

= The Last of the Masters =

The Last of the Masters (also known as Protection Agency) is a science fiction novelette by Philip K. Dick . The original manuscript of the story was received by the Scott Meredith Literary Agency on July 15 , 1953 , and the story was published by the Hanro Corporation in the final issue of Orbit Science Fiction in 1954 . It has since been reprinted in several Philip K. Dick story collections , beginning with The Golden Man in 1980 .

" The Last of the Masters " depicts a society 200 years after a global anarchist revolution has toppled the national governments of the world (the exact year is unstated) . Civilization has stagnated due to the loss of scientific knowledge and industry during the now @-@ legendary revolt . Elsewhere , the last state , governing a highly centralized and efficient society , conceals itself from the Anarchist League , a global militia preventing the recreation of any government . When three agents of the League are sent to investigate rumors of the microstate 's existence , the government arranges for them to be killed , leading to the death of one and the capture of another . Tensions rapidly escalate after the agents of the state realize that the third has escaped . Assuming he will report the state 's existence , the government mobilizes for total war . In actuality , the surviving anarchist elects to attempt his comrades ' rescue and assassinate the head of state : the last surviving " government robot " .

The primary theme of the story is the conflict between anarchism and statism , the political and ethical dimensions of which are explored through the characters ' dialogue . Though the attention the story received was limited prior to the author 's death in 1982 , it has since seen greater circulation in Philip K. Dick story collections , and has been reviewed and analyzed for its postmodern critique of technology and its political implications .

= = Synopsis = =

= = = The last government = = =

The title character , Bors , a 200 @-@ year @-@ old " government integration robot " ? and the last in existence ? awakens after a routine maintenance check to learn that his motor system is in a state of decline . An artificially intelligent machine who displays a degree of emotion and even psychological complexity , he is informed by Fowler , a personal mechanic , that his body has begun to break down due to age . His legs no longer work , his motor system will be irreparable in a matter of months , and full paralysis will take place in under a year .

Of his entire body , only five " synapse coils " have not yet begun to degrade . These memory units are irreplaceable due to the lack of skilled technicians and rare components needed to recreate them . Within them , he stores the last records of advanced science and technology , which he uses to guide his society at high efficiency as a benevolent dictator , operating according to utilitarian principles . Though he wields hegemonic control over his society , he views his dictatorship as the last bastion of humanity 's scientific progress , and views himself as a guardian who oversees and protects that progress . This causes him to privately despair that he ? and the knowledge only he possesses ? will soon die . He also becomes increasingly paranoid , fearing to trust a loyal assistant , Peter Green , and confiding only in Fowler , his personal mechanic .

Hidden in a remote mountain valley , Bors commands the world 's last government . The microstate is tightly centralized around him , and he manages it bureaucratically for optimum efficiency in all sectors of the economy and military . The effect is " an accurate and detailed reproduction of a society two centuries gone . " Bors is immediately established as an utterly necessary figure in his society and is quickly escorted back into service as the leader of the government by Fowler . A personal assistant as well as mechanic to Bors , Fowler maintains a pretension of loyalty to the robot , but privately recognizes that his society is stagnant and that its leader is becoming mentally unbalanced . Pessimistic , he expresses cynicism regarding the subservient role humans in his society play to Bors . He is contrasted with Peter Green , a genuinely loyal assistant to the robot ,

who is among the few humans trusted to oversee his body while it is unconscious for repair . Though loyal to his leader , Green nonetheless draws Bors ' distrust as the robot 's paranoia steadily grows .

= = = The Anarchist League = = =

Elsewhere , three members of the " Anarchist League " are on a mission to investigate rumors of a government in existence near a remote mountain valley . The League is a global organization dedicated to seeking out and eradicating governments . Established at some unknown point during or after the global revolt , the League is organized around " League camps " which dot the landscape . Members of the League are easily recognized by their " ironite staffs " : metallic walking sticks which they are trained in using as weapons . These tools are a symbol of the League ? " the walking Anarchists who patrolled the world on foot , the world 's protection agency . "

The three member team is composed of Edward Tolby , his daughter , Silvia Tolby (of unspecified age , but vaguely described as an adolescent or young adult) , and their mutual friend , Robert Penn . While en route to the valley , the team arrives in a small rural town by the name of Fairfax . Fairfax is littered with ancient , decaying gadgets ; the last remnants of the era of governments and high tech society , which none of the locals know how to fix or reproduce . Excited by the strangers , the locals ask about the League . Tolby answers their questions in turn , ending with an explanation of the timeline of events which led up to the great revolt . The event is summarized as having begun with revolts in Europe which overthrow the national governments . After France exists for a month free of government , millions join the by then explicitly anarchist movement to disarm the nuclear powers . At each toppled government center , millions of records are burned and government integration robots are destroyed . These events result in the setting of the story ; a world full of anachronistic high @-@ technology , interspersed in a pre @-@ industrialized , agrarian culture .

= = = Conflict and resolution = = =

While retelling the story of the anarchist revolution , Tolby attracts the attention of a local who invites the trio of anarchists to her home , but who is in secret a government spy ordered to kill them . The ensuing assassination plot is bungled , as the spy dies in the process , but succeeds in killing Penn . Silvia is also badly injured and left unconscious . Her father survives the tragedy largely unscathed , however , and awakens as a patrol of military scouts arrives . The scouts panic after a brief counterattack by Tolby and retreat with Silvia captive . After re @-@ arming himself , Tolby sets out to mount her rescue .

Bors is alerted to the situation and overreacts upon learning that one of the three anarchists has escaped . Fearing that the agent will alert the world to their existence , he initiates plans for a war economy and decides to question Silvia in her hospital room . Their dialogue reveals the story of his escape during the collapse of governments and the establishment of the microstate . He was damaged and in transport for repairs when the anarchist revolution began 200 years prior , allowing him to survive in hiding . Enraged by his calm indifference to the prospect of war , Silvia attacks him and attempts her escape , but is restrained by guards .

Tolby infiltrates the mountain valley , sneaking past the rapidly mobilizing army of the state . After killing and outmaneuvering inexperienced soldiers , he arrives at the government center and encounters Fowler . Fowler alludes to his desire to end the government and spurs Tolby onward . Ultimately , Tolby confronts and kills Bors , sending the building into confusion as the citizens react with hysteria and grief . The condition is implied to spread outward from the city to troops in the hills , resulting in mass desertion . No longer resisted by guards , Tolby reunites with Silvia . The story concludes as Fowler secretly salvages three remaining synapse coils from Bors ' remains , " just in case the times change " .

= = Publication history = =

The exact date Philip K. Dick wrote " The Last of the Masters " is unknown , but the original manuscript of the novelette was received by the Scott Meredith Literary Agency on July 15 , 1953 . 25 years old at the time , Dick was in the habit of submitting a new story to the agency weekly . Just prior to receiving " Last of the Masters " , the agency received " The Turning Wheel " on July 8 , and following the former , the agency received " The Father @-@ thing " on July 21 . " The Last of the Masters " was published over a year later , in the 1954 November / December issue of Orbit Science Fiction no.5. The issue was the last in a science fiction anthology series edited by Donald A. Wollheim . Orbit Science Fiction advertised " The Last of the Masters " on its cover and included Dick among an advertised list of prominent contributing authors , among them August Derleth , Gordon R. Dickson , and Chad Oliver . The novelette was republished in 1958 for the Australian market by Jubilee Publications Pty . , in Space Station 42 and Other Stories , a part of the Satellite Series .

The novelette was not published again until the 1980 release of The Golden Man , the sixth collection of classic stories by Dick . This collection also included the only commentary Dick ever wrote regarding the story . Thereafter , " The Last of the Masters " was included in six more print collections ? most of which have seen multiple print runs ? and two audiobooks .

= = = Publication list = = =

" The Last of the Masters " has been included in the following publications , listed by publication type :

Pulp magazines

Orbit Science Fiction vol.1 no.5. New York , NY : Hanro Corporation . November ? December 1954

Space Station 42 and Other Stories . Sydney , NSW : Jubilee Publications Pty . March 1958 .

Philip K. Dick collections

Hardcovers

The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick , Vol . III , The Father @-@ Thing . Lancaster , PA : Underwood @-@ Miller . 1987 . ISBN 0 @-@ 88733 @-@ 053 @-@ 3 .

Paperbacks

The Golden Man . New York , NY : Berkley Books . 1980 . ISBN 0 @-@ 425 @-@ 04288 @-@ X.
Robots , Androids , and Mechanical Oddities . Carbondale , IL : Southern Illinois University Press . 1984 . ISBN 0 @-@ 8093 @-@ 1159 @-@ 3 .

The Father @-@ Thing . London , England : Victor Gollancz Ltd . 1989 . ISBN 0 @-@ 575 @-@ 04616 @-@ 3 .

Second Variety . New York , NY : Citadel Twilight . 1991 . ISBN 0 @-@ 8065 @-@ 1226 @-@ 1 .

The Philip K. Dick Reader . New York , NY : Citadel Twilight . 1997 . ISBN 0 @-@ 8065 @-@ 1856 @-@ 1 .

The Early Work of Philip K. Dick , Volume Two : Breakfast at Twilight & Other Stories . Prime Books . November 2009 . ISBN 1 @-@ 60701 @-@ 203 @-@ 0 .

Audio collections

The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick , Vol . I. Blackstone Audio Ing . November 30 , 2008 . ISBN 1 @-@ 4332 @-@ 2825 @-@ 4 . Read by William Hughes . (cassette / CD / MP3)

The Selected Stories of Philip K. Dick , Vol . I. Blackstone Audio Ing . November 30 , 2008 . ISBN 1 @-@ 4332 @-@ 2822 @-@ X. Read by William Hughes . (iTunes)

= = = Copyright status = = =

= = = United States = = =

The Last Of The Masters is in the public domain in the United States because it was published in the United States between January 1 , 1950 and December 31 , 1963 , but copyright was not

renewed with the U.S. Copyright Office within a year period beginning on December 31 of the 27th year of the copyright and running through December 31 of the following year . When renewal registration was not made within the statutory time limit , copyright effectively expired at the end of its first term and protection was lost permanently . Copyright protection for Orbit Science Fiction No.5 and its contents was created under registration number B00000497234 .

After the author 's death , a nonexistent story with the same title was included under the new renewal registration number RE0000190631 . This created the appearance that " The Last Of The Masters " was still under copyright protection . This incorrect first publication date has been cited in several Dick anthologies (e.g. , The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick & The Selected Stories of Philip K. Dick) ; these publications falsely list the original publication of the story to have been in Imaginative Tales in November 1955 .

= = Reception = =

While " The Last of the Masters " was little noticed in the years immediately following its publication , it was reviewed after its 1980 publication in The Golden Man collection . Fellow science fiction writer Thomas M. Disch reviewed Dick 's The Golden Man collection among other works in " Fluff and Fizzles " , an essay dated to 1979 , but published in a 1980 edition of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction . While celebrating several stories in the collection , and proclaiming to readers the " categorical imperative " of buying a copy , he nonetheless derided most of its contents as " turkeys " , citing specifically " The Last of the Masters " as an example . Referring to the story as " a hyperkinetic foray into hairy @-@ chested @-@ style hugger @-@ mugger " , Disch also mocked its " action @-@ packed denouement " involving Edward Tolby as an example of " bogus machismo " .

In her 1982 review of the Golden Man collection , Hazel Pierce lauded the sophistication of the story , summarizing the theme of " The Last of the Masters " as an examination of " the paradoxical cast of human existence . "

= = Thematic analysis = =

= = = Technological critique = = =

In his 1980 commentary on the story , Dick also suggested that his reasoning for making Bors sympathetic was a result of a form of trust he advanced towards robots , as opposed to androids . " Perhaps " , he suggested , " it 's because a robot does not try to deceive you as to what it is " . One of the themes that runs throughout all of Dick 's fiction is the " power of empathy " and he uses it as the " key element defining the authentic human being " . For example , when Silvia meets the robot that runs the government , she exclaims " My God , you have no understanding of us . You run all this , and you 're incapable of empathy . You 're nothing but a mechanical computer . "

Christopher Palmer , of La Trobe University , has written on the postmodern literary themes of Dick 's early short stories , analyzing stories in which " breakdown and ignorance " are the result of social upheaval . Palmer proposed that Dick often created post @-@ apocalyptic scenarios of ruined worlds which held high tech gadgets in an attempt to present a view of postmodern materialism . Common to many of Dick 's short stories were settings in which the outgrowth of modernity is a world where that which is natural is in ruin , and what is artificial is reshaped through science into a fantastically high tech form . Palmer presented " The Last of the Masters " as an example of this , as well as " The Variable Man " and The Penultimate Truth , two other post @-@ apocalyptic works by Dick . Palmer contended that these shared themes were " ... not simply the expression of dystopian malaise , or of Luddism treacherously taking up residence in popular SF ... It points to a coherent interpretation of industrialism and post @-@ industrialism . "

Suggesting that many of the philosophical and political underpinnings of the author 's short stories stemmed from his views on domestic life , Palmer 's focus turned to Dick 's common use of sterility as a metaphor . In " The Gun " , " Second Variety " , The Penultimate Truth , and " The Last of the

Masters " , people and sometimes the earth itself have been driven to sterility . As Palmer noted of " The Last of the Masters " , Bors can be interpreted as a symbol of infertility : " It is not clear why he does not replicate himself , or educate his human servants : it is simply a given that he is sterile . The old , technologically advanced , highly organized civilization is a civilization of production , but now under Bors it can do no more than maintain itself . " Following an inspection of other short stories with similar references to sterility , Palmer asserts that Dick 's work presented a social and existential protest . Palmer interpreted Dick 's social critique to be that if the act of creation validates existence , and genuinely expresses a form of individuality , then the process of reproduction is alienating , oppressive , and retards an individual 's liberty . As Palmer explains , " ... this process disempowers consumers , and even technocrats , by making them dependent on a process of which they have become entirely ignorant . " Existentially , Palmer interpreted Dick to further mean that reproduction violated the author 's concept of what made an object unique and valuable : " A thing can 't be a real thing unless it is in some sense an individual thing . "

In writing a biography on the author , Brian Stableford placed several of Dick 's short stories in a context that established their relationship to the author 's personal hardships . " ... it always seemed to him [Philip K. Dick] that his career was a catalogue of undeserved disappointments and the record of his published work a travesty of his true ambitions . " The personal problems which Dick struggled throughout his life provided fuel for several of the anxiety driven themes for his short stories . In Dick 's early work , Stableford highlighted recurring themes in those most popular . These included paranoid suspicions ; the dangerous hostility of " seemingly innocent entities " ; and " the mechanization of the environment and the computerization of political decision @-@ making " . Stories in which androids and robots are a danger to the protagonist include " Autofac " , " Colony " , and Vulcan 's Hammer . However , " The Last of the Masters " , Stableford contends , was an exception to Dick 's common dystopic portrayals of technology , given Stableford 's interpretation of Bors as an altruist , who was " benign " in its role .

= = = Political interpretations = = =

In his 1980 commentary , Philip K. Dick pointed out the moral ambiguity of the story , laying out its political implications : " Should we have a leader or should we think for ourselves ? Obviously the latter , in principle . But ? sometimes there lies a gulf between what is theoretically right and that which is practical . " This quote became part of a larger political analysis of Dick 's work in How Much Does Chaos Scare You ? by Aaron Barlow , Associate Professor of English at New York City College of Technology . In analyzing Dick 's short fiction , Barlow presented their themes against the backdrop of post @-@ September 11 , 2001 America . In particular , Barlow compared many of the philosophical underpinnings of Neoconservatism , and its rise to prominence during the George W. Bush administration , to the philosophy of Philip K. Dick . " To [Dick] , " writes Barlow , " the elites were both alien and dangerous . To him , the focus of vision and of political debate should never be on the rulers , but on the little person , the shopkeeper , the mechanic . " In his dissection of Dick 's work , Barlow compared several stories in which normal humans lose some form of liberty in their society to an elite group . Examples presented include " Autofac " , " Null @-@ O " , and " Some Kinds of Life " . From these stories , Barlow drew three themes important to Dick 's anti @-@ government writings : first , that humanity is often doomed by institutions of power created by the humans themselves ; second , that paranoia is a natural aspect of governance , as " [n] o elite can ever completely trust the people it governs , " and this distrust leaves a governed people in perpetual danger ; and third , that the belief that individuality must be sacrificed ? either for the sake of social stability or survival ? is a constant threat . " To Dick , " Barlow adds , " there are few attitudes more dangerous than this . " Each of these themes would be revisited in " The Last of the Masters " .

Continuing his analysis , Barlow addressed " The Last of the Masters " , contrasting it with an earlier work by Dick , " The Defenders " . In " The Defenders " , humanity has been duped by a noble lie ? provided by their robot soldiers ? into believing in a war which is not actually taking place . In the latter story , Barlow asserts that Dick surprisingly agreed with such neoconservative theorists as Leo

Strauss in the efficacy of the deception . " Here , the [robots] have saved mankind ... The ' noble lie ' has served its purpose . " However , Barlow concedes , " [b] ut this is an extremely early story and Dick had not yet clarified his own world view ... " Comparing this story to " The Last of the Masters " , Barlow took note of Dick 's commentary from The Golden Man collection (" ... sometimes there lies a gulf between what is theoretically right and that which is practical . ") and concluded that the story represented Dick 's understanding of " the problems at the other extreme ... " in politics . Where most of Dick 's stories presented government in skeptical terms to warn the reader of potential abuse , " The Last of the Master " presented an argument for the utility of government .

Barlow dissected the Anarchist League and " the contradictory nature of their organization " which patrolled a " poor and dirty " world , and juxtaposed this with the " opulent organization of the (state) " . In particular , he highlighted dialogue by the robot master , Bors , as illustrating the importance of his leadership to the success of the micro @-@ state . In the story , a conversation with a mechanic leads the robot to state , " You know I 'm the only one who can keep all this together . I 'm the only one who knows how to maintain a planned society , not a disorderly chaos ! If it weren 't for me , all this would collapse , and you 'd have dust and ruins and weeds . The whole outside would come rushing in to take over ! " Barlow concluded that while the story ended in triumph for the anarchists , the story did not go so far as to validate their society . " Dick does not vindicate them , " writes Barlow , " keeping it clear that the robot had certainly accomplished something in that valley , though it had eventually gone too far . "

= = = Spiritual allegory = = =

In a commentary made for the 1980 anthology , The Golden Man , Philip K. Dick briefly touched on several themes of the story , including the Christian allegory of the " suffering servant " , manifested in the character of Bors . This was touched upon in the Dick biography Divine Invasions , by memoirist and biographer Lawrence Sutin . Drawing on Dick 's commentary , Sutin sees Bors as part of a religious pattern in Dick 's stories as a " Christ @-@ like robot " , and likens the robot to characters in other stories by Dick who suffer from illness .