COSMOPOLIS

Number 55 November, 2004

Contents

Recruitment Drive

COSMOPOLIS readers will have noted the extensive reports in last month's edition devoted to 'GM3.2', the meeting at Chinon to get the final texts ready for publication. The next stage in proceedings is GM4.2, when eager volunteers get one last chance to pore over the proofs to spot errors which may still be lurking in the texts. Any mistakes which survive GM4.2 will make it all the way into your VIE sets!

The GM4.2 volunteers are therefore important people, worthy of the gratitude and admiration of VIE readers the world over. But who are they? Put simply, they could be YOU! I am looking for volunteers to help with GM4.2 by undertaking to review one VIE volume during the first fortnight of December. The kind of issues we expect to find, based on previous experience, include:

- Kerning errors – particularly cramped words or lines
- Eccentric hyphenation
- Inconsistencies in font
- 'Classic' proofing errors such as missing punctuations

If this is the kind of work which interests you, and you can commit to a two-week turnaround, please email me: gm4@dragonchaser.net. You need not be an experienced VIE volunteer (although if you are, you're especially welcome): if you'd always thought you'd like to volunteer but never got round to it, this may very well be your last chance!

I look forward to working with you.

Tim Stretton
Golden Master Co-ordinator

You have done it!

VIE work Credits

Compiled by Hans van der Veeke

There were a lot of mistakes in the previous credits. This was because it was kind of a rush job. Rush jobs are never good but sometimes they cannot be avoided. In this article I would like to apologize to anyone who was forgotten or was mistakenly mentioned. Here is the list of mistakes.

Correction Validation on *The Absent-minded Professor* was not done by Mark Bradford but by Steve Sherman. Also Paul Rhoads did composition on this file.

Rhialto the Marvellous has a similar issue. Steve Sherman did Correction Validation on this file and Paul did some composition on this file also.

Andreas Irle did some composition work on *Phalids Fate* and *Crusade to Maxus* which resulted in a volume credit change for volume 5.

And last but not least, Steve Sherman did the board review on *Phailid's Fate* and not Tim Stretton. Thanks to Bob Luckin who pointed these issues out to me.

Another mistake was the spelling of Chris LaHatte's name. It is 'LaHatte' instead of 'laHatte'.

I have corrected all these mistakes and the correct files can be found on the website. The corrections will also make it to print in the Wave 2 volumes.

This issue has no credits because no files were finished since the last *Cosmopolis*. There are only a few remaining texts. *Space Opera* (volume 18) and *The Star King* (volume 22) are in the final stages. This is also true for *Ports of Call* and *Lurulu* (volume 43). And for volume 44 *Wild Thyme and Violets* and *The Stark* are still in progress. So we have still not arrived at the finish line! I hope to present more credits in the next *Cosmopolis*.

Until then you can check your credits on the website

a. go to www.vanceintegral.com
b. click on Editors only
c. click on Volunteer Credits (second link from top)
d. Or go to the page directly: www.vie-tracking.com/www/credits/

Any questions, additions or changes can be emailed to me at hans@vie.tmfweb.nl.

Work Tsar Status Report

as of November 1, 2004

All texts have completed TI.
Three texts are in composition and Post Proof. The remaining three texts are in the final composition and updating process.
Seven volumes of the last 11 have been completed at GM 3.2. The first 11 volumes (GM 3.1) are being finalized with frontispiece work and will be ready for final printing in the next couple of weeks.

Last month:
+ In-TI: 1 texts (1.2%)
+ Post-TI: 5 texts (6.1%)
+ Volume Ready: 76 texts (92.68%)
+ Volumes Ready: 7 (31.82%)
+ Volumes Completed: 11 (50%)

This month:
+ In-TI: 0 texts (0%)
+ Post-TI: 6 texts (7.32%)
+ Volume Ready: 76 texts (92.68%)
+ Volumes Ready: 7 (31.82%)
+ Volumes Completed: 11 (50%)

Joel Riedesel

The Mathematical Vance, Part 9

Richard Chandler

Recently rereading *Night Lamp*, I was reminded that a group of the social clubs (so important in the life of most citizens of Thanet on the world Gallingale) is named for one of the most famous problems in mathematics: the Four Quadrants of the Squared Circle. To understand the problem we have to go back in time to around 300 BC when Euclid "published" what is arguably the second most influential book in Western Civilization. Innocuously titled *Elements*, this was the first textbook in abstract mathematics. In it Euclid presented what the Greeks had discovered in geometry during the preceding 350 years. Much more importantly, he developed the material from first principles: a set of 23 definitions (*e.g.*, "A point is that which has no part."), 5 postulates (*e.g.*, "To draw a straight line from any point to any point."), and 5 axioms (*e.g.*, "Things which are equal to the same thing are also equal to one another.").

It would be impossible to overstate the importance of *Elements*. Every educated person for the next 2100 years studied it. It is clear from the way *The Declaration of Independence* is worded that Thomas Jefferson modeled it on Euclid's presentation (my interpolations are in brackets):

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, [axioms and postulates were considered to be self-evident, requiring no proof]
>
> [AXIOM 1] that all men are created equal,
> [AXIOM 2] that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.
> [AXIOM 3] That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the consent of the governed,
> [AXIOM 4] that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.
>
> [There follows a long list of grievances which proves the Proposition] A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

When Abraham Lincoln first ran for President he prepared a short autobiography at the request of John L. Scripps of the *Chicago Press and Tribune*. It contained this fascinating tidbit regarding his education:

> After he was twenty-three and had separated from his father, he studied English grammar–imperfectly, of course, but so as to speak and write as well as he now does. He studied and nearly mastered the six books of Euclid since he was a member of Congress. He regrets his want of education, and does what he can to supply the want.

His *Gettysburg Address* pays homage to Jefferson's *Declaration*, that most Euclidean of our sacred documents.

In 1876 while still a member of Congress, James A. Garfield, our 20th President, discovered what is probably still the easiest proof of the Pythagorean Theorem (Proposition 47 in *Elements*).

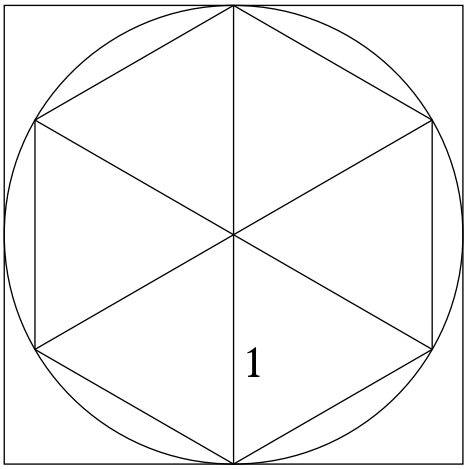
But we should get back to the Squared Circle. Euclid's first three postulates defined the straight edge (for drawing lines) and compass (for drawing circles) as the appropriate *tools* for geometry. Construction of figures using only these two tools thus became an early part of geometry. They had to be used correctly: The straight edge was unmarked (*not* a ruler) and could be used only to draw a line through two previously determined points. The compass could be used only to draw a circle having a given center point and passing through another point. The intersections of lines or circles with other lines or circles generated new points to use for constructing new lines or circles.

