter of perception": "The ground is liable to shift under your feet. A protagonist may find himself living out another person's dream, or he may enter a drug-induced state that actually makes better sense than the

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alienation" (11), suggesting that the Gnostics tend to demythologize the present world they don't conform to by abstracting "the essence of a phenomenon" "from its 'husk,' that is, from the particular expressive form in which it appears" (13).

<sup>8</sup> See Jonas 25-26, 33-34.

real world, or he may cross into a different universe completely” (146). To probe into the foundation of authentic human being, he also deliberately juxtaposes real human beings with their simulacra, the artificial androids, which appear almost indistinguishable from their models, in order to have a chance to redraw the demarcation line between them while challenging our previous knowledge about humanity. Pushing reality and human nature to their limits so that their ultimate boundaries can be doubly attested by what they at once are and are not, Dick’s works have, since the 1960s, pioneered the literary mode that would come to be the prototype of cyberpunk, a subgenre of science fiction which is, in Thomas Michaud’s words, usually characterized by “the violence of reality” (69), or, in N. Katherine Hayles’s words, mostly composed of “flickering signifiers,” signaling “an important shift in the plate tectonics of language” (30). Nevertheless, finding the dystopian milieu of the cyberpunk genre alone inadequate for his metaphysical exploration in the 70s, particularly after undergoing a series of mystical experiences starting from 1974, Dick came up with a new trope in the last few years of his career, when his *VALIS* trilogy was created. The trope suggests answers to all the questions concerning the essence of reality and the foundation of authentic human being from a broader systematic view beyond human comprehension. That is, God.

In both *VALIS* and *The Divine Invasion*, God appears in the form of a VALIS, an organic matrix which can not only determine what reality is but also keep itself perpetually living by connecting men across the borders of time and space, generating new impossible realities—impossible as manifest in “the two-world superimposition” (*VALIS* 47) that Horselover Fat experiences after God “fired a beam of pink light directly at him” and “injured” him (14), for those realities are all structurally generated beyond men’s comprehension. And yet, dominant as God is, his presence as a matrix cannot be perceived by men until He manifests himself by breaking into men’s realities in some tangible form; hence men’s oblivion of God’s presence, or even worse, mistaking the mundane information system for God’s matrix, albeit paradoxically, even when such a simulated information system has already been reckoned by God and incorporated into his matrix. God’s matrix is, accordingly, intricately composed of God’s intelligence system *and* his simulacra; hence his alias, Zebra, which is a blend of two apparently similar but essentially different systems. In this sense, God’s matrix is also a form of mimicry, but of a higher order, because his mimicry is not just a simple mimicry, but a mimicry of how he is mimicked. By remaining camouflaged and escaping man’s perception in the image of Zebra made up of double semblances, God in Dick’s trilogy thus may also remind us of Heidegger’s mysterious God.

Unsurprisingly, as God disguises himself in the image of Zebra, his obscurity to men inevitably afflicts men, leading men to spiritual predicaments. Despite the fact that, in Fat's words, "all creation is a language and nothing but a language" (18) containing "God's Message" (19), awaiting men to decode the signs to enter into God's intelligence system, men without a clear mind or unable to experience the miracle of being invaded by God still have no proper access to God. As a result, they either fall into misbelief, having failed to distinguish God from his simulacra and thus mistaken the technological information system for God's VALIS, or sink into the abyss of spiritual crisis dejectedly. Unable to recognize the transcendental role properly, characters in Dick's trilogy are thus described as either helplessly afflicted with the pains of existence, or taking themselves to be the supreme agents of the universe, blindly obsessed with making the best use of everything and turning everything into an instrument, to the extent that everything in the world exists only as a means for other purposes, however abstract, vague, and empty they are. For example, in *VALIS*, Fat has been afflicted with traumas and even schizophrenia brought on by the successive deaths of his friends before he meets and gets cured by Sophia "the Savior," or "VALIS incarnated as a human being" (208). Unable to see faith in God as belonging to the spiritual category, a realm beyond human reasoning, the skeptic Kevin, having lost his cat because it "saw the car and ran into it, not the other way around," cannot be consoled by any account of his cat's death until he is enlightened by Sophia the Savior, who attributes the cat's death to nothing but a simple causality or *karma*, which according to Erik Davis is a concept Dick has borrowed from Hinduism—that is, it is exactly its bumping into the car that causes its death—suggesting her wisdom in solving a problem from the sufferer's perspective (234).<sup>9</sup> As to the improper uses of power and technology due to the blindness to divine agency, in *VALIS*, it is generally through the eponymous sci-fi movie written by and starring Mother Goose or Eric Lampton, a fictional rock star "rated with Bowie and Zappa and Alice Cooper," that Dick expresses his criticisms of modern technology and totalitarianism (152): an electronic genius and record firm owner's scheming on a song writer's wife by attempting to laser the song writer, namely Eric Lampton, out of existence; President Ferris Fremount's attempt to demolish the divine satellite or PROJECT VALIS with a missile, an abuse of power and technology on the scale of Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, which involves the abuses of wiretapping technology and such

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<sup>9</sup> In *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies*, Erik Davis uses the Hindu concept *Karma* to account for Dick's dealing with the "scientific mechanism or impersonal 'natural law'" (Davis 356).

government agencies as FBI and CIA; and even Sophia the Savior's death due to a laser accident caused by Brent Mini, the movie's electronic composer, who gets a computer to create random sounds or "Synchronicity Music" by itself (151). However, as Davis also reminds us, since it is exactly such a "B-movie" functioning as a "triggering event" that leads "Fat and his friends into an extraterrestrial conspiracy and the encounter with a two-year-old savior named Sophia," which makes the novel enter "more surreal, science-fiction territory," we, like the viewers in the novel, should never miss the value of the film or our role as "a potential host or transponder" (*High Weirdness* 358, 373); rather, we should "study the film frame by frame," as Kevin suggests in the novel (*VALIS* 160). In fact, as Davis goes to argue, regarding the significance of flip-flopping on the values of the "sacred trash" by treating them as "plasmate," something like "living information" that both "replicates and infects," the film indeed "performs the role of Dick's fish sign encounter," a mystical event which triggers Dick's personal divine experience in 1974 (*High Weirdness* 368, 360, 372). Considering the fact that the value of the film *Valis* resides in something it is criticizing, namely technology, we may treat it not only as a film about "an alternate U.S.A.," but also as the Zebra itself, containing within it both the abused technology *and* the divine work which makes such criticism possible. The film *Valis*, in brief, is also God's/*VALIS*'s incarnation itself.

Like the schizophrenic truth seeker Fat in the first novel of the series, Herb Asher in the second novel, *The Divine Invasion*, is also the pivotal character whose perception of reality, though unreliable and fickle in the absence of God, is what is at stake, particularly in the Armageddon related in the last few chapters. And like Fat before meeting Sophia, Asher is injured due to his involvement with the divine force, though his injury is much more serious compared with Fat's. The injury sustained in a fatal sky accident keeps him in cryonic suspension almost throughout the novel. While the first novel deals with the improper uses of power and technology mainly in the context of an eponymous film within the novel, the second novel expands the same issue into the main concern of the whole storyline. Thematically, the novel is concerned with how the exiled God, this time incarnated in the form of a child named Emmanuel, reclaims Earth and saves men from the Satanic villain Belial's phantom world. Since the phantom world is basically an illusory counterpart or simulacrum of the divine intelligence matrix constructed out of modern technology—such as the functioning of the "Big Noodle," or Earth's A.I. monitoring system, and the operation of the cryonic equipment that sustains Asher's suspended animation as a half-lifer—the struggle between God/Emmanuel and Satan/Belial is fundamentally a contest

between truth and its counterfeit, reality and nonreality, or real life and the dreamy half-life living. Moreover, since in the novel it is Linda's love which eventually saves Asher from the false existence set by Belial disguised as an innocent goat and brings him back to the best *and* the only reality, where, as Herb recollects, "once I imagined this and now I experience this" (*Divine Invasion* 254), the battle between God/Emmanuel and Satan/Belial also involves the tug-of-war between the power of love and "the power of evil," the latter described by Emmanuel as the power that makes "the ceasing of reality, the ceasing of existence itself" (146). Asher's reality (or the novel's reality), in other words, is determined by the result of the Armageddon: Who wins the world? Emmanuel or Belial? Linda or the goat?

It is clear from our analysis that the strategy Belial adopts to lead men away from God is based on a deception starting with simulation. By mimicking God, speaking God's words, using the same media God uses, or even referring to God as "a monster," "something alien," or even "the evil" (90-93) on the symbolic level, Belial feigns God and usurps his Godhead. As Emmanuel's guru Zina cautions, "Even the devil can cite Scripture" (164). In the face of Belial's malicious verbal tricks, Herb also reminds himself, "Even a goat can cite Scripture" (249). To keep a clear mind in the distorted symbolic world created by Belial, one thus needs to be aware of the proper *use* of such media as language and technology.

In the third novel, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, although God does not explicitly appear in the form of VALIS or Zebra, his ambiguous entanglement both with order and disorder, truth and untruth, still makes Him as mysterious as VALIS or Zebra in the first two novels. In our following discussion on the third novel, we continue to focus our attention on the issue of God's ambiguity and his liability to being mistaken. Thematically, the third novel, like *VALIS*, also involves the successive deaths of the main character's friends and relatives. Like Fat in the first novel, the protagonist Angel is haunted by doubts about life as well as regrets over the deaths of her beloved. Moreover, the main characters in the third novel are also either too confused about existence or too obsessed with turning everything into a means for something else to take their being and the world to be satisfying. For example, unable to resolve his ambivalence toward Kirsten, the woman he is attracted to but also hates for her usurpation of his father Tim's interest and affections, Jeff can only commit suicide. Likewise, haunted by the remorse for Jeff's death because of her, Kirsten can only resort to suicide to escape from her grief and guilt. Yet, since this novel is centered on Bishop Timothy Archer's life and death, and even his arguable eternal return or transmigration, in the pages that follow we will delve into the bishop's character, with

special focus placed on his practicality, which is both his strength and hamartia in terms of his capability (or technique) of turning everything into useful means for his own good, though “good” remains a vague idea to him until his death. Losing faith in his present being, it will be revealed, Tim only longs for the imagined salvation vaguely lying out there beyond his reach. Preoccupied with that absent world, he treats his being in the present world merely as a means for some other goal. His being in the present world, in this sense, has never been real. It has never been itself *per se*.

Having been a practicing lawyer before entering priesthood and finally serving as a bishop, Tim is not only well-equipped with knowledge in many areas, but also ingenious in verbal communication and logical cogitation. In Angel’s words, “Tim was fundamentally a *realist*,” who “entered the world with a wary eye, a keen sense of what benefited him and what worked to his disadvantage” (*Transmigration* 180; emphasis added). But all those qualities that may be beneficial for a lawyer only become harmful for Tim as an ecclesiastic leader, for while all he needs to be a bishop is reverence for God, his interests in mastering the *real* world with his pragmatic skills, together with his reliance on the power of science and technology in their narrower sense, may only hinder him from being a wholehearted priest. As Angel reminisces of Tim in the novel, “he did not really define himself as a bishop any more than he had previously let himself be defined as an attorney” (181). In fact, compared with serving God, Tim apparently would rather emulate God in order to *realize* God in the *real* world. From the affinity he sees between the medieval reverence for God and the Renaissance confidence in man, an argument he once shared with Angel, we can see his ambition to simulate God by exerting man’s capacity and skills to the extreme.

What may render Tim’s assertion disputable is this: if God really comes down to the *real* world, he is no longer the *true* God by definition. Seen from this point, many of Angel’s confusions about Tim’s controversial heresies and behaviors can be resolved in light of his inappropriate emulation of God—to name a few, his undue appropriation of the Discretionary Fund or “Church money” to buy an apartment for his secret mistress (29); his opportunistic employment of his experience with the medium and the séance to comfort Kirsten about Jeff’s suicide, cure Bill’s mental problems, and publish a series of books for readers who do and do not believe in the séance. That is to say, what Tim has been doing is nothing other than trying to meet his various ends as thoroughly as possible.; Most importantly, he is apparently plagued by his conviction of *anokhi* as God’s incarnation in the form of a mushroom somewhere around the Dead Sea Desert, which prompts him to set out on his journey without due preparation, eventually

costing him his life. Assuming himself to be endowed with unlimited freedom and power, Tim abuses everything available to him to meet his own end, everything including his own gifts, the potential qualities that make him aspire toward “becoming God,” even just “for an instant” (65). What ultimately turns ironical for Tim is that, by instrumentalizing all things around him, treating them as mere means of something else, his pragmatism in effect *virtualizes* what he thought of as *real*. For example, in soliciting opinion from the younger generation about the music to be used for his rock mass at Grace Cathedral, he is simply wondering how that knowledge could help to “attract a good deal of attention” for his mass (50). Music is thus simply an empty tool for him, existing not for appreciation, but for fashioning him into an iconic figure.

In fact, as Angel reflects upon Tim’s life and death in the light of Tim’s theory about Satan’s sin, namely the usurpation of God’s knowledge to his own purpose without sharing it with mankind “as Prometheus did with fire,” Tim’s habit of instrumentalizing everything to meet his own ends seems no less evil than Satan’s usurpation, although he has justified his conduct by arguing that “human beings can redeem Satan by wresting this knowledge from him” (66). As Heidegger says, “where enframing reigns, there is *danger* in the highest sense” (309). And since a knowledge, actualized and possessed, holds sway when “it drives out every other possibility of revealing” (Heidegger 309), Tim’s attempt to “acquire a knowledge of God by way of Satan” only brings danger to him and to everything entangled with him (*Transmigration* 66). In the novel, unable to see the double entente of *anokhi*, the Hebrew noun he learns from the newly found and translated Zadokite Documents, denoting not only the “mushroom” (82) the Zadokites ate and drank to become “God Himself” (74) but also the pronoun “I,” which paradoxically makes the word too ambiguous to be useful, Tim sets out for the sacrament in the desert and exposes himself to life-threatening danger. In fact, when Angel says, “Tim believed that words were *actual* things” and “that is what cost him his life” (11; emphasis added), what she really means by “actual” is Tim’s *actualization* of words by purveying pure signifiers with narrow and obsolete meanings. What he may not know is that, as he limits words to their actual uses, he pins his own life to some actual point as well. This is how the bishop’s practicality and mundane knowledge ironically cost him his life.

### **The Themes of Love and Being Living**

According to our analysis of the trilogy, what constitutes the bewilderment of the technological world is apparently the function of simulation carried out to its

extreme: not just men's simulation of God's intelligence system, but also God's simulation of men's simulation within his intelligence system. As a result of the double simulation incarnated in the form of Zebra, God's presence has been kept mysterious to men. Unable to access God properly, men are thus either afflicted with spiritual crisis or falling into a false assumption that men can be as powerful as God simply by usurping God's knowledge. In fact, as will be shown in this section, despite God's mysteriousness, God can still be distinguished from his simulacra in two ways, namely love and the state of being living.

From our discussion on Satan's sin in the third novel, we have learned that egoism is the greatest evil for human beings because it renders men selfish and incapable of opening themselves to new possibilities, thus depriving men of humanity. Nevertheless, according to Jung's theories of phylogenetic memory and the collective unconscious, extensively discussed in the first novel to account for such mysterious phenomena as xenoglossia and the two-world superimposition, each individual "recapitulates the phylogeny—that is, the species" (35). Following this line of thinking, men can be connected with one another across the borders of time and space as long as they are awakened to the fact that they are of one species speaking only one language within God's matrix. Since it is only love that can resolve the interpersonal boundaries and regenerate life force through ongoing recombination, it is only love that can disarm men from their subjective fortress. Love, in other words, is the only remedy for detrimental individualism and its consequences (such as self-pity, or even fear of death). In the first novel, this is exactly what brings Fat to the sense of euphoria when he hears an incorporeal voice addressing him in his dream, where he is as incorporeal as the voice: "Out of everyone, it is you I love the most" (*VALIS* 49). In the chapter where Fat sees Sophia in person, he and Phil, the schizophrenic identities of one person but presented as two persons almost throughout the novel, even surprisingly merge into one without any one identity becoming subordinated to the other. In the second novel, as we have mentioned, it is Linda's love that finally saves Herb from Belial's phantom world. Perhaps what is more important in the second novel, in terms of the theme of love, is Emmanuel's teachings on love after he is completely cured of his amnesia under Zina's care, particularly at the moment when he perceives Zina's fear of what might follow after they have imprudently released Belial, which prompts him to protect her out of love: "Greater love has no man than that he give up his life for his friends" (*Divine Invasion* 257). In fact, considering the fact that even Belial's phantom world can be accommodated in God's or Zebra's divine matrix, we can see that God's/Zebra's *VALIS* in the second novel, like that in the first one, is also constituted by love. Reading the third novel in this

light, we can see how Angel could portray Tim in such an ambivalent way that the bishop is both critically analyzed and affectionately remembered. After all, were it not love, how can Angel criticize the bishop's absurdity without betraying her pity and regret at the same time? The element of love, in brief, is what Dick sees as essential to the nature of God but missing in his simulacra.

Besides love, the state of being living or constantly having the potential of generating new possibilities is also a significant way through which God manifests himself and distinguishes himself from his simulacra. For example, in the first novel, God manifests himself in the film *Valis* by making the film a "living information"—or, in Davis's words, "a force of transformation," transmitting new meanings to the audiences each time they see it (*High Weirdness* 360, 373; *Technosis* 241).<sup>10</sup> In terms of its capacity to transport its audience to different time-and-space frameworks and inspire them infinitely, the film *Valis* is indeed a living incarnation of God. In the second novel, the three-dimensional hologram of the Bible designed by Elias also aims at containing as much information as possible. Moreover, with the device of a multiplelayered input system which enables the complex messages to become permutable and adaptable to different readers, the Bible designed by Elias is even potentially open since "new information could be fed into it" anytime (*Divine Invasion* 72). Considering the possibility that one can always enter into a dialogue with other people while reading the Bible, the Bible is indeed a living, organic Scripture full of new possibilities. This living Bible, of course, greatly challenges the Christian-Islamic Church, for "if Scripture escapes out from under the church, [the Church's] monopoly departs" (73). Contrasted with Elias's idea of keeping the Bible open and living, the Church's attempt to freeze the Bible and the Koran is apparently fascist and unjustifiable. In fact, if we continue to compare such authoritarian practices of the Church, particularly with respect to its attempt to freeze the Scripture, intertextually with Tim's paranoiac interpretation of the word *anokhi* as nothing but the mushroom in legend, we will see Tim's death caused by his rigid overinterpretation as symbolic of his death due to his failure to keep the word living or free from any fixed meaning. To be sure, Tim's overinterpretation has much to do with his private concern with his own life and interest. In contrast with God's

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<sup>10</sup> In *High Weirdness*, Davis points out that the term "living information" is Dick's brilliant portmanteau contribution to mystical metaphysics: "a figure that combines antique notions of Logos and the spirit of Pentecost with the postwar recoding of information as cybernetic process and genetic code" (360). In fact, Davis's attention to Dick's combination of mysticism and technology can be traced back to his *Technosis* published two decades before *High Weirdness*, where he sees "Living Information" as "an echo of genetic engineering," a divine language more powerful than any human language (241).

eternal living or reincarnation in different forms in response to different demands of different ages (such as Sophia the two-year-old female AI as the fifth incarnation in the technological age, succeeding the previous four incarnations “Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus and Abu Al-Qasim Muhammad Ibn Abd Allah Abd Al-Muttalib Ibn Hashim [i.e., Muhammad]” [VALIS 133]), Tim’s obsession with his individual life and interests, as perhaps also manifested in his dubious transmigration, is indeed merely a circular dead end.

Moreover, aside from being used to overinterpreting words, Tim is also portrayed as fond of recording and reproducing everything worth being replayed or even reproduced. Although apparently this habit of using the recording and reproduction technology may seem resonant with Walter Benjamin’s vindication of the reproduced work of art in his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” my article maintains that there is a marked difference between the two uses of technology: while Benjamin envisions the revolutionary dynamics inherent in the technological reproduction of works of art,<sup>11</sup> Tim sees in the recording and reproduction technology only his personal interest, namely the growth of his wealth and fame. When Benjamin says that “what one is entitled to ask from a work of art” is either the “multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law” or the “thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment,” he takes art as a dynamite that can always blow up, not just build up, some certain reality (sec. XI). For him, that is also the essence and function of technology: to penetrate into a reality in order to create a new one. Both art and technology, in other words, essentially aim to bring up new possibilities constantly. From his association of the two fields based on their revolutionary potential, we may infer Benjamin’s views about art and technology: given their common prospect for the future, neither art nor technology should serve any specific purpose, man, or party. In this sense, compared with Tim’s albums for sale, Elias’s permutable living Bible is surely closer to Benjamin’s ideal about the reproduced works of art. And perhaps it is exactly with the adherence to the living information in mind that Dick also insists on keeping his true belief ambiguous in the trilogy. To engage with Dick’s true concern in his fiction, in the next section on the author’s ambiguous attitude toward Gnosticism in the trilogy, we will examine the hermeneutic problem that may turn out to be an ingenious device in the context of Dick’s divine work.

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<sup>11</sup> As Benjamin remarks explicitly in the beginning of the article, the theory of art he is formulating is the “revolutionary demands in the politics of art.” As Paddy Scannell points out in his article on Benjamin’s contribution to this question, Benjamin’s formulation of the political implication in art has much to do with “Brecht’s ideas for a revolutionary theater,” aiming to both penetrate into reality and create commotions (87).

## Gnosticism? Or Literary Theology?

In the trilogy, passages directly or indirectly referring to the Gnostic doctrines pervade the texts, the first novel in particular, with Fat's "journal" (or, in Fat's own words, "exegesis") extensively assuming a prominent part in the novel. Due to these Gnostic references, together with other evidence showing explicit parallels between Fat's exegesis and Dick's own,<sup>12</sup> many Dick scholars have been led to taking Fat as Dick's mouthpiece, treating the novel as the author's autobiographical creation and reading Dick's oeuvre as a Gnostic gospel. In "Gnosticism and Dualism in the Early Fiction of Philip K. Dick," for example, Lorenzo DiTommaso treats the proposition as an inarguable fact that "even the casual reader cannot help but notice the degree to which explicit gnostic Christian themes and components pervade such works as *The Three Stigma of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), *VALIS* (1981), and *The Divine Invasion* (1981)" (49). In "A Real Gnostic Gospel," John Garvey even explicitly remarks that Dick's mystic "visions and dreams coalesce in the *VALIS* trilogy," which can be studied as "classic Gnostic teaching" (16). In "Between Faith and Melancholy," Jean-Noël Dumont also identifies Dick's trilogy as a Gnostic series after his close reading of the following Gnostic themes in the novels: locating the real life elsewhere, treating the material world as the evil creator's crazy work, taking anamnesis as a way of salvation, and treating the world as a sign transmitting God's gospel or the way to salvation. And in Scott Lash's "Experience, Time and the Religious," Dick's trilogy becomes the literary model of what is called the "techno-Gnosticism" (119), a modern version of Gnosticism, which Lash believes may best manifest the essence of Gnosticism because he sees the technologically-dominated world not only as the crazy world of the lunatic creator, the absent God's counterfeit, but also as the only signs or material information to convey God's messages, though it may often incur misinterpretations. To found his argument on a solid philosophical ground, Lash borrows theories on technology from Bernard Stiegler, particularly the parts concerning the activation of the material tertiary retention into something immaterial or something motivating, and asserts that both "Stiegler's phenomenology and Dick's Christology can give us a window onto the nature of experience in the contemporary age" (116).

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<sup>12</sup> *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*, co-edited by Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), shortened as *Exegesis* in my article, is Dick's journal kept between February and March of 1974, which he called "2-3-74," after he experienced some mystical events. Consisting of Dick's religious and visionary experiences, this journal or exegesis is published posthumously and has been taken as an important document through which to approach Dick's spiritual life.

But with the remarks on Dick's Gnostic slant as well as the works' contribution to awakening people from their non-being, Lash seems to have conflated *what* Dick writes with *why* Dick writes. While the former involves the Gnostic content, or "gospel" in Garvey's words, the latter concerns the author's real concern in writing. By identifying the novel's content with the author's inner voice or his purpose of writing, Lash then seems to have disregarded Dick's godlike presence in his works or his role as an artist, the fact that Dick as an artist *may* have some other interests than just transmitting the Gnostic gospel through his literary works. Here is exactly the rub we are confronted with: Does an author necessarily stand by the theme covered in his novel? Or, is the Gnostic teaching really Dick's only concern? Is there anything *else* Dick wants to say, or has already said, albeit implicitly, in his novels besides the Gnostic gospel?

In fact, where Scott Lash sees hope in the "information theology" (120-22) in *VALIS*,<sup>13</sup> Scott Durham sees only the postmodern inertia peculiar to late capitalism, or, in his own words, the "loss of critical distance or estrangement characteristic of SF as a genre" (196), a brilliant insight about the science fiction genre he borrows from Darko Suvin.<sup>14</sup> Reading the identification of information with God delineated in *VALIS* as an echo to the more "quiescent, depoliticized and quasi-religious New-Ageism" (196), that is, an ethos taking shape when the liberatory counter-cultures of the 1960s gave way to a collective urge for more harmonious relationships rather than conflicts among different social classes, Durham asserts that *VALIS* does not criticize the present reality, as most science fictions are expected to do; rather, *VALIS* becomes an index to a reinvestment of the present reality, which reflects the paranoid desiring machine of late capitalism. But it is important to note that while proposing his critique on Lash's argument about Dick's gnostic slant, Durham still detects some overtones other than the simple Gnostic doctrines in the novels, even though with the discovery of the new tone, Durham may paradoxically re-affirm Dick as a Gnostic writer on a different level.

Durham calls the new tone he reads in the novel "Dick's theology" (197), which, while implicitly embedded in the Gnostic motifs in the novel, can still be detected in details like "the Christian insurgents of Horselover Fat's visions,"

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<sup>13</sup> According to Lash, Dick's "information theology," a theology constructed on the belief that God is concealed in the vast active living intelligence system composed of material information and can be revealed by decoding, is also a materialist theology, like the theology proposed by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, though Badiou's and Žižek's "materiality and multiplicity is beyond experience in the real, while [Dick's] is experienced via perception and the imaginary" (120).

<sup>14</sup> For the concept of "cognitive estrangement" as an essential component of science fiction as a genre, see Suvin 15-19.

“the counter-cultural ‘Rhipidon Society,’ and the ‘millenarian montage’ (197) of the selves into a newly-constructed common entity—all of this clearly demonstrating man’s active role in constructing the present reality. In Durham’s words, “Dick’s theology remains bound less to transcendence than to immanent contradiction; his theological moment remains one in which a collective subject capable of grasping such contradiction is imagined” (197). Dick’s theology, according to Durham is not a Gnostic one, which is characterized by a longing for salvation from the world beyond the present one. Rather, it is a secular one, which may paradoxically generate meaning of life at the moment when one confronts his *ananke* or the inevitable dilemma of his existence with contentment. Here, again, lies the rub: By reading Dick’s theology *outside* the Gnostic motif apparently contained *within* the novel, doesn’t Durham’s approach seem to reincarnate the Gnostic element paradoxically (such as meaning lying beyond the text), and thus re-affirm Dick’s theology as a Gnostic one instead, as Garvey remarks in his “A Real Gnostic Gospel”? If so, how can Dick’s theology be defined as distinctive from the Gnostic theology criticized by Durham himself, or perhaps also from the New Age Gnosticism, which is explicitly rejected by Slavoj Žižek in his *On Belief*?<sup>15</sup> Here are Garvey’s words:

Dick creates characters who struggle not only for salvation, for ultimate truths, but sometimes merely to be decent human beings—and the two struggles are really one. What reality is and what it means to be authentically human are intrinsically linked. Dick’s answers, such as they are, range randomly from new-age nonsense, through his own episodes of delusion and paranoia, to a *Gnostic Christianity that contains more of the pain and compassion of real Christianity than most Gnostic visions*. Many Gnostic writings advance an elitism that delights in being among the chosen in whom the divine light resides. Dick saw glimmers of the shattered divine light in many confused and struggling people, and he found something of cosmic significance there, both in the light and in the struggle. (16; emphasis added)

According to many scholars on Gnosticism, particularly after the 1945 discovery of Egypt’s Nag Hammadi library, Gnosticism, in spite of its uncertain origin, was syncretic at its early stage, inclusive not only of many religious believers and mystics (such as the early Christians and the followers of Valentinus), but also of

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<sup>15</sup> In *On Belief*, Žižek uses “Gnosticism? No, thanks!” as the section title in his first chapter entitled “Against the Digital Heresy.”

philosophers and theologians (such as Plotinus and his Neoplatonic followers). It has been commonly treated as a vague term, whose “precise meaning in any given case is often hard to discern” (King 5).<sup>16</sup> Of course, this makes Gnosticism hard to define and barely distinguishable from other religions at their early stages, such as the early Christianity, particularly in terms of their core spirits. Hence Garvey’s conflation of “real gnostic” and “real Christianity.” In his claim to see Dick’s fiction as characteristic of “Gnostic Christianity,” or as his essay title indicates, “a real Gnostic,” both “Gnostic” and of “real Christianity” more than Gnostic (as suggested in my emphasis), Garvey thus at once reveals the problem caused by the ambiguity of Gnosticism and resolves it by reconciling “what is Gnostic” with “what is more Gnostic” (such as the “real Christianity”) at the dialectic level. From the aspect of Garvey’s dialectic view, Durham’s argument about “Dick’s theology” can be studied as further reinforcement of the Gnostic spirit, a real practice of the Gnostic spirit in its development of Dick’s own theology in contrast to the apparent (or material) Gnostic doctrines in the novel, thus re-affirming *VALIS* as “a real Gnostic gospel.” The religious identity of Dick’s novel, in this sense, is arguable and difficult to pin down from one single aspect. But in another sense, being open to contesting arguments, the ambiguity may also allow for itself the freest interpretations. Of course, in such a double twist reading of Dick’s novel, we have gradually shifted the foci of our discussion from the novel’s reality, through Durham the critic’s reality, finally to our own (as the critic of Durham’s critical study), and have eventually seen Dick in his position as God both *inside* and *outside* his novel, overseeing the ongoing dialectic of these arguments. It is exactly at the last level of reality, the reality where Dick appears as God, that we get to examine Dick’s theology from a perspective different from Durham’s humanistic theological reading.

Since our investigation is set on the level of seeing Dick as God both creating the novel *inside* the literary text and revealing its rift from the *outside*, like Garvey’s and Durham’s studies of Dick’s theology which either seek “glimmers of the shattered divine light in many confused and struggling people” (Garvey) or in “a collective subject capable of grasping such contradiction” (Durham) in his novels, our research will also confront some seemingly irreconcilable contradic-

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<sup>16</sup> According to Karen L. King, not only is Gnosticism used to refer to certain types of ancient Christian heresy, but it has come to have significant application in a variety of other areas, including philosophy, literary studies, politics, and psychology. In *Beyond Gnosticism*, Ismo Dunderberg also argues that “given the misleading images created with the terms ‘Gnostic’ and ‘Gnosticism,’ I have avoided using them” unless necessary (31). See Dillon for the latest comprehensive introduction to Gnosticism’s affinity with diverse thoughts and religions, particularly at their inceptive stages.

tions in the text. While Garvey and Durham may see the text as structurally solid, such that the aesthetically constructed universe will never fall apart, our interest of investigation will be directed to interrogating the solidity of the aesthetic foundation itself. More precisely, our work will be to reveal the hermeneutic problem left by Dick in the trilogy which may make his works contestable among multiple interpretations, just like the imperfect material world created by the demiurge according to general Gnostic doctrines. In this sense, our interest in the aesthetic or formalist level may be resonant with Umberto Rossi's project in his "Shunts in the Tale: The Narrative Architecture of Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*," where the ontological uncertainty of the novel is disclosed in narratological terms in order to show the complexity of life and meaning implied by the author. As Rossi suggests, "[Dick's novel] complicates our ideas about the relationship between fiction and nonfiction, between the author's life and works. By depicting the split subject of the autobiographical narrative, it complicates our ideas about life itself: the quest for *VALIS* may simply be Dick's own quest for himself—as a real, historical individual, or a character (or *some* characters) in his fiction" (258). From such an argument about Dick's entanglements with his work, which are at once deliberately and yet ambiguously presented in the novel, we may infer Rossi's double interest in his project: the interest in the theme intertextually presented *inside* the novel, which makes the truth seeker in the novel always in "the condition of . . . doubt, not certainty" (252), and the aesthetic interest, which involves the author's persistent resistance to textual certainty *outside* the text by means of a series of "genre shunts" that shuttle back and forth among realistic fiction, theological SF, postmodern metafiction, and other literary forms in the novel. In the former concern, we see Dick appear as an entangled body intertextually integrated with his characters; in the latter, we see Dick appear as an artist who keeps an aesthetic distance from the intertextual work and leaves the work its integrity as a complete work of art. While Rossi chooses to foreground the textual materiality full of "unyielding contradictions," our project will be focused on discussing Dick's role as an artist or God staying away from the material work/world.

For this purpose, perhaps we can reread Dumont's analysis of the ironic overtones he detects in the trilogy. As we have read in Dumont's Gnostic reading of Dick's divine trilogy, sign-decoding is one of the essential features that characterize Dick's trilogy as Gnostic. Since many modern people have conflated the ability to decode signs with the state of having knowledge, erudition has been made one of the significant motifs throughout the trilogy. While explaining the significance of sign-reading in the novels, Dumont has also questioned the abso-

lute power of knowledge. As he puts it, “here we can no longer distinguish what comes from the spiritual attitude of the Gnostic and what comes from the disorderly acquisitiveness of the Western intellectual who, in the end, no longer perceives the world directly but through a welter of learned references” (241). In his Gnostic reading of the trilogy, he also carefully examines Dick’s ironic overtones hidden between the lines and asserts that Dick has in effect inserted in the novels his own doubt about the Gnostic belief in the absolute power of sign-reading or knowledge. It is to be noted, however, that while Dumont identifies Dick’s use of irony in mocking the excessive sign-reading or the improper appropriation of knowledge in the novels, as most notably exemplified by the erudite bishop’s rush and unwitting plunge into his pilgrimage to the Dead Sea Desert alone with only “a gas station map and two bottles of soda pop” at hand (203), he does not really repudiate Dick’s hope for salvation or his will to truth. Rather, in his analysis of irony as an alternative form of melancholy (in our context, the melancholy over the impossibility of obtaining truth), Dumont proposes to read in Dick’s “desperate coldness” (242) a more desperate desire for truth, just “in the same way,” Dumont suggests “someone in love might resort to irony out of bashfulness, and thereby run the risk of not making oneself understood” (242). According to Dumont, in other words, Dick’s mocking of any vain attempt at obtaining truth through sign-reading bespeaks nothing but his high regard for the power of knowledge and his desire for truth. Irony, in this sense, is the final, irreducible core of this trilogy. With Dumont’s discovery of this core component, we seem to arrive at the answer Rossi does not offer us in his essay, the answer to *why* the trilogy is rendered hermeneutically problematic: it is only through constant resistance to the textual unity at the material level that Dick can always reserve the sublime position for the ultimate truth. In Dumont’s words, by means of irony, Dick preserves the “stronghold that refuses to give up its secret” (242).

Will sign-reading eventually become meaningless if a definite meaning behind the textual materiality proves to be an impossible dream? If the ultimate meaning of a material work/world has always been deferred in the process of sign-decoding, what else can one get from the process of sign-reading? With these words, Dumont offers a point of departure for addressing these issues:

At the heart of Dick’s work I find a desperate coldness that accepts questions but refuses to answer them. Erudition then becomes the means of pushing off answers, of transforming thought into a game of parchesi, hopping from sign to sign. Indeed, is not SF itself ironic in nature? We need only think of what

happens to myth when it is taken up in the modern age. What is ironic here is the irruption of rationality in the midst of the imaginary, just as the burlesque is what makes the absurd implacably logical. (242)

Here, we get a bright vision for what seems to invite pessimism: even though the ultimate meaning of Dick's material work/world has always been deferred, unlimited numbers of multiple or even contesting meanings and, more importantly, the immanent logic of the literary function, can still be generated from within. In fact, it is precisely in the attempt to decode signs (or to create meaning) that men can experience what it might be like to be God. According to Dumont, this is exactly what makes science fiction an ironic and fascinating genre: although the fiction is constructed in an imaginary universe, reason and erudition are still at play within it. That is exactly what Dick does in his trilogy: by making people create diverse meanings of their own, Dick not only appears as God to his readers and his literary work/world, but also makes his readers experience what it might be like to be God. To create meaning exactly from the act of meaning creation, this is Dick's literary theology and also his way of responding to Heidegger's proposition: to seek the saving power in the realm of art. By destroying the hermeneutic unity, Dick invites readers to decode the textual materiality, to exert reason and imagination, and to create meaning of their own constantly. Though full of ambiguity and contradictions, Dick's trilogy nevertheless engages readers' full attention and engenders piety. Perhaps, in his introduction to *A Dictionary of Gnosticism*, Andrew Phillip Smith is right when he treats Dick and the movie *The Matrix* as the most prominent "treasure of Gnostic literature" since "the Nag Hammadi library burst open the dam" (xvi). But, as a literary writer, both the true God and demiurge of his work/world of art made up of literary materiality, Dick is never simply dedicated to transmitting a Gnostic gospel. His true devotion, rather, is to the combination of art, truth, and theology, that is, to the creation of the Dickian literary theology.

**Philip K. Dick's  
Literary Theology**

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