

Philip K. Dick: If You Find This World Bad, You Should See Some of the Others" (1977)

May I tell you how much I appreciate your asking me to share some of my ideas with you. A novelist carries with him constantly what most women carry in large purses: much that is useless, a few absolutely essential items, and then, for good measure, a great number of things that fall in between. But the novelist does not transport them physically because his trove of possessions is mental. Now and then he adds a new and entirely useless idea; now and then he reluctantly cleans out the trash—the obviously worthless ideas—and with a few sentimental tears sheds them. Once in a great while, however, he happens by chance onto a thoroughly stunning idea new to him that he hopes will turn out to be new to everyone else. It is this final category that dignifies his existence. But such truly priceless ideas... perhaps during his entire lifetime he may, at best, acquire only a meager few. But that is enough; he has, through them, justified his existence to himself and to his God.

An odd aspect of these rare, extraordinary ideas that puzzles me is their mystifying cloak of—shall I say—the obvious. By that I mean, once the idea has emerged or appeared or been born—however it is that new ideas pass over into being—the novelist says to himself, “But of course. Why didn’t I realize that years ago?” But note the word “realize.” It is the key word. He has come across something new that at the same time was there, somewhere, all the time. In truth, it simply surfaced. It always was. He did not invent it or even find it; in a very real sense it found him. And—and this is a little frightening to contemplate—he has not invented it, but on the contrary, it invented him. It is as if the idea created him for its purposes. I think this is why we discover a startling phenomenon of great renown: that quite often in history a great new idea strikes a number of researchers or thinkers at exactly the same time, all of them oblivious to their compeers. “Its time had come,” we say about the idea, and so dismiss, as if we had explained it, something I consider quite important: our recognition that in a certain literal sense ideas are alive.

What does this mean, to say that an idea or a thought is literally alive? And that it seizes on men here and there and makes use of them to actualize itself into the stream of human history? Perhaps the pre-Socratic philosophers were correct; the cosmos is one vast entity that thinks. It may in fact do nothing but think. In that case either what we call the universe is merely a form of disguise that it takes, or it somehow is the universe—some variation on this pantheistic view, my favorite being that it cunningly mimics the world that we experience daily, and we remain none the wiser. This is the view of the oldest religion of India, and to some extent it was the view of Spinoza and Alfred North Whitehead, the concept of an immanent God, God within the universe, not transcendent above it and therefore not part of it. The Sufi saying [by Rumi] “The workman is invisible within the workshop” applies here, with workshop as universe and workman as God. But this still expresses the theistic notion that the universe is something that God created; whereas I am saying, perhaps God created nothing but merely is. And we spend our lives within him or her or it, wondering constantly where he or she or it can be found.

I enjoyed thinking along these lines for several years. God is as near at hand as the trash in the gutter—God is the trash in the gutter, to speak more precisely. But then one day a wicked thought entered my mind—wicked because it undermined my marvelous pantheistic monism of which I was so proud. What if—and here you will see how at least this particular SF writer gets his plots—what if there exists a plurality of universes arranged along a sort of lateral axis, which is to say at right angles to the flow of linear time? I must admit that upon thinking this I found I had conjured up a terrific absurdity: ten thousand bodies of God arranged like so many suits hanging in some enormous closet, with God either wearing them all at once or going selectively back and forth among them, saying to himself, “I think today I’ll wear the one in which Germany and Japan won World War II” and then adding, half to himself, “And tomorrow I’ll wear that nice one in which Napoleon defeated the British; that’s one of my best.”

This does seem absurd, and it certainly seems to reveal the basic idea as nonsense. But suppose we recast this “closet full of different suits of clothes” just a little and say, “What if God tries out a suit of clothes and then, for reasons best known to him, changes his mind?” Decides, using this metaphor, that the suit of clothes that he possesses or wears is not the one he wants... in which case the aforementioned closet full of suits of clothes is a sort of progressive sequence of worlds, picked up, used for a time, and then discarded in favor of an improved one? We might ask at this point, “How would the suddenly discarded suit of clothes—the suddenly abandoned universe—feel? What would it experience?” And, for us even more importantly, what change, if any, would the life forms living in that universe experience? Because I have a secret hunch that this exact thing does indeed happen; and I have a keen additional insight that the endless trillions of life forms involved would suppose—incorrectly—that they had experienced nothing, that no change had taken place. They, as elements of the new suit of clothes, would incorrectly imagine that they had always been worn—always been as they now were, with complete memories by which to prove the correctness of their subjective impressions.

We are accustomed to supposing that all change takes place along the linear time axis: from past to present to future. The present is an accrual of the past and is different from it. The future will accrue from the present on and be different yet. That an orthogonal or right-angle time axis could exist, a lateral domain in which change takes place—processes occurring sideways in reality, so to speak—this is almost impossible to imagine. How would we perceive such lateral changes? What

would we experience? What clues—if we are trying to test out this bizarre theory—should we be on the alert for? In other words, how can change take place outside of linear time at all, in any sense, to any degree?

Well, let us consider a favorite topic of Christian thinkers: the topic of eternity. This concept, historically speaking, was one great new idea brought by Christianity to the world. We are pretty sure that eternity exists—that the word “eternity” refers to something actual, in contrast, say, to the word “angels.” Eternity is simply a state in which you are free from and somehow out of and above time. There is no past, present, and future; there is just pure ontological being.

“Eternity” is not a word denoting merely a very long time; it is essentially timeless. Well, let me ask this: Are there any changes that take place there; i.e., take place outside of time? Because if you say, “Yes, eternity is not static; things happen,” then I at once smile knowingly and point out that you have introduced time once more. The concept “time” simply denotes—or rather posits—a condition or state or stream—whatever—in which change occurs. No time, no change. Eternity is static. But if it is static, it is even less than long-enduring; it is more like a geometric point, an infinitude of which can be determined along any given line. Viewing my theory about orthogonal or lateral change, I defend myself by saying, “At least it is intellectually less nonsensical than the concept of eternity.” And everyone talks about eternity, whether they intend to do anything about it or not.

Let me present you with a metaphor. Let us say that there exists this very rich patron of the arts. Every day on the wall of his living room above his fireplace his servants hang a new picture—each day a different masterpiece, day after day, month after month—each day the “used” one is removed and replaced by a different and new one. I will call this process change along the linear axis. But now let us suppose the servants temporarily running out of new, replacement pictures. What shall they do in the meantime? They can’t just leave the present one hanging; their employer has decreed that perpetual replacement—i.e. changing the pictures—is to take place. So they neither allow the current one to remain nor do they replace it with a new one; instead, they do a very clever thing. When their employer is not looking, the servants cunningly alter the picture already on the wall. They paint out a tree here; they paint in a little girl there; they add this; they obliterate that; they make the same painting different and in a sense new, but as I’m sure you can see, not new in the sense of replacing it. The employer enters his living room after dinner, seats himself facing his fireplace, and contemplates what should be—according to his expectations—a new picture. What does he see? It certainly isn’t what he saw previously. But also it isn’t somehow... and here we must become very sympathetic with this perhaps somewhat stupid man, because we can virtually see his brain circuits striving to understand. His brain circuits are saying, “Yes, it is a new picture, it is not the same one as yesterday, but also it is the same one, I think, I feel on a very deep, intuitive basis... I feel that somehow I’ve seen it before. I seem to remember a tree, though, and there is no tree.” Now, perhaps, if we extrapolate from this man’s perceptual, mental confusion to the theoretical point I was making about lateral change, you can get a better idea of what I mean; I mean, perhaps you can, to at least a degree, see that although what I’m talking about may not exist—my concept may be fictional—it could exist. It is not intellectually self-contradictory.

As a science fiction writer I gravitate toward such ideas as this; we in the field, of course, know this idea as the “alternate universe” theme. Some of you, I am sure, know that my novel *The Man in the High Castle* utilized this theme. There was in it an alternate world in which Germany and Japan and Italy won World War II. At one point in the novel Mr. Tagomi, the protagonist, somehow is carried over to our world, in which the Axis powers lost. He remained in our world only a short time, and scuttled in fright back to his own universe as soon as he glimpsed or understood what had happened—and thought no more of it after that; it had been for him a thoroughly unpleasant experience, since, being Japanese, it was for him a worse universe than his customary one. For a Jew, however, it would have been infinitely better—for obvious reasons.

In *The Man in the High Castle* I give no real explanation as to why or how Mr. Tagomi slid across into our universe; he simply sat in the park and scrutinized a piece of modern abstract handmade jewelry—sat and studied it on and on—and when he looked up, he was in another universe. I didn’t explain how or why this happened because I don’t know, and I would defy anyone, writer, reader, or critic, to give a so-called “explanation.” There cannot be one because, of course, as we all know, such a concept is merely a fictional premise; none of us, in our right minds, entertains for even an instant the notion that such alternate universes exist in any actual sense. But let us say, just for fun, that they do. Then, if they do, how are they linked to each other, if in fact they are (or would be) linked? If you drew a map of them, showing their locations, what would the map look like? For instance (and I think this is a very important question), are they absolutely separate one from another, or do they overlap? Because if they overlap, then such problems as “Where do they exist?” and “How do you get from one to the next?” admit to a possible solution. I am saying, simply, if they do indeed exist, and if they do indeed overlap, then we may in some literal, very real sense inhabit several of them to various degrees at any given time. And although we all see one another as living humans walking about and talking and acting, some of us may inhabit relatively greater amounts of, say, Universe One than the other people do; and some of us may inhabit relatively greater amounts of Universe Two, Track Two, instead, and so on. It may not merely be that our subjective impressions of the world differ, but there may be an overlapping, a superimposition, of a number of worlds so that objectively, not subjectively, our

worlds may differ. Our perceptions differ as a result of this. And I want to add this statement at this point, which I find to be a fascinating concept: It may be that some of these superimposed worlds are passing out of existence, along the lateral time line I spoke of, and some are in the process of moving toward greater, rather than lesser, actualization. These processes would occur simultaneously and not at all in linear time. The kind of process we are talking about here is a transformation, a kind of metamorphosis, invisibly achieved. But very real. And very important. Contemplating this possibility of a lateral arrangement of worlds, a plurality of overlapping Earths along whose linking axis a person can somehow move—can travel in a mysterious way from worst to fair to good to excellent—contemplating this in theological terms, perhaps we could say that herewith we suddenly decipher the elliptical utterances that Christ expressed regarding the Kingdom of God, specifically where it is located. He seems to have given contradictory and puzzling answers. But suppose, just suppose for an instant, that the cause of the perplexity lay not in any desire on his part to baffle or to hide, but in the inadequacy of the question. “My Kingdom is not of this world,” he is reported to have said. “The Kingdom is within you.” Or possibly, “It is among you.” I put before you now the notion, which I personally find exciting, that he may have had in mind that which I speak of as the lateral axis of overlapping realms that contain among them a spectrum of aspects ranging from the unspeakably malignant to the beautiful. And Christ was saying over and over again that there really are many objective realms, somehow related, and somehow bridgeable by living—not dead—men, and that the most wondrous of these worlds was a just kingdom in which either He Himself or God Himself or both of them ruled. And he did not merely speak of a variety of ways of subjectively viewing one world; the Kingdom was and is an actual different place, at the opposite end of continua starting with slavery and utter pain. It was his mission to teach his disciples the secret of crossing along this orthogonal path. He did not merely report what lay there; He taught the method of getting there. But, tragically, the secret was lost. The enemy, the Roman authority, crushed it. And so we do not have it. But perhaps we can refind it, since we know that such a secret exists.

This would account for the apparent contradictions regarding the question as to whether the Just Kingdom is ever to be established here on Earth or whether it is a place or state we go to after death. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that this issue has been a fundamental one—and an unresolved one—throughout the history of Christianity. Christ and St. Paul both seem to say emphatically that an actual breaking through into time, into our world, by the hosts of God, will unexpectedly occur. Thereupon, after some exciting drama, a thousand-year paradise, a rightful Kingdom, will be established—at least for those who have done their homework and chores and generally paid attention... have not Gone To Sleep, as one parable puts it. We are enjoined repeatedly in the New Testament to be vigilant, that for the Christian it is always day, there is always light, by which he can see this event when it comes. See this event. Does that imply that many persons who are somehow asleep or blind or not vigilant—they will not see it, even though it occurs? Consider the significance that can be assigned to these notions. The Kingdom will come here, unexpectedly (this is always stressed); the rightful faithful shall see it, because for them it is always daytime, but for the others ... what seems expressed here is the paradoxical but enthralling thought that—and hear this and ponder—the Kingdom, were it established here, would not be visible to those outside it. I offer the idea that, in more modern terms, what is meant is that some of us will travel laterally to that best world and some will not; they will remain stuck along the lateral axis, which means that for them the Kingdom did not come, not in their alternate world. And yet meantime it did come in ours. So it comes and yet does not come. Amazing. Please ask yourself, What event signals the establishment or reestablishment of the Kingdom? Of course it is nothing other than the Second Advent, the return of the King Himself. Following my reasoning as to the existence of worlds along a lateral axis, one could reason, “Certainly the Second Coming has not taken place—at least not along this Track, in this universe.” But then one could speculate, logically, “But perhaps it came exactly as stipulated in the New Testament: during the lifetime of those living then, back in the Apostolic Age.” I enjoy—I find fascinating—this concept. What an idea for a novel, an alternate Earth in which the Parousia took place, say, around A.D. 70. Or, say, during the medieval period—say, at the time of the Catherist Crusades... how neat an idea for an alternate-world novel! The protagonist somehow is transported from this, our universe, in which the Second Coming did not take place or has not taken place—is transported to one in which it occurred centuries ago.

But if you have followed my conjectures about the overlapping of these alternate worlds, and you sense as I do the possibility that if there are three there may be thirty or three thousand of them—and that some of us live in this one, others of us in another one, others in others, and that events in one track cannot be perceived by persons not in that track—well, let me say what I want to say and be done with it. I think I once experienced a track in which the Savior returned. But I experienced it just very briefly. I am not there now. I am not sure I ever was. Certainly I may never be again. I grieve for that loss, but loss it is; somehow I moved laterally, but then fell back, and then it was gone. A vanished mountain and a stream. The sound of bells. All gone now for me; entirely gone.

I, in my stories and novels, often write about counterfeit worlds, semi-real worlds, as well as deranged private worlds inhabited, often, by just one person, while, meantime, the other characters either remain in their own worlds throughout or are somehow drawn into one of the peculiar ones. This theme occurs in the corpus of my twenty-seven years of writing. At no time did

I have a theoretical or conscious explanation for my preoccupation with these pluriform pseudoworlds, but now I think I understand. What I was sensing was the manifold of partially actualized realities lying tangent to what evidently is the most actualized one, the one that the majority of us, by consensus gentium [general consent], agree on.

Although originally I presumed that the differences between these worlds was caused entirely by the subjectivity of the various human viewpoints, it did not take me long to open the question as to whether it might not be more than that—that in fact plural realities did exist superimposed onto one another like so many film transparencies. What I still do not grasp, however, is how one reality out of the many becomes actualized in contradistinction to the others. Perhaps none does. Or perhaps again it hangs on an agreement in viewpoint by a sufficiency of people. More likely the matrix world, the one with the true core of being, is determined by the Programmer. He or it articulates—prints out, so to speak—the matrix choice and fuses it with actual substance. The core or essence of reality—that which receives or attains it and to what degree—that is within the purview of the Programmer; this selection and reselection are part of general creativity, of world-building, which seems to be its or his task. A problem, perhaps, which he or it is running, which is to say in the process of solving.

This problem-solving by means of reprogramming variables along the linear time axis of our universe, thereby generating branched-off lateral worlds—I have the impression that the metaphor of the chessboard is especially useful in evaluating how this all can be—in fact must be. Across from the Programmer-Reprogrammer sits a counterentity, whom Joseph Campbell calls the dark counterplayer. God, the Programmer-Reprogrammer, is not making his moves of improvement against inert matter; he is dealing with a cunning opponent. Let us say that on the game board—our universe in space-time—the dark counterplayer makes a move; he sets up a reality situation. Being the dark player, the outcome of his desires constitutes what we experience as evil: nongrowth, the power of the lie, death and the decay of forms, the prison of immutable cause and effect. But the Programmer-Reprogrammer has already laid down his response; it has already happened, these moves on his part. The printout, which we undergo as historic events, passes through stages of a dialectical interaction, thesis and antithesis as the forces of the two players mingle. Evidently some syntheses fall to the dark counterplayer, and yet they do not, by virtue of the fact that, in advance, our great Advocate selected variables, the alteration of which brings final victory to him. In winning each sequence in turn he claims some of us, we who participate in the sequence. This is why instinctively people pray, “Libera me Domine,” which decodes to mean, “Extricate me, Programmer, as you achieve one victory after another; include me in that triumph. Move me along the lateral axis so that I am not left out.” What we sense as “being left out” means remaining under the jurisdiction of, or falling prey to, the malignant power. But that malignant power, for all its guile, has already lost even as it wins, for in some way the counterplayer is blind and so the Programmer-Reprogrammer possesses an advantage.

The great medieval Arabic philosopher, Avicenna, wrote that God does not see time as we do; i.e. for him there is no past nor present nor future. Now, supposing Avicenna is correct, let us imagine a situation in which God, from whatever vantage point he exists at, decides to intervene into our space-time world; i.e. break through from his timeless realm into human history. But if there is only omnipresent reality from his viewpoint, then he can as easily break through into what for us is the past as he can break through into what for us is the present or future. It is exactly like a chess player gazing down at the chessboard; he can move any of his pieces that he wishes. Following Avicenna’s reasoning, we can say that God, in desiring, for example, to bring about the Second Advent, need not limit the event to our present or future; he can breach our past—in other words, change our past history; he can cause it to have happened already. And this would be true for any change he wished to make, large or small. For instance, suppose an event in our year A.D. 1970 does not meet with God’s idea of how it all should go. He can obliterate it or tinker with it, improve it, whatever he wishes, even at a prior point in linear time. This is his advantage.

I submit to you that such alterations, the creation or selection of such so-called “alternate presents,” is continually taking place. The very fact that we can conceptually deal with this notion—that is, entertain it as an idea—is a first step in discerning such processes themselves. But I doubt if we will ever be able in any real fashion to demonstrate, to scientifically prove, that such lateral change processes do occur. Probably all we would have to go on would be vestiges of memory, fleeting impressions, dreams, nebulous intuitions that somehow things had been different in some way—and not long ago but now. We might reflexively reach for a light switch in the bathroom only to discover that it was—always had been—in another place entirely. We might reach for the air vent in our car where there was no air vent—a reflex left over from a previous present, still active at a subcortical level. We might dream of people and places we had never seen as vividly as if we had seen them, actually known them. But we would not know what to make of this, assuming we took time to ponder it at all. One very pronounced impression would probably occur to us, to many of us, again and again, and always without explanation: the acute, absolute sensation that we had done once before what we were just about to do now, that we so to speak lived a particular moment or situation previously—but in what sense could it be called “previously,” since only the present, not the past, was evidently involved? We would have the overwhelming impression that we were reliving the present, perhaps in precisely the same way, hearing the same words, saying the same words... I submit that these impressions are valid and

significant, and I will even say this: Such an impression is a clue that at some past time point a variable was changed—reprogrammed, as it were—and that, because of this, an alternate world branched off, became actualized instead of the prior one, and that in fact, in literal fact, we are once more living this particular segment of linear time. A breaching, a tinkering, a change had been made, but not in our present—had been made in our past. Evidently such an alteration would have a peculiar effect on those persons involved; they would, so to speak, be moved back one square or several squares on the board game that constitutes our reality. Conceivably this could happen any number of times, affecting any number of people, as alternative variables were reprogrammed. We would have to go live out each reprogramming along the subsequent linear time axis, but to the Programmer, whom we call God—to him the results of the reprogramming would be apparent at once. We are within time and he is not. Thus, too, this might account for the sensation people get of having lived past lives. They may well have, but not in the past; previous lives, rather, in the present. In perhaps an unending repeated and repeated present, like a great clock dial in which grand clock hands sweep out the same circumference forever, with all of us carried along unknowingly, yet dimly suspecting.

Since at the resolution of every encounter of thesis and antithesis between the dark counterplayer and the divine Programmer a new synthesis is struck off, and since it is possible that each time this happens a lateral world may be generated, and since I conceive that each synthesis or resolution is to some degree a victory by the Programmer, each struck-off world, in sequence, must be an improvement upon—not just the prior one—but an improvement over all the latent or merely possible outcomes. It is better but in no sense perfect—i.e. final. It is merely an improved stage within a process. What I envision clearly is that the Programmer is perpetually using the antecedent universe as a gigantic stockpile for each new synthesis, the antecedent universe then possessing the aspect of chaos or anomie in relation to an emerging new cosmos. Therefore the endless process of sequential struck-off alternate worlds, emerging and being infused with actualization, is negentropic in some way that we cannot see.

In my novel *Ubik* I present a motion along a retrograde entropic axis, in terms of Platonic forms rather than any decay or reversion we normally conceive. Perhaps the normal forward motion along this axis, away from entropy, accruing rather than divesting, is identical with the axis line that I characterize as lateral, which is to say, in orthogonal rather than linear time. If this is so, the novel *Ubik* inadvertently contains what could be called a scientific rather than a philosophical idea. But here I am only guessing. Still, the fiction writer may have written more than he consciously knew.

What blinds us to this hierarchy of evolving form in each new synthesis is that we are unaware of the lesser, unactualized worlds. And this process of interaction, continually forming the new, obliterates at each stage that which came before. What, at any given present instant we possess of the past, is twofold but dubious: We possess external, objective traces of the past embedded in the present, and we possess inner memories. But both are subject to the rule of imperfection, since both are merely bits of reality and not the intact form. What we retain existentially and mentally are therefore inadequate guides. This is implied by the very emergence of true newness itself; if truly new, it must somehow kill the old, the that which was. And, especially, that which did not come to fully be.

What we need at this point is to locate, to bring forth as evidence, someone who has managed somehow—it doesn't matter how, really—to retain memories of a different present, latent alternate world impressions, different in some significant way from this, the one that is at this stage actualized. According to my theoretical view, it would almost certainly be memories of a worse world than this. For it is not reasonable that God the Programmer and Reprogrammer would substitute a worse world in terms of freedom or beauty or love or order or healthiness—by any standard that we know. When a mechanic works on your malfunctioning car he does not damage it further; when a writer creates a second draft of a novel he does not debase it further but strives to improve it. I suppose it could be argued in a strictly theoretical way that God might be evil or insane and would in fact substitute a worse world for a better one, but frankly I cannot take that idea seriously. Let us then pass over it. So let us ask, Does any one of us remember in any dim fashion a worse Earth circa 1977 than this? Have your young men seen visions and our old men dreamed dreams? Nightmare dreams specifically, about a world of enslavement and evil, of prisons and jailers and ubiquitous police? I have. I wrote out those dreams in novel after novel, story after story; to name two in which this prior ugly present obtained most clearly I cite *The Man in the High Castle* and my 1974 novel about the United States as a police state, called *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*.

I am going to be very candid with you: I wrote both novels based on fragmentary residual memories of such a horrid slave state world—or perhaps the term “world” is the wrong one, and I should say “United States,” since in both novels I was writing about my own country.

In *The Man in the High Castle* there is a novelist, Hawthorne Abendsen, who has written an alternate-world novel in which Germany, Italy, and Japan lost World War II. At the conclusion of *The Man in the High Castle*, a woman appears at Abendsen's door to tell him what he does not know: that his novel is true; the Axis did indeed lose the war. The irony of this ending—Abendsen finding out that what he had supposed to be pure fiction spun out of his imagination was in fact true—the irony is this: that my own supposed imaginative work *The Man in the High Castle* is not fiction—or rather is fiction only now, thank God. But there was an alternate world, a previous

present, in which that particular time track actualized—actualized and then was abolished due to intervention at some prior date. I am sure, as you hear me say this, you do not really believe me, or even believe that I believe it myself. But nevertheless it is true. I retain memories of that other world. That is why you will find it again described in the later novel *Flow My Tears*. The world of *Flow My Tears* is an actual (or rather once actual) alternate world, and I remember it in detail. I do not know who else does. Maybe no one else does. Perhaps all of you were always—have always been—here. But I was not. In March 1974 I began to remember consciously, rather than merely subconsciously, that black iron prison police state world. Upon consciously remembering it I did not need to write about it because I have always been writing about it. Nonetheless, my amazement was great, to remember consciously suddenly that it was once so—as I'm sure you can imagine. Put yourself in my place. In novel after novel, story after story, over a twenty-five-year period, I wrote repeatedly about a particular other landscape, a dreadful one. In March 1974 I understood why, in my writing, I continually reverted to an awareness, in intimation of, that one particular world. I had good reason to. My novels and stories were, without my realizing it consciously, autobiographical. It was—this return of memory—the most extraordinary experience of my life. Or rather I should say lives, since I had at least two: one there and subsequently one here, where we are now.

I can even tell you what caused me to remember. In late February 1974 I was given sodium pentothol for the extraction of impacted wisdom teeth. Later that day, back home again but still deeply under the influence of the sodium pentothol, I had a short, acute flash of recovered memory. In one instant I caught it all, but immediately rejected it—rejected it, however, with the realization that what I had retrieved in the way of buried memories was authentic. Then, in mid-March, the corpus of memories, whole, intact, began to return. You are free to believe me or free to disbelieve, but please take my word on it that I am not joking; this is very serious, a matter of importance. I am sure that at the very least you will agree that for me even to claim this is in itself amazing. Often people claim to remember past lives; I claim to remember a different, very different, present life. I know of no one who has ever made that claim before, but I rather suspect that my experience is not unique; what perhaps is unique is the fact that I am willing to talk about it.

If you have followed me this far, I would like you to be kindly enough disposed to go a little further with me. I would like to share with you something I knew—retrieved—along with the blocked-off memories. In March 1974 the reprogrammed variables, tinkered with back at some earlier date, probably in the late forties—in March 1974 the payoff, the results, of at least one and possibly more of the reprogrammed variables lying along the linear time line in our past, set in. What happened between March and August 1974 was the result of at least one reprogrammed variable laid down perhaps thirty years before, setting into motion a thread of change that culminated in what I am sure you will admit was a spectacularly important—and unique—historical event: the forced removal from office of a president of the United States, Richard Nixon, as well as all those associated with him. In the alternate world that I remembered, the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement of the sixties, had failed. And, evidently, in the midseventies Nixon was not removed from power. That which opposed him (if indeed anything existed that did or could) was inadequate. Therefore one or more factors tending toward that destruction of the entrenched tyrannical power had retroactively, to us, come to be introduced. The scales, thirty years later, in 1977, got tipped. Examine the text of *Flow My Tears* and, keeping in mind that it was written in 1970 and published in February 1974, make an effort to construct the previous events that would have had to take place, or not take place, to account for the world depicted in the novel as lying slightly in the future. One small but critical theme is alluded to twice (I believe) in *Flow My Tears*. It has to do with Nixon. In the future world of *Flow My Tears*, in the dreadful slave state that exists and evidently has existed for decades, Richard Nixon is remembered as an exalted, heroic leader—referred to, in fact, as the “Second Only Begotten Son of God.” It is evident from this and many other clues that *Flow My Tears* deals not with our future but the future of a present world alternate to our own. Blacks, by the time *Flow My Tears* takes place, have become an ecological rarity, protected “as are wild whooping cranes.” In the novel one rarely sees blacks on the streets of the United States. But the year in which *Flow My Tears* takes place is only eleven years from now: October 1988. Obviously the fascist genocide against the blacks in the United States in my novel began long before 1977; a number of readers have pointed this out to me. One of them even pointed out that a careful reading of *Flow My Tears* not only indicates that the society depicted, the U.S. police state of 1988, had to be an alternate-world novel, but this reader pointed out that mysteriously, at the very end of the novel, the protagonist, Felix Buckman, appears somehow to have slipped over into a different world, one in which blacks were not exterminated. Early in the novel it is stipulated that a black couple is allowed by law to bear only one single child; yet, at the end of the novel, the black man at the all-night gas station proudly gets out his wallet and shows Police General Buckman photographs of his three children. The open manner in which the black man shows the pictures to a perfect stranger indicates that for some weird and unexplained reason it is now no longer illegal for a black couple to have several children. Somehow, just as Mr. Togomi slipped over briefly into our alternate present, General Buckman in *Flow My Tears* did the same thing. It is even evident in the text of *Flow My Tears* when and where the police general slipped over. It was just before he landed his flying vehicle at the all-night gas station and encountered—hugged, in fact—the black man; the slipover, which is to say

the moment in which the absolutely repressive world of the bulk of the novel faded out, took place during the interval in which General Buckman experienced a strange dream about a kinglike old man with white wool-like beard, wearing robes and a helmet and leading a posse of similarly helmeted robed knights—this king and these helmeted knights appearing in the rural world of farmhouse and pastureland where General Buckman had lived as a boy. The dream, I think, was a graphic depiction in General Buckman's mind of the transformation taking place objectively; it was a kind of inner analog to what was happening outside him to his entire world.

This accounts for the changed Buckman, the very different police general who lands at the all-night gas station and draws the heart with an arrow piercing it, giving the piece of paper with its drawing to the black man as a communication of love. Buckman at the gas station in encountering the black stranger is not the same Buckman who appeared earlier throughout the book: The transformation is complete. But he is unaware of it. Only Jason Taverner, the once-famous television personality who woke up one day to find himself in a world that had never heard of him—only Taverner, when his mysteriously taken-away popularity seeps back, understands that several alternate realities—two upon a cursory reading, but at least three if the ending is studied scrupulously—only Jason Taverner remembers. This is the whole basic plot of the novel: One morning Jason Taverner, popular TV and recording star, wakes up in a fleabag dingy hotel room to find all his identification papers gone, and, worse yet, finds that no one has ever heard of him—the basic plot is that for some arcane reason the entire population of the United States has in one instant of linear time completely and collectively forgotten a man whose face on the cover of Time magazine should be a face virtually every reader would identify without effort. In this novel I am saying, "The entire population of a large country, a continent-sized country, can wake up one morning having entirely forgotten something they all previously knew, and none of them is the wiser." In the novel it is a popular TV and recording star whom they have forgotten, which is of importance, really, only to that particular star or former star. But my hypothesis is presented here nonetheless in a disguised form, because (I am saying) if an entire country can overnight forget one thing they all know, they can forget other things, more important things; in fact, overwhelmingly important things. I am writing about amnesia on the part of millions of people, of, so to speak, fake memories laid down. This theme of faked memories is a constant thread in my writing over the years. It was also Van Vogt's. And yet, can one contemplate this as a serious possibility, something that could actually happen? Who of us has asked himself that? I did not ask myself that prior to March 1974; I include myself.

You will recall that I pointed out that after Police General Buckman slipped over into a better world he underwent an inner change appropriate to the qualities of the better world, the more just, the more loving, the warmer world in which the tyranny of the police apparatus was already beginning to fade away as would a dream upon the awakening of the dreamer. In March 1974, when I regained my buried memories (a process called in Greek anamnesis, which literally means the loss of forgetfulness rather than merely remembering)—upon those memories reentering consciousness I, like General Buckman, underwent a personality change. Like his, it was fundamental but at the same time subtle. It was me but yet it was not me. I noticed it mostly in small ways: things I should have remembered but did not; things I did remember (ah, what things!) but should not have. Evidently this had been my personality in what I call Track A. You may be interested in one aspect of my restored memories that strikes me as most astonishing. In the previous alternate present, in Track A, Christianity was illegal, as it had been two thousand years ago at its inception. It was regarded as subversive and revolutionary—and, let me add, this appraisal by the police authorities was correct. It took me almost two weeks, after the return of my memories of my life in Track A, to rid myself of the overpowering impression that all references to Christ, all sacerdotal acts, had to be veiled in absolute secrecy. But historically this fits the pattern of a fascist takeover, especially those along Nazilines. They did so regard Christianity. And, had they attained a victory in the war, this surely would have been their policy in that portion of the United States that they controlled. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses, under the Nazis, were gassed in the concentration camps along with the Jews and Gypsies; they were placed right up at the top of the list. And, in that other modern totalitarian state, for the same reason it is banned and its members persecuted; I mean, of course, the USSR. The three great tyrannical states in history that have murdered their domestic Christian populations—Rome, the Third Reich, and the USSR—are, from an objective standpoint, three manifestations of a single matrix. Your own personal beliefs about religion are not an issue here; what is an issue is a historic fact, and therefore I ask you to ponder objectively what the overwhelming fear I felt regarding Christian rites and protestations of faith signifies about the Track A society abruptly remembered. It is a decisive clue about Track A. It tells us how radically different it was. I would like you, if you have gone this far, to accept my statements about my other memories that, under the sodium Pentothal, returned; it was a prison. It was dreadful; we overthrew it, just as we overthrew the Nixon tyranny, but it was far more cruel, incredibly so, and there was a great battle and loss of life. And, please, let me add one other fact, maybe objectively unimportant but to me interesting nonetheless. It was in February 1974 that my blocked-off memories of Track A returned, and it was in February 1974 that Flow My Tears was finally, after two years' delay, published. It was almost as if the release of the novel, which had been delayed so long, meant that in a certain sense it was all right for me to remember. But until then it was better that I did not. Why that would be I do not know, but I have the impression that the memories were not to come to the surface until the

material had been published very sincerely on the author's part as what he believed to be fiction. Perhaps, had I known, I would have been too frightened to write the novel. Or perhaps I would have shot my mouth off and somehow interfered with the effectiveness of these several books—whatever effectiveness that might be or was. I do not even claim there was an intended effectiveness; perhaps there was none at all. But if there was one—and I repeat the word “if” emphatically—it was almost certainly to stir subliminal memories in readers back to dim life—not a conscious life, not an entering consciousness as in my own case, but to recall to them on a deep and profound, albeit unconscious level, what a police tyranny is like, and how vital it is, now or then, at any time, along any track, to defeat it. In March 1974 the really crucial moves to depose Nixon were beginning. In August, five months later, they proved successful, although these reprogrammings, this intervention in our present, may have been designed more to affect a future continuum rather than our own. As I said at the beginning, ideas seem to have a life of their own; they appear to seize on people and make use of them. The idea that seized me twenty-seven years ago and never let go is this: Any society in which people meddle in other people's business is not a good society, and a state in which the government “knows more about you than you know about yourself,” as it is expressed in *Flow My Tears*, is a state that must be overthrown. It may be a theocracy, a fascist corporate state, or reactionary monopolistic capitalism or centralistic socialism—that aspect does not matter. And I am saying not merely, “It can happen here,” meaning the United States, but rather, “It did happen here. I remember. I was one of the secret Christians who fought it and to at least some extent helped overthrow it.” And I am very proud of that: proud of myself in time Track A. But there is, unfortunately, a somber intimation that accompanies my pride as to my work there. I think that in that previous world I did not live past March 1974. I fell victim to a police trap, a net or mesh. However, in this one, which I will call Track B, I had better luck. But we fought here in this track a much lighter tyranny, a far stupider one. Or, perhaps, we had assistance: The anterior reprogramming of one or more historic variables came to our rescue. Sometimes I think (and this is, of course, pure speculation, a happy fantasy of my soul) that because of what we accomplished there—or anyhow attempted to, and very bravely—we who were directly involved were allowed to live on here, past the terminal point that brought us down in that other, worse world. It is a sort of miraculous kindness. This gracious gift serves to delineate for us—for me at least—some aspects of the Programmer. It causes me to comprehend him after a fashion. I think we cannot know what he is, but we can experience this functioning and so can ask, “What does he resemble?” Not “What is he?” but rather “What is he like?”

First and foremost, he controls the objects, processes, and events in our space-time world. This is, for us, the primary aspect, although intrinsically he may possess aspects of vaster magnitude but of less applicability to us. I have spoken of myself as a reprogrammed variable, and I have spoken of him as the Programmer and Reprogrammer. During a short period of time in March 1974, at the moment in which I was resynthesized, I was aware perceptually—which is to say aware in an external way—of his presence. At that time I had no idea what I was seeing? [sic; this question mark appears, in context, to be a typo]. It resembled plasmic energy. It had colors. It moved fast, collecting and dispersing. But what it was, what he was—I am not sure even now, except I can tell you that he had simulated normal objects and their processes so as to copy them and in such an artful way as to make himself invisible within them. As the Vedantists put it, he was the fire within the flint, the razor within the razor case. Later research showed me that in terms of group cultural experience, the name Brahman has been given to this omnipresent immanent entity. I quote a fragment of an American poem [“Brahma”] by Emerson; it conveys what I experienced:

They reckon ill who leave me out;

When me they fly I am the wings.

I am the doubter and the doubt,

And I the hymn the Brahman sings.

By this I mean that during that short period—a matter of hours or perhaps a day—I was aware of nothing that was not the Programmer. All the things in our pluriform world were segments or subsections of him. Some were at rest but many moved, and did so like portions of a breathing organism that inhaled, exhaled, grew, changed, evolved toward some final state that by its absolute wisdom it had chosen for itself. I mean to say, I experienced it as self-creating, dependent on nothing outside it because very simply there was nothing outside it.

As I saw this I felt keenly that through all the years of my life I had been literally blind; I remember saying over and over to my wife, “I've regained my sight! I can see again!” It seemed to me that up until that moment I had been merely guessing as to the nature of the reality around me. I understood that I had not acquired a new faculty of perception but had, rather, regained an old one. For a day or so I saw as we once all had, thousands of years ago. But how had we come to lose sight, this superior eye? The morphology must still be present in us, not only latent; otherwise I could not have reacquired it even briefly. This puzzles me yet. How was it that for forty-six years I did not truly see but only guessed at the nature of the world, and then briefly did see, but soon after, lost that sight and became semiblind again? The interval in which I actually saw was, evidently, the interval in which the Programmer was reworking me. He had moved forward as palpably sentient and alive, as set to ground; he had disclosed himself. Thus it is said that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are revealed religions. Our God is the *deus absconditus*: the hidden god. But why? Why is it necessary that we be deceived regarding the nature of our reality?

Why has he cloaked himself as a plurality of unrelated objects and his movements as a plurality of chance processes? All the changes, all the permutations of reality that we see are expressions of the purposeful growing and unfolding of this single entelechy; it is a plant, a flower, an opening rose. It is a humming hive of bees. It is music, a kind of singing. Obviously I saw the Programmer as he really is, as he really behaves, only because he had seized on me to reshape me, so I say, "I know why I saw him," but I cannot say, "I know why I do not see him now, nor why anyone else does not." Do we collectively dwell in a kind of laser hologram, real creatures in a manufactured quasi-world, a stage set within whose artifacts and creatures a mind moves that is determined to remain unknown?

A newspaper article about this speech could well be titled: AUTHOR CLAIMS TO HAVE SEEN GOD BUT CAN'T GIVE ACCOUNT OF WHAT HE SAW.

If I consider the term by which I designate him—the Programmer and Reprogrammer—perhaps I can extract from that a partial answer. I call him what I call him because that was what I witnessed him doing: He had previously programmed the lives here but now was altering one or more crucial factors—this in the service of completing a structure or plan. I reason along these lines: A human scientist who operates a computer does not bias nor warp, does not prejudice, the outcome of his calculations. A human ethnologist does not allow himself to contaminate his own findings by participating in the culture he studies. Which is to say, in certain kinds of endeavors it is essential that the observer remain occluded off from that which he observes. There is nothing malign in this, no sinister deception. It is merely necessary. If indeed we are, collectively, being moved along desired paths toward a desired outcome, the entity that sets us in motion along those lines, that entity which not only desires the particular outcome but that wills that outcome—he must not enter into it palpably or the outcome will be aborted. What, then, we must turn our attention to is—not the Programmer—but the events programmed. Concealed though the former is, the latter will confront us; we are involved in it—in fact, we are instruments by which it is accomplished.

There is no doubt in my mind as to the larger, historic purpose of the reprogramming that paid off so spectacularly and gloriously in 1974. Currently I am writing a novel about it; the novel is called V.A.L.I.S., the letters standing for "VAST ACTIVE LIVING INTELLIGENCE SYSTEM." In the novel a government researcher who is very gifted but a little crazy formulates a hypothesis that declares that, located somewhere in our world, there exists a mimicking organism of high intelligence; it so successfully mimics natural objects and processes that humans are routinely unaware of it. When, due to chance or exceptional circumstances, a human does perceive it, he simply calls it "God" and lets it go at that. In my novel, however, the government researcher is determined to treat this vast, intelligent, mimicking entity the way a scientist would treat anything under scrutiny. His problem is, however, that by his own hypothesis he cannot detect the entity—certainly a frustrating experience for him.

But also in my novel I write about another person, unknown to this government researcher; that person has been having unusual experiences for which he has no theory. He has in fact been encountering Valis, who is in the process of reprogramming him. The two characters possess between them the whole truth: the correct but untestable hypothesis by one, the unexplained experiences by the other. And it is this other man, this nonscientific person, whom I identify with, because he, like me—he is beginning to retrieve blocked-off memories of another world, memories he cannot account for. But he has no theory. None at all.

In the novel I myself appear as a character, under my own name. I am a science fiction writer who has accepted a large advance payment for a yet unwritten novel and who must now come up with that novel before a deadline. I, in the book—I know both these men, Houston Paige, the government researcher with the theory, and Nicholas Brady, who is undergoing the unfathomable experiences. I begin to make use of material from both. My purpose is merely that of meeting my contractual deadline. But, as I continue to write about Houston Paige's theory and Nicholas Brady's experiences, I begin to see that everything fits together. I, in the novel, hold both key and lock, and no one else does.

You can see, I am sure, that it is inevitable, in my novel Valis, that eventually Houston Paige and Nicholas Brady meet. But this meeting has an odd effect on Houston Paige, he with the theory. Paige undergoes a total psychotic breakdown as a result of getting confirmation of his theory. He could imagine it but he cannot believe it. In his head his ingenious theory is dissociated from reality. And this is an intuition which I feel: that many of us believe in Valis or God or Brahman or the Programmer, but if we ever actually encountered it we could simply not handle it. It would be like a child driven mad by Christmas. He could sustain hoping and waiting, he could pray, he could wish, he could suppose and imagine and even believe; but the actual manifestation—that is too much for our small circuits. And yet the child grows up and there is the man. And those circuits—they grow, too. But to remember a different, discarded world? And to perceive the great planning mind that achieved that abolition, that unthreading of evil?

One thing I really want you to know: I am aware that the claims I am making—claims of having retrieved buried memories of an alternate present and to have perceived the agency responsible for arranging that alteration—these claims can neither be proved nor can they even be made to sound rational in the usual sense of the word. It has taken me over three years to reach the point where I am willing to tell anyone but my closest friends about my experience beginning back at the vernal equinox of 1974. One of the reasons motivating me to speak about it publicly at last, to

openly make this claim, is a recent encounter I have undergone, which, by the way, bears a resemblance to Hawthorne Abendsen's experience in *The Man in the High Castle* with the woman Juliana Frink. Juliana read Abendsen's book about a world in which Germany and Japan and Italy lost World War II and felt she should tell him what she comprehended about the book. This final scene in *The Man in the High Castle* has, I think, been the source for a similar scene in my later story "Faith of Our Fathers," where the girl Tanya Lee shows up and acquaints the protagonist with the actual reality situation—which is to say, that much of his world is delusional, and purposefully so. For several years I have had the feeling, a growing feeling, that one day a woman, who would be a complete stranger to me, would contact me, tell me that she had some information to impart to me, would then appear at my door, just as Juliana appeared at Abendsen's door, and would forthwith in the gravest possible way tell me exactly what Juliana told Abendsen—that my book, like his, was in a certain real, literal, and physical sense not fiction but the truth. Precisely that has recently happened to me. I am speaking of a woman who systematically read each and every novel of mine, more than thirty of them, as well as many of my stories. And she did appear; and she was a total stranger; and she did inform me of this fact. At first she was curious to find out if I myself knew, or if not that, whether I suspected it. The probing between us, the cautious questioning, lasted three weeks. She did not inform me suddenly or immediately, but rather gradually, watching carefully each step of the way, each step along the path of communication and understanding, to see my reaction. It was a solemn matter, really, for her to drive four hundred miles to visit an author whose many books she had read, books of fiction, of the author's imagination, to tell him that there are superimposed worlds in which we live, not one world only, and that she had ascertained that the author in some way was involved with at least one of these worlds, one canceled out at some past time, rewoven and replaced, and—most of all—does the author consciously know this? It was a tense but joyful moment when she reached the point where she could speak candidly; that point did not arrive in our encounter until she was certain that I could handle it. But I had, three years earlier, posited theoretically that if my retrieved memories were authentic, it was only a matter of time before a contact, a cautious, guarded probing by someone would occur, initiated by a person who had read my books and for one reason or another deduced the actual situation—I mean, knew what the significant information was that the books and stories carried. She knew, from my novels and stories, which world I had experienced, which of the many; what she could not determine until I told her was that, in February 1975, I had passed across into a third alternate present—Track C, we shall call it—and this one was a garden or park of peace and beauty, a world superior to ours, rising into existence. I could then speak to her of three rather than two worlds: the black iron prison world that had been; our intermediate world in which oppression and war exist but have to a great degree been cast down; and then a third alternate world that someday, when the correct variables in our past have been reprogrammed, will materialize as a superimposition onto this one... and within which, as we awaken to it, we shall suppose we had always lived there, the memory of this intermediate one, like that of the black iron prison world, eradicated mercifully from our memories. There may be other persons like this woman who have deduced from evidence internal to my writing, as well as from their own vestigial memories, that the landscape I portray as fictional is or was somehow literally real, and that if a grimmer reality could have once occupied the space that our world occupies, it stands to reason that the process of reweaving need not end here; this is not the best of all possible worlds, just as it is not the worst. This woman told me nothing that I did not already know, except that by independently arriving at the same conclusion she gave me the courage to speak out, to tell this but at the same time knowing as I do so that in no way—none that I know of, at least—can this presentation be verified. The best I can do, rather than that, is to play the role of prophet, of ancient prophets and such oracles as the sibyl at Delphi, and to talk of a wonderful garden world, much like that which once our ancestors are said to have inhabited—in fact, I sometimes imagine it to be exactly that same world restored, as if a false trajectory of our world will eventually be fully corrected and once more we will be where once, many thousands of years ago, we lived and were happy. During the brief time I walked about in it I had the strong impression that it was our legitimate home that somehow we had lost. The time I spent there was short—about six hours of real elapsed time. But I remember it well. In the novel I wrote with Roger Zelazny, *Deus Irae*, I describe it toward the end, at the point where the curse is lifted from the world by the death and transfiguration of the God of Wrath. What was most amazing to me about this parklike world, this Track C, was the non-Christian elements forming the basis of it; it was not what my Christian training had prepared me for at all. Even when it began to phase out I still saw sky; I saw land and dark blue smooth water, and standing by the edge of the water a beautiful nude woman whom I recognized as Aphrodite. At that point this other better world had diminished to a mere landscape beyond a Golden Rectangle doorway; the outline of the doorway pulsed with laserlike light and it all grew smaller and was at last alas gone from sight, the 3:5 doorway devouring itself into nothingness, sealing off what lay beyond. I have not seen it since, but I had the firm impression that this was the next world—not of the Christians—but the Arcady of the Greco-Roman pagan world, something older and more beautiful than that which my own religion can conjure up as a lure to keep us in a state of dutiful morality and faith. What I saw was very old and very lovely. Sky, sea, land, and the beautiful woman, and then nothing, for the door had shut and I was closed off back here. It was with a bitter sense of loss that I saw it go—saw her go, really, since it all constellated about her. Aphrodite, I discovered when I looked in my

Britannica to see what I could learn about her, was not only the goddess of erotic love and aesthetic beauty but also the embodiment of the generative force of life itself; nor was she originally Greek: In the beginning she had been a Semitic deity, later taken over by the Greeks, who knew a good thing when they saw it. During those treasured hours what I saw in her was a loveliness that our own religion, Christianity, at least by comparison, lacks: an incredible symmetry, the palintonos harmonie that Heraclitus wrote of: the perfect tension and balance of forces within the strung lyre that bowed by its stretched strings but that appears perfectly at rest, perfectly at peace. Yet, the strung lyre is a balanced dynamism, immobile only because the tensions within it are in absolute proportion. This is the quality of the Greek formulation of beauty: perfection that is dynamic within yet at apparent rest without. Against this palintonos harmonie the universe plays out the other aesthetic principle incorporated in the Grecian lyre: the palintropos harmonie, which is the back-and-forth oscillation of the strings as they are played. I did not see her like this, and perhaps this, the continual oscillation back and forth, is the deeper, greater rhythm of the universe things coming into existence and then passing away; change rather than a static durability. But for a little while I had seen perfect peace, perfect rest, a past we have lost but a past returning to us as if by means of a long-term oscillation, to be available as our future, in which all lost things shall be restored.

There is a fascinating passage in the Old Testament in which God says, "For I am fashioning a new heaven and a new earth, and the memory of the former things will not enter the mind nor come up into the heart." When I read this I think to myself: I believe I know a great secret. When the work of restoration is completed, we will not even remember the tyrannies, the cruel barbarisms of the Earth we inhabited; "not entering the mind" means we will mercifully forget, and "not coming up into the heart" means that the vast body of pain and grief and loss and disappointment within us will be expunged as if it had never been. I believe that process is taking place now, has always been taking place now. And, mercifully, we are already being permitted to forget that which formerly was. And perhaps in my novels and stories I have done wrong to urge you to remember.