Three difficult construction problems became known:

1. To trisect an arbitrary angle. (That is, divide it into three equal subangles.)
2. To double a cube. (That is, construct a cube having twice the volume of a given cube.)
3. To SQUARE A CIRCLE. (That is, construct a square having the same area as a given circle.)

Although attracting a lot of attention for at least 2000 years, all proved to be completely intractable and during the 19th Century they were shown to be impossible. Euclid's two tools allowed addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and the extraction of SQUARE roots of numbers which were lengths of line segments. However, the first two problems required the extraction of cube roots (proved in 1837 by Pierre L. Wantzel) and the third required constructing a segment of length π.

Now π is a very strange number. Its definition is simple: π is the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter. (Archimedes proved this ratio was the same for all circles.)



This picture shows that π is between 3 and 4:

Since the diameter of the circle is 2, the perimeter of the circle is 2π, by the definition of π. But the perimeter is clearly greater than that of the inside hexagon (6) and clearly less than that of the outside square (8). Thus $6 < 2\pi < 8$. If we divide these inequalities by 2, we get $3 < \pi < 4$. This is about the only property of π which is easy to argue.

It was Archimedes who originated the idea of trapping 2π between the perimeters of inside and outside polygons. Using 96 sided polygons he was able to show that $223/71 < \pi < 22/7$. This means that $3.1408 < \pi < 3.1429$. In 1706 John Machin used an entirely different method to approximate π accurate to 100 decimal places. In 1768 Johann Lambert proved that π is irrational, that is, *not* a fraction. Finally, in 1882 Ferdinand von Lindemann proved that π is a transcendental number, that is, *not* the solution of any polynomial equation having integer coefficients. Since no transcendental length can be constructed, this result doomed all circle-squaring activity.

I wonder what the Kahulibahs, the Zonkers, the Bad Gang and the Naturals were thinking to name their group the Four Quadrants of the Squared Circle. Of course, over its 2000+ year history many people thought they had solved the problem. Much of Augustus De Morgan's *magnum opus*, *A Budget of Paradoxes*, was given to debunking the various circle squarers who were active around the middle of the 19th Century. Perhaps some member of the Bad Gang thought he had solved the problem after all. It would certainly have provided a substantial increment to his comporture.

38's Crucible

Wave 2 Delivery

The printers and binders in Milan have prepared the covers for most of the books. By the time this is published 'batch 1' of wave 2 will be in print (volumes: 3, 8, 13, 14, 15, 21, 24, 27, 32, 33, and 41) and proofs for the batch 2 volumes will be in preparation, to be sent to GM4.2 reviewers. We are counting on wave 2 packing for February. The 'first' printing of wave 2 will be identical in numbers to wave 1. Once these books are packed and sent, there will be a 'second printing' of both waves, for all 'late' subscribers, which will then be packed and shipped in March or April.

For 'early' subscribers: before delivery of your wave 2 books you must pay the delivery charge. 'Late' subscribers will be asked to pay this charge before delivery, and will receive both 'wave' boxes at the same time.

Cosmopolis 54 Frontispiece Quiz

The following people entered the frontispiece contest announced in *Cosmopolis* 54:

Willem Timmer
Helmut Hlavacs
Derek W. Benson
Kingsley Sawyers
Richard Chandler

There were two winning entries, both by Richard Chandler. In the case of the etching shown on page 29, Richard correctly identified the location, in *Throy*, as Stroma and Denzel Attabus as the personage with raised arms. The caption of the frontispiece of volume 41 will be:

I have reached the Ninth Sign of the Noble Way, and you suggest that I broaden my perspectives?

Several contestants correctly identified the scene from *The Anome* where Etzwane first encounters Ifness; see page 5 of *Cosmopolis* 54. The caption will be:

The man, reining the pacer to a halt, gave Etzwane a somber appraisal.

Most contestants guessed that the missing element was Ifness'torc. But since Ifness is turned away his torc plaque cannot be seen. Note that Etzwane hides his naked neck by clutching his collar close. The missing element is still to be found. Can any sharp-eyed person tell?

As for the etching on page 14, this illustrates volume 8, The Houses of Iszm. The caption is:

Farr, a man with a highly developed social conscience, became indignant.

Congratulations to Richard who is awarded the prizes for his correct entries.

Re: Star King

Magazine Printing and Publishing Procedures

Information from David B. Williams

I've been browsing through *Cosmopolis* 54. I'm glad I'm not personally involved in the *Star King* TI issues. What a mass of perplexities.

As a former magazine editor, I can cast some light on

one question: No typesetter made any cuts in the text. It is a prime credo of their guild to set the copy that is put before them. The typesetter sets the text in a single column of specified line width. In the days before electronic production, the result was then returned to the customer on long strips of paper, or "galley proofs."

It was up to the editor, or the production manager, to cut these strips up and paste them onto page layout sheets. This is when minor cuts (or additions) are made to fit the type to the page. The standard way to fit excess text to the page is to eliminate (or create) "widows", the last lines of paragraphs that contain only one or two words. By cutting (or adding) something within the paragraph, that last line can be eliminated (or created) when the paragraph is re-set.

Occasionally, a story will fit a number of full pages with just a line or two left over. Rather than create a jump ("continued on page 127") to the back of the magazine for just those few lines, the editor will cut an equivalent number of lines farther up in the text so the story will end at the bottom of the last full page.

The same procedure of formatting text to pages applies also to books but to a lesser degree. Unlike magazine publishers, book publishers don't seem to mind a few inches of blank paper at the end of a chapter, or a couple of blank pages at the end of a book.

Once the editor or production manager had pasted the galley proofs onto page layout forms, these paste-ups were returned to the printer. The editor usually marked last-minute changes on the paste-ups to deal with those "widows" I mentioned earlier, or changing line breaks when the existing breaks didn't occur at the appropriate places (you wouldn't want a break at the very bottom of a column, for example).

The typesetter set these corrections. Then, if the printing were being done with metal type, the compositor would arrange the metal slugs of type in page frames with the appropriate spacing, page numbers, etc., and a group of these page frames would be locked up in a larger frame to form the "signature" of 8, 12, or 16 pages that would be run on the press.

If the printing was done on an "offset" or photo-lithography press, the page paste-ups would go to the typesetter as before, and the corrections made. Then a clean set of galley proofs would be produced if the type were still being set in metal, or a clean copy of the columnar text would be generated if the typesetting were being done electronically.

In either case, these new proofs then would be sliced up by a "keyliner" or page layout artist and pasted down very accurately on page layout forms (in cheap publications such as 1960's SF magazines, you can sometimes notice that a portion of text is out of alignment because it was nudged before the glue dried, or the bottom edges of the letters in a line of type are missing because the layout artist was a little careless with his/her Exacto knife when cutting between two lines of text). This keyline paste-up was then photographed and the negatives used to "burn" the printing plate that would produce a signature of printed pages on the offset press.

So the SF magazine editor had two basic opportunities to alter an author's text: (1) writing changes on the author's manuscript before it was sent to the typesetter (copyediting: when vassarization occurs), or (2) to a lesser degree on the galley proofs when they were pasted up into page forms (re-setting type costs money, so alterations at this stage were held to a minimum, just generally the formatting of text to pages that I discussed earlier).

In an ideal situation, editors could correct galley proofs, return them to the printer, get back corrected galleys and then paste them up into pages, and then get page proofs back for inspection and additional correction – but this would have been more common in the book publishing business. Magazine publishing was too rushed and cost-driven for many editors to wallow in such luxury.

Understanding these production processes explains why the magazine version of a story might be closer to the author's manuscript than the book version.

Editorially, most SF magazines in the 1960's were one-man shops. There might be a girl in the corner of the publishing office who did the paste-ups, and a part-time assistant editor who read through the slush pile to eliminate the impossible manuscripts before the editor saw the rest, but the editor was basically responsible for everything. He did not have time to invest in detailed copyediting - best just to buy the manuscripts without serious problems and reject those that would require too much attention.

On the other hand, book publishing was a more leisurely process, and publishers usually had full-time copy editors who justified their positions by the work they did on each manuscript. This guaranteed that, in addition to the editor's "artistic interpolations", there would be a degree of vassarization by the copy editor.

There is a special factor to consider with regard to the Galaxy serialization of *Star King*: the editor was Frederik Pohl, a good writer himself, not one of the editorial drudges who worked on some other magazines. If he had

the time and inclination, he could have done a skillful job of "formatting" the text to the magazine layout.

A side issue: Jack was normally represented by an agent. In such arrangements, a writer would send the agent the final, clean typescript and save the carbon copy at home as security against loss of the original. Norma might recall whether there was actually a second carbon copy "for the file" so the first carbon copy could also be circulated to publishers. Or perhaps the Vances considered the first typed manuscript, marked up with Jack's revisions, as an adequate security copy. If disaster struck, poor Norma could always type it up again.

Vance at the Merrill Collection

Lorna Toolis, of the Merrill Collection in Toronto Canada, has sent photos of their recent exhibition: 'The Many Faces of Jack Vance', including this display of their VIE collection. Lorna reports that the show was a success.

Why Etchings?

It has been asked why, if the VIE books must have frontispieces, they are to be etchings. Today photo reproduction of images in any medium is possible; it has been suggested that the VIE choice is 'nostalgic', or 'self-consciously antiquarian' or — even less charitably — a 'faux antique' aesthetic.

It is true that there is a traditional, not to say venerable, relationship between books and engraved illustrations, and the VIE frontispieces will, indeed, not be actual etchings but photographic reproductions of etchings. The 'nostalgia' criticism, however, is based on the historicist fallacy, or its most vulgar interpretation: the past is not only incomprehensible but irrelevant, so that any reference to it, other than more or less contemptuous rejection, is tainted with blind and guilty conservatism if not, per the preferred epithet of contemporary intellectual terrorism, 'fascism'. Historicism, or the idea that values evolve and progress with the passage from age to age, is the historical expression of relativism. Relativism is a philosophical, or pseudo-philosophical, strategy to escape the restraints traditionally opposed to our human lusts. While rejecting permanent values and truths does efficiently smooth the road to sin, it also has unintended secondary consequences like elevating fashion and power to the highest dignity — for, once the past is swept away, what is left to oppose them? Gutter phenomena, spray-can graffiti and 'rap music', are therefore honored as 'cultural expressions', as valuable and enriching as the paintings of Renoir and the symphonies of Mozart. But this is only collateral damage wreaked by the philosophical dirty bomb of relativism. Its actual target is so called 'traditional values'; the modes of life and thought which allowed humanity to traverse the ocean of the ages from the dawn of time until the middle of the 20th century when, the prophecy of historicism fulfilling itself, we have indeed entered an alien era, the denizens of which are, as predicted, seemingly incapable of comprehending the import of anything but their current fad. It seems clear that this new era, satirized by Vance in stories like *Murth*, is likely to plunge us into a stone age, but it also seems that most people want their western culture after all. Slowly and ineluctably, therefore, the weirdness is evaporating. Enjoy it while it lasts! In another 10 years the mini-skirts will be replaced by something more like a burka.

Half a century ago, however, historicism had already been unanswerably shown as self-contradictory and absurd — by Leo Strauss in his famous work, *Natural Right and History*. This transgression earned him the deepest antagonism of the left, which either ignores him into invisibility or diabolicizes him to full extent. One hears of Leo Strauss only when he is accused of being the godfather of the neo-conservatives, the American equivalent of al Qaeda and bin Laden. One way and another, however, the name 'Leo Strauss' will be heard more and more as modernism, making its final stand, is obliged to confront its most dangerous foe face to face.

For the purposes of this essay it is enough to say that worship of fashion and success, if understandable, will not impress men of virtue, at least not to the point where they neglect their god-given capacity of discernment. If

it is healthy and a tonic to question and criticize received ideas, intellectual terrorism should be resisted with vigor, particularly when it directly contradicts ordinary and natural human reactions.

The VIE aesthetic pretends to timelessness. Its basic assumption is therefore the opposite of historicism; certain things are of universal and permanent value.

The modernist claim that, since Vance's work has, so far, been presented in a certain guise — 'vulgarian', 'garish', 'trashy' or 'commercial' — to present it otherwise betrays its nature. This is what I mean by worship of fashion. But the true nature of Vance's work is not defined by how it may have been packaged and sold. Its true nature, properly understood, is 'timeless literature'. It is therefore most appropriate to present it as such. Serious literature, for various reasons, has mostly been presented, for the last several centuries and even today, in small easy-to-handle volumes, of handsome, rugged and simple aspect, often with engraved frontispieces. The use of engraved frontispieces, with the general collapse of visual art, has gone out of fashion in recent decades, but not with Vance himself who likes illustrated books — assuming the illustrations are of quality and do not betray the stories.

Etching, or more properly speaking 'engraving', is not itself a 'universal and permanent' value. It is merely a particular form, or medium, of expression. It is not, however, without its specific powers and special uses. We do not eat soup with a shovel nor do we dig ditches with a spoon. There is a dynamic relationship between the particular and timely, and the universal and eternal, which is the spice of life. It is not because our calendars say 'AD 2000' that we stop walking on our feet and take to walking on our hands. It is not because the female girls fall under the spell of such and such a vestimentary craze that the boys, more or less abashed and defenseless, will cease to study them as carefully as possible. Even under her burka, or perhaps all the more for that, the Arab matron inspires the dreams which have made the world go round since Adam discovered the fig-leaf. Abrogating cosmic laws, like the one proclaiming that man is man and woman is woman* is not only a disaster, it is a dead-end.

A Very Brief History of Engraving

Printing, typically, is 'positive'; wood cuts or letter type are salient surfaces which, inked and pressed onto paper, make an imprint according to their shape. Engraving, on the other hand, is 'negative'. Cuts or channels are made into a surface of smooth metal; the plate is then inked in such a way that the ink is forced into the cuts. The surface of the plate is then wiped clean. The paper is humidified to render it supple, laid upon the plate and pressed with great pressure by passing it between steel rollers. The paper is covered with a felt blanket which helps force the paper into the inked depressions where it picks up the imprint. This technique, known as 'engraving', makes it easy to obtain a degree of precision and detail impossible to obtain with 'positive' techniques such as wood-block printing, and supplanted the latter in the 16th century as the standard method of image reproduction. Engraving continued supreme in this function until it was eventually replaced, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, first by lithography and then photographic processes. While hand-illustrated books, such as were created in the Middle Ages, continued to be widely produced even in the 19th century — lavishly color-illustrated reference works on botanical subjects for example — engraving was the only medium for large-run book printing illustration for several centuries. There existed, during this time, a class of professional engravers. The work of these specialists was usually to make copies of paintings or drawings by artists, rather than creating original works themselves. Several great artists, however, practiced engraving in their own right, and some great artists began their careers as trained engravers. Francois Boucher, one of the greatest painters of the 18th century, and all time, was among them. Though he did no engraving in his maturity Boucher was

Engraving in the 'crayon manner' (manniere de crayon), from plate VIII of the 'Gravure' section of the *Encyclopedia* of Diderot and d'Alembert.

* See *Murth*.

responsible for the last and most important innovation of engraving technique: the so called 'chalk manner'. As a youth Boucher was charged with engraving reproductions of the drawings of Antoine Watteau. Watteau, considered one of the greatest draftsmen of all time, did not draw in ink but with chalk. Ink gives neat black lines, which correspond nicely to the natural result, crisp black lines, produced by engraving. Chalk, on the other hand, has a broad and soft effect; the 'tooth' or texture of the paper retains more or less pigment as the 'crayon', which can be much wider than a pen nib, is drawn across the paper. Boucher invented a method of imitating chalk lines with engraving. He did this by conceiving of tools which, rather than the chisel-like 'burin' which is the engraver's basic tool, had broad spiky surfaces or even specially toothed 'wheels', thanks to which clusters or swaths of small indents imitate the effect of the tooth of the paper.

Today engraving remains important for certain printing processes. I do not know if they still print dollar bills from engraved plates, but the models must still be carved with burins because, as far as I know, there is no other way to obtain such results. Engraving is no longer the all important technique of reproduction it used to be. It continues, however, to be a popular medium in its own right.

THE ART OF ENGRAVING

The word 'engraving' comes from the fact of 'graving' lines into metal. 'Etching' is a type of engraving where the lines are 'etched' with acid rather than carved with burins. Traditional engraving technique, as practiced in the heyday of engraved reproductions, combined these techniques. Typically the work began with etching and was finished with burin and 'dry point' work — the latter a technique of scratching, rather than gouging, adapted to certain delicate effects. To etch with acid, the plate (traditionally copper, but iron and zinc are also used) is covered with a wax 'varnish'. Lines are then traced through this varnish with 'needles'. The plate is then bathed in acid. The operation is delicate, with great latitude for error. The action of the acid depends on the quality of the metal, the strength and composition of the acid, the temperature of the air. Incorrectly prepared varnish may not adhere well, flaking away before the bite is deep. The acid, in any case, not only attacks 'down' into the metal but, after biting down, attacks laterally any exposed metal, undercutting the varnish. For this reason, in etching, lines may not be traced too closely because the acid will merge them and destroy the intended effect. Burin work is delicate in other ways, requiring dexterity and experience. Once the plate itself is ready it must be printed, a critical operation of many steps. The ink must be properly diluted with oil, a matter depending on the nature of the engraved lines, wiping techniques and type of paper. Wiping is another delicate operation and its proper execution is one of great secrets of the technique. The paper must be correctly humidified; too much water and the ink is 'floated' away. Too little and the paper fails to penetrate the inked crevices. Finally the press must be adjusted to a critical pressure. All these factors — the nature of the engraved lines, the quality of the ink, the manner of wiping, the type and humidity of the paper — must be coordinated; failure at any point spoils the work.

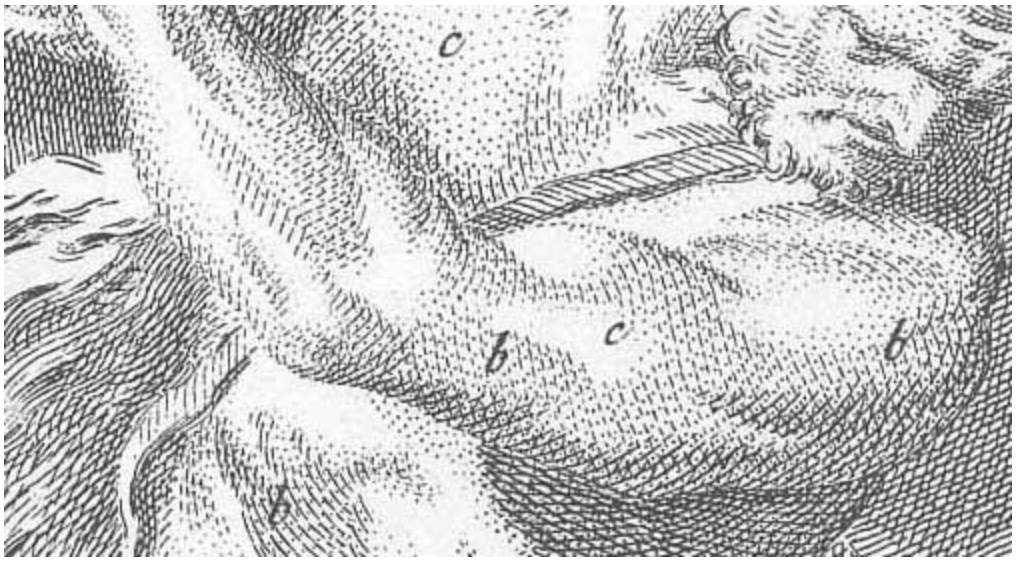
I emphasize these technical constraints to explain why engraving was, generally, a matter for specialists, or why it may justly be characterized as a 'secondary technique'. The engraver, whether specialist or original artist in his own right, must not only, like any illustrator or painter, succeed in his draftsmanship, he must also cope with the numerous technical constraints imposed by a medium recourse to which might seem, therefore, justified only by its utility in reproduction. Since this utility has disappeared — and with it the specialists — why does engraving remain popular; why has it not been abandoned by artists?

ENGRAVING AS ART

Hogarth, the great English painter and satirist, was an artist who began his artistic carrier as a trained engraver. But he deplored his early training. He believed that beauty, the object and source of art, is a natural and living phenomenon. Artificial and mechanical processes, he felt, betray and hamper art. Despite this complaint Hogarth's etchings often take full advantage of specialist's artifices, and the techniques are of interest in themselves.

To say nothing of special tools and procedures, engraving techniques include an elaborate science of lines, dashes and dots, parallel and interwoven in various ways, as well as juxtaposition of cuts of greater and lesser width, depth and spacing. The specialist was taught about various moiré patterns introduced by incorrect overlapping, which introduced lines of white dots in opposition to the composition. The finality of all this technique was effects of volume, light and texture. It was perfected in order to better imitate and reproduce famous paintings. I will not describe these techniques specifically but a glance at the reproduced enlargements ('Engraving techniques' 1 and 2) will give the reader some idea of what is involved.

Engraving technique 1: detail of Hogarth's *Self Portrait*.



Engraving technique 2: from plate IV of the 'Gravure' section of the *Encyclopedia* of Diderot and d'Alembert.

However, and from its origins, engraving was never restricted to reproduction. It was also practiced by many important artists as a primary medium of creation. Among them is the 16th century German, Albrecht Dürer, probably the most famous engraver of all time. Engraving was particularly suited to his combination of heavy force and nimble exactitude. Inspecting the detail from his famous *Melancholia* we see that Dürer's technique does not depend on the savant overlappings of the 18th century specialist but is much closer to the wood block technique of parallel lines, current at that time. Dürer also prolongs his with dots; an obvious facility offered by engraving. Overlapping and dotted line, if not impossible, are unnatural and prohibitively laborious in wood-cuts, for obvious reasons. If, compared to Hogarth's sleeve, Dürer's is less supple and cloth-like, it has a bravura and authority all its own. Metal engraving (*Melancholia* is an etching in steel) allowed Dürer an ideal outlet to his penchant for amazingly exact and concentrated powerful work, and it may be argued that his etchings are the supreme expression of his particular genius.

Detail from Dürer's *Melancholia*.

Another famous non-specialist etcher was the 17th century Dutchman, Rembrandt. By Rembrandt's time engraving technique was highly developed but, while Rembrandt's etchings are among the greatest ever made they do not depend upon them. As with Dürer, Rembrandt expresses his unique creative powers through and despite the constraints of the medium. Rembrandt was an enthusiastic draftsman who worked in many techniques: pen, wash, chalk. He approached etching, to begin with, in exactly the same manner he approached ink drawing. Etching, however, allowed, and demanded, that he pursue the work in directions and with methods that have nothing to do with drawing. Some of Rembrandt's etchings culminate in brilliant effects of fine modeling and suave areas of black and gray shadow.

The image quality of *Christ Preaching*, its combination of subtlety and force, would be difficult to achieve with pen drawing, which does not lend itself to the measured and exact tonal construction so natural to engraving. None of Rembrandt's etchings, however, depend on the 'artificial' and 'mechanical' specialist approach deplored by Hogarth. This can be understood by looking at an early state* Rembrandt etching in detail. In *The Lion Hunt*, for example, we see not a specialist at work but a draftsman and a painter. Rembrandt sketches on the plate, throwing in his forms and shadows with the sort of confidant and bold approximation one might expect of the first strokes of a painting. Totally absent is any hint of the plodding and exact method of the professional engraver. Note the shadow covering half the huntsman's face. To obtain a result such as he reaches in *Christ Preaching* Rembrandt might have had to burnish away some of these lines. Note the continuous scribble shading in the upper right; such a system of lines would baffle any effort to get a controlled zone of tone or define more exactly elements in the background, such as we see in the Hogarth example. Note the draftsman-like squiggle representing the shadow which defines the inner part of the horse's knee; though powerful in itself, this line, in the context of engraving, would hamper any further articulation of this form.

Detail from *Christ Preaching*, by Rembrandt.

* Proofs, or prints of an engraving are said to be of the 'first', 'second' and etc. 'state'. A state is the stage of the development of the plate, as measured by the difference in proofs printed at various stages during its development.

Detail from *The Lion Hunt* by Rembrandt.

One can imagine the squawks of outrage were a student to present such work to Hogarth's engraving instructors. Their concerns, it should be emphasized, would not have focused on 'messiness'. These technicians, being connoisseurs of art in general, would recognize and value artistic force as such. Their disapproval would have been linked to the constraints and nature of engraving, and such a free approach is incompatible with the orderly procedure upon which a plate's progressive development depends, per the wise and logical dictates of traditional technique. Engraved lines are not 'drawn', or laid upon a page, as they would be in a drawing technique. They are channels in a metal plate. The transformation of these channels into lines on paper depends on considerations that have nothing to do with drawing per se, but might almost be called sculptural considerations. When drawing with pen and ink it is possible to build up an area of black by scribbling over an area. But engraved lines depend on channels, and channels must have walls. If the walls of the channels are too broken up, rather than channels the result is a sort of basin. Such a plate can no longer be wiped, because the surface of the plate, which protects in the channels from being wiped away, would be missing. The wiping process, therefore, would pull away the ink, at least from the middle of these basins, resulting in uncontrolled splotches, black at the edges and more or less gray in the middle. Some contemporary etchers, using a surrealist approach which leans on unconscious and accidental actions, make use of such basins. But, from the non-modernist point of view, they are uncontrolled. Rembrandt, however unconventional he may have been, wanted, and got, full control over what he was doing, even if the result would not necessarily get full approval, in some of its aspects, from the professionals.

It should be noted that engraving, despite its many constraints, is in some ways flexible. It is possible, in a certain measure, thanks to scraping, burnishing, and 'hammering out', to erase and undo, something impossible with ink drawing. The most famous example of etching erasure is certainly Rembrandt's own *Christ Presented to the People*. In early states of this famous work the people are gathered in a large crowd in the lower section of the plate. But Rembrandt scraped and burnished them away, so that the space they occupied is blank in later states. In the final states a new crowd replaces them. This flexibility is one reason why engraving is more suave and exact than, for example, pen drawing. By the same token, its pen drawing-like quality lends it a certain force that is hard to achieve with the naturally softer lines of chalk, pencil or charcoal.

The following century, the 18th, is notable for such artist-etchers as the Italian painters Giambattista Tiepolo and his son Domenico, as well as the great engraver Piranesi, famous for his monumental and moody prison interiors, and the Spanish painter Goya. Goya's series, *The Horrors of War,* is among the most popular set of engravings of all time. The work of all these artists may be studied to see how their particular genius discovered and adapted engraving according to their particular inspirations.

Detail of *Adoration of the Mages*

Inspecting, for example, the detail from G. Tiepolo's *Adoration of the Mages*, we may note Tiepolo's unusual use of dots, for example in the Negro's head, or his method of creating areas of dark by laying in areas of short lines. What we find in all cases of non-specialist artist engravers is that their etching work begins in a manner related to their personal drafting techniques. They then develop this in a personal direction, a dynamic driven by the constraints of the medium and their inspiration.

Detail from Whistler's *Two Doorways*.

Probably the most striking example of this natural and personal approach are the etchings of the American painter James Abbott McNiell Whistler. Whistler might be said to have been something of a professional; as a young man he worked as an artist for the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey, making maps with engraving techniques. Having seen some examples of his map making work I do not believe he was thereby exposed to the elaborate specialist methods discussed above, or not many of them. In any case his own etchings are highly original and bear no trace of the specialist techniques. In a time, the 19th century, rife with originality, Whistler was one of the most innovative and influential painters. Even among such figures as Blake, Moreau or Redon, Whistler stands out as one of the most striking examples of this sometimes overvalued quality. Whistler is rightly credited with being a primary influence on the impressionists, and his own work took many directions.

In the 1880's Whistler visited Venice. Rather than sketching in a pad, he sketched on varnished plates. The result is a series of etchings almost as famous as *The Horrors of War*. Like the rest of Whistler's work they are hard to categorize, but it can confidently be stated that, a) they are like nothing else and, b) their technique, like Rembrandt's, while, clearly starting from pen sketching, is specific to engraving. This specificity is to be found in Whistler's way of exploiting the mix of delicacy, or suaveness, and pungent decisiveness, which characterize the medium.

Detail from *The Traghetto*, by Whistler.

Whether the lines are produced by needle work in wax varnish and burned into the copper with acid, or chiseled directly with burins in the living metal, the engraved line has a sort of decisive precision that surpasses anything

else; the least etched mark, down to the most humble dot, gains an authority through the printing process it could never attain in another medium.

ENGRAVING AND THE VIE

All this to say that, if there are indeed other ways the VIE frontispieces might have been created, there are reasons to choose engraving that have nothing to do with antiquarianism.

Vance's paramount quality, it seems to me, is atmosphere. To read Vance, more than any other author, is to be plunged into a 'world', to live an experience which, if imaginary, is none-the-less real. The power of this imaginary experience, as opposed to its richness, is not predicated on Vance's artistic power of illusion, great as this certainly is, but on that essential quality of literature, and art generally: the alchemy between reality and artifice. Art, even the most formal and decorative, is not a spiritual vapor rising from the artist's skull like fog off a swamp. At the other end of the problem even the most literal and documentary representations are always recreations. Art is a statement about reality. There is no other subject. Psychedelic art is a discussion of a real experience, however confused, absurd, and mental. Surreal art is about dreams, or nightmares, or the chaos that lurks in the mind; such things, if disembodied and vaporous, are aspects of our experiential reality.

Illustration, and, in particular, illustration of that consummate illustrator Jack Vance, is a special problem. There is, however, no call to lose ourselves in a labyrinth of sterile rationalization; illustrations of Vance's stories are, in the last analysis, like illustrations of anything else: an attempt to say something about an experience of a reality. That this reality is the experience of reading a book takes nothing away from its essence. I am not trying to obliterate the distinction between imagination and reality; art, true art, is not pure imagination but an intersection of creative imagination and reality. To put this another way: reality is a necessary ingredient of meaningful art. To say that art is a 'statement', or 'discussion', or 'conversation' is an effort to express how art is an intersection of reality and imagination. Reality, well or poorly perceived, is weakly or powerfully refounded in the artist's creative imagination; this is the artist's statement. Experienced by the reader/spectator the statement becomes a 'conversation'. The subject of this discussion is reality. Important art, observing well, and fully digesting its subject, recreates it powerfully. It also transforms it to some degree, but such transformation should not be a solipsistic caprice. The artist should not wallow in his own personality but use his personal expressive power to strengthen his statement, or make the conversation more expressive.

To put this another way, successful illustrations will take their subject — in this case Vance's stories — seriously. Their success does not depend on how well they correspond to the imaginative reaction each individual reader may have to the stories; if this were their goal they would be redundant. Their purpose is also not to impose the illustrator's imaginative reaction of the stories on other readers. In this case they interfere with the stories. While the minimum that can be demanded is that they do not betray the stories by misrepresentation — as is so often the case with published Vance illustrations to date — this would be no mark of success. They must contribute, not so much to the story itself, as to the book, or to the presentation of the stories. They should help set a mood, or point out a way into, or suggest an attitude toward, the story. To me this means, among other things, emphasizing vancian aspects of the stories which may not be obvious; the atmosphere, the comedy, the wistfulness, the down-to-earthness, the excitement, the whimsy, the dreaminess, which variously characterizes the work.

Detail from the volume 21 frontispiece. Note: for technical reasons I rejected the plate reproduced in *Cosmopolis* 53. This detail shows the new plate.

To say that etching is more adapted to this task than any other medium would be to say that etching is the greatest art. This is not the case. The greatest art is painting, because painting with its full color range, dramatic contrasts and subtle gradations, possibility of

Detail from a VIE frontispiece. Be the first to name the story illustrated, the VIE volume in which it appears, and the chapter in which this particular episode occurs, and win a original print of the etching!

careful elaboration, and capacity to cover vast surfaces, enjoys the greatest possible expressive range in visual art. Etching, however, has certain advantages in the context of a book that painting lacks. The VIE frontispieces, like frontispieces for centuries, for reasons of economy, will be in black and white; the color advantage of painting is nullified. The frontispieces will also be quite small, nullifying painting's expansive power, as well as many of more dramatic effects. The frontispieces will be reproductions, which nullifies several other advantages of painting such as texture and presence. Etching is itself a medium of reproduction; its texture and presence are constituted by ink on paper, qualities not totally absent even in a reproduction of an etching. Etching, black and white and small scale, is at home with the constraints of a book. Still, why not drawings photographically reproduced? One reason, indeed, is to convey by association our belief that Vance's work is great literature. But, as I have been at pains to point out, engraving offers a special aspect, the marriage of subtlety and force, that, it seems to me, is appropriate to the illustration of Vance's work in particular.

A Reaction to David Reitsema's Comment in *Cosmopolis* 53*

I call Vance's writings 'genuine art' and Dave wonders why I say that 'great art is rooted in erotic desire'. Seeking a more adequate definition of genuine, or great art, Dave advances that the audience of such art experiences a 'surge of internal comprehension' or reacts to it by understanding 'some aspect of his life experience more fully', while lesser art is 'without power', failing to help readers comprehend their life experience, or that it is 'simple entertainment, or at its worst is a type of word-magic, both of which lead the audience into a dream world devoid of experiential reality'. He contends that even if such lesser art may justly be called 'creative', in some regards, it fails the decisive test of genuine or great art by failing to lead anyone to better understand their 'life experience'.

* Interested readers may return to *Cosmopolis* **53** and **50** for the complete background to this discussion.

Dave then quotes this famous passage from *The Face*:

The woman behind the bar called out: "Why do you stand like hypnotized fish? Did you come to drink beer or to eat food?"

"Be patient," said Gersen. "We are making our decision."

The remark annoyed the woman. Her voice took on a coarse edge.

"'Be patient', you say? All night I pour beer for crapulous men; isn't that patience enough? Come over here, backwards; I'll put this spigot somewhere amazing, at full gush, and then we'll discover who calls for patience!"

Dave comments that, if this passage does build 'a mental image' for the reader, the experience remains at the level of 'humorous entertainment' and fails to meet the decisive test of great art, namely: enabling readers 'to more fully understand and experience life'. The greatness of Vance's art, Dave alleges, is not to be measured by any 'degree of erotic desire'.

At the risk of pedantry I will explain that if, by 'erotic desire', I do not exclude licentiousness, I mean a good deal more. Eros is both the youngest and the oldest of the gods. His is the primal power that sets, and maintains, the universe in motion. This power might almost be said to be motion itself. All motion is relative; if there were only one thing in the universe motion could not exist. But even with more than one thing in the universe, why should motion come to be? Why not a cosmos where rest and stability have absolute sway, with the numerous things each immobile in its place? A motionless universe is not inconceivable, but a universe where motion exists is not simply a place where things 'move around'. If these motions had no relation to each other, if the things never met or parted, if they had no effect on each other, the result would be equivalent to a universe without motion. The motions of the cosmos, in fact, are driven by attraction, or its mirror image, repulsion. The physicists have special names for this: 'gravity', 'magnetism', the 'strong force', the 'weak force'. Since there is some doubt that 'substance' itself is anything other than vibrations and waves and such microcosmic agitations, it might be said that motion, or Eros, is cosmic substance itself.

Be this as it may, it is undeniable that motion is neither *sui generis* nor aimless. When Cupid's arrow pierces the heart, the victim is moved toward the designated beloved. The flower pushes its way toward the sun. The tide veers toward the moon. The rain seeks to fall upon the ground. 'Erotic power' is the attraction, or negative attraction (repulsion) that moves. All action in the universe, and human action in particular, results, it therefore may be said, from desire. We look in a given direction because we wish to see what lies that way. We listen because we want to hear. We may be set into motion by secondary desires; toil itself might not move us but we desire a benefit it affords, or we desire to avoid some evil that toil helps us escape. All human movement has an ultimate source in desire. Even suicide is erotically motivated; desire for, or love of non-being.

Before I attempt to restate how this relates to art, and greatness in art in particular, I would like to pick the following bone: in my view if great art certainly does contribute to our education, or provide a sort of therapy by helping us understand and experience life better, lots of other things also provide this service. The School of Hard Knocks for example. But there is nothing artistic about the School of Hard Knocks. Education and therapy are good but they are not artistic. Art, as such, and great art in particular, cannot, in the decisive respect, be measured by the good it does us, for this good is not artistic in nature. Life is certainly enriched by art, but it is also enriched by gold, or travel, or any number of other things that are not art, even if they may have artistic aspects. Art as such, and artistic greatness in particular, must be measured in terms of the power that is proper to itself. This power, I say, is what I call the erotic power, or the power to attract. If it is not inconceivable that the passage from *The Face* might help us gain insight into, say, comportment appropriate to strange taverns, augmenting our experience of life by helping us escape enemas in public places, what makes it 'great art', as opposed to mere 'humorous entertainment'— though I fail to sympathize with any depreciation of that rare and precious thing— is its erotic force.

On October 23 David B. Williams posted a comment on the Jack Vance message board, quoting a comment by one Fiammetta Rocco. David claims that it 'explains perfectly how JV manages to enthrall us'. Fiammetta writes: *In order to capture a reader, an author must first duel with them and force them to submit to the writer's vision.* This is one way to put it. I would say that, just as great painters produce images which so enchant the eyes that we desire to keep looking, so great writers enchant the ear and the mind with a species of delectableness which seduces, or tempts us to continue reading. This power to enchant, this attractiveness, I say, is the measure of artistic greatness. The more attractive, the more beautiful, the greater. Art is about beauty, and beauty is measured in units of delectableness.

The passage from *The Face* is so delectable that it can be read, again and again, with a pleasure that never wanes. How did Vance do it? His success, I say, is a function of his 'erotic power'. From what does this erotic power arise? At

the most fundamental level, from the artist's own sense of the beauty of his subject. It is impossible to create convincing, let alone great art without a strong erotic relationship with the subject. In the passage from *The Face* Vance has perfectly seized, one might say, a certain type of feminine petulant aggressiveness. The sensitive analyst, feeling his way behind the words, perceives Vance's gargantuan delight in this quality. Why or how can 'aggressiveness'—to put a name on the unnamable quality which Vance represents in the passage— be delightful? The passage itself is the answer to this mystery. It is a fact, revealed by Vance, that this quality, once penetrated by the full force of his 'desire' and recreated for the reader, has an irresistible charm.

What makes all sorts of normally repellant things delightful in art? Bosch's infernal scenes, Goya's *Horrors of War*, and many other subjects that would be depressing, repulsive, or even horrifying in real life, become not only tolerable, not only interesting, but actually delectable when re-presented by a great artist. This transformation is not linked to some secondary good art might have on our life experience. The good is direct and immediate; it is the experience of the art itself. Aspects of this experience may indeed be instructive or therapeutic. By contemplating the behavior of this Darsh woman a reader may, for example, learn a new attitude towards his own Darsh-like wife. But that result is secondary. It is not artistic as such. We love to contemplate (or read) Vance's representation of this woman because it is an intensely pleasurable experience in itself.

Humans can learn from anything. There is an inevitable moral and intellectual aspect to any artistic work, just as there are artistic aspects to basically inartistic things. An AK-47, an old discarded shoe, an election speech by John Kerry: all have an aesthetic side. But these are not, properly speaking, artistic things. While it is possible to discuss their artistic aspects they are misunderstood if they are seen as primarily artistic phenomena. Stockhausen was not wrong when he suggested that 9/11 was a 'work of art'. 9/11 certainly has its aesthetic aspects, some of which were even deliberately constructed by the terrorists as an integrated part of their attack. By these aesthetic effects they hoped to more powerfully strike the consciousness of their 'audience'. However, when Stockhausen called it a 'great work of art', or even 'the greatest work of art', he notably failed to put this aesthetic aspect in its proper place, which was a secondary place. This failure was not merely an error of judgment, it was a serious moral fault, and now poor Stockhausen has a great deal for which to be forgiven. So, if there is art in almost everything, there is also a difference between things that are art and things that are not art, and assessment of the latter depends on the quality of their specifically artistic aspect. This, I say, depends on the artist's desire.

Talking about art is like drawing a picture of a conversation. But to persist, despite the inadequacy of the method, let us compare the passage from *The Face* with a passage of vancian prose released recently onto the internet. Precision is needed for this comparison to be useful. I therefore restate that the passage from *The Face* is made great by Vance's love for, or attraction to, or fascination with, the attitude and comportment of, let us say, a certain species of feminine petulance. The passage is striking because Vance's invention, or creation, or recreation, is a function of his erotic élan toward, or delight in, this subject. This dynamic carries him into the subject. He disappears into it, leaving the reader face-to-face with a reality. This reality, in the final analysis, or behind the apparent subject, is Vance's erotic élan itself. The experience of the passage is the experience of Vance's love for the subject. The passage is intensely enjoyable because Vance's own delight in the subject is acute. Is this acuteness the cause of the artistic force of the writing? Yes. Great love of a thing is the motivation to find a way to adequately express it. The lover cries his love from the rooftops, and love moves mountains.

Writing, however, is something anyone with a second grade education can do. Someone who has also gone to third grade can probably write even better. But, as with engraving, it is not the specialist's panoply of technical tricks that makes the crucial artistic difference, the difference between more and less gratification for the spectator. Likewise it is not, I say, respect for the rules of grammar and style that convert legible verbiage into a delectable experience.

The charges concerned the disappearance of a number of persons in the vicinity of Wan Water over recent months. At first it had been thought that they had wandered into range of neropt hunting parties, the usual reason for disappearances on Dimpfen Moor.

The break in the case came when two young girls had not only gone missing from Thurloyn Vale but had then suddenly reappeared after a few days wandering within the walls of Wan Water. They were found in a state of confusion and distress, with vague memories of being seized, transported, confined and interfered with in intimate ways. They could not directly identify the person or persons responsible for the outrage, but each had blanched and screamed when shown an image of Turgut Therobar.
"Now," I said, "how do you answer?"

He spoke and his face and tone betrayed a blase unconcern that I found surprising. But the substance of his response was nothing less than astonishing.
"The affair is now moot," he said. "Events have moved on."
I set my cup and plate on the table. "Wealth and social rank will not keep you from the Archonate's Contemplarium if you are found guilty."
His eyes looked up and away. "The case is nuncupatory."
"Colonel-Investigator Warhanny will have a different view."
He chose a cake and nibbled at its topping.
"Please," I said, "I have given surety for you. My interests are also at stake."
He smiled and it was not a pleasant sight. There was a glint in his eye that gave me an inkling as to why the victims had reacted with horror to his image. "You will soon find," he said, "that you have more pressing concerns."

If anything is interesting about this passage it is probably that its author has been published. If anything is clear about it, it is that the author wishes to generate a certain atmosphere—which we recognize as inspired by Vance. There is nothing wrong with such an aim. The passage's quality is not a function of the author's desire to emulate, but absence of an erotic relationship to his subject—the characters and their attitudes. The erotic élan we feel is desire to generate a suave mood of menace and suppressed emotion. We do not experience the mood, but the desire to create the mood, because that is what the subject of passage actually is. This aim, this subject, is somewhat obscured by prolixity and uncontrolled language diluting the concentrated intensity upon which such effects depend. The problem, however, is not that the style is flawed; the style is flawed for the same reason that atmosphere is not generated. Since the writer fails to have an erotic relationship with the reality he seeks to portray, since, in other words, he has no subject, he has nothing to say; consequently he lacks motivation to say it well. This state of affairs is clearer when the stylistic errors are removed:

Neropt hunting parties had been held responsible for the disappearances. But two girls, missing from Thurloyn Vale, appeared in Wan Water with tales of seizure, confinement . . . and other things. They failed to identify a culprit, but when I showed them an image of Turgut Therobar they fell silent.
I challenged him: "What do you say now?"
Turgut Therobar spoke: "The affair is moot. Events have moved on."
Amazed at his effrontery, I held out the bill of charge: "If you are guilty, do not count on wealth and rank; the Archonate's Contemplarium awaits you!"
". . . The case is nuncupatory."
"Colonel-Investigator Warhanny will have a different view!" I cried, but Turgut Therobar chose a cake, and took a small bite. "I have given surety; my interests are at stake!"
A glint appeared in his eye. "You will soon find that you have more pressing concerns."

The author's intent, a heavy mood of dark doings, is now more adequately realized, but the passage remains fundamentally inadequate. It might, charitably, be suspected that the problem is absence of context. But take a single line of Vance, without any context at all:

'Be patient', you say? All night I pour beer for crapulous men; isn't that patience enough?

Not only does this remain as delightful as the passage as a whole, but is in itself a complete scene: behind a bar a woman of formidable aspect, puffed with indignation and quivering with exasperation, is engaged in dialogue with a male interlocutor, though she is obviously motivated by attitudes and experiences beyond the scope of the current exchange. Here is writing with relief and vitality! Vance is inside his subject. Nothing like this can be extracted from the other passage:

The affair is moot. Events have moved on. The case is nuncupatory. You will soon find that you have more pressing concerns.

This is just a series of canned phrases. Again: we sense that the writer desires to write a vancian scene, which is no negative. Art may have many non-artistic aspects. Just as it may provide education and therapy, so it may show the influence, or emulate another writer without damage to its artistic aspect. Vance's writing sometimes shows the influence of, say, Edgar Rice Burroughs or L. Frank Baum. This takes nothing away, and sometimes even enriches it, in a certain non-artistic way. Such things are non-artistic because they have nothing to do with generating artistic effect, which is to say: delighting the reader. Failing to have an erotic relationship with his subject, the writer achieves only what the French call an exercise of style. Such exercises may, as demonstrated above, be more or less successful. But if the passage is assessed from the point of view of art, or the delectation it affords a reader, its fundamental problem is obvious: lack of essence. This missing quality is not 'plot', or 'well defined characters'; the passage has both of these. The failure to generate real atmosphere is a failure, one might say, to be tortured by desire to taste the beauty of the subject. The writer has no eroticism toward his subject. The failure is erotic.

Several Ways of Looking at Jack Vance

Matthew Paris

1

When I was in college I was trained as a scholar to think small. If we had been studying microbes instead of literature it might have worked. The supposed tough-minded faith system of that insane time was no more bonkers than what preceded or succeeded it. They believed that literature was or could be a science if one could focus on a tiny enough surface to identify and predict phenomena as if Art had the properties of hydrogen atoms. They invented a science fashioned by the myopic for the nearsighted.

As a result I only learned after I departed these colorful asylums to think big. One can't take in a major piece of literature without assessing it with a capacious view that includes its own epic concerns, its place in a global social and political history, its broad perceptions of life and death.

One would be a fool to do otherwise. It's particularly true in science fiction; it's most centrally the only way to approach Jack Vance. One really can't pretend that Vance was writing about the same small and cozy presumptive physical universe as Homer or Dante.

Many of our ancestors had a notion that Creation was a very small place compared to Vance's postulate of an infinite one. They had gods that lived on mountains or in the sky on a single planet they were sure was the center of the cosmos. It was unimaginable that gods or human beings might concern themselves with other worlds or their inhabitants: they didn't exist.

The design of this pocket Creation was beyond us. We weren't gods; we hadn't even made a tolerable run of creating porcelain plumbing. The convenient ineluctability of our absolute reality, except to the gods and perhaps a few minor demons, put off for many the need of or hope for a science.

However this cosmos had an uncanny resemblance to that of our current physicists, such as Stephen Hawking. It has not three but ten dimensions, and three worlds; one in our perception, if we are wise and hawk-eyed, two we only knew by inference or report. It's curious that our current savants have verified scientifically this ancient ten dimensional realm, though as yet almost nothing else of this old view.

Our science claims our current ten dimensional universe is the result of a collapsed and much more volatile twenty-six dimensional cosmos. They are also, as much as the ancient world but with different means, explorers of those elements of this universe they inhabit that are beyond our senses and cognitive perceptions. Our contemporary notions of reality include baroque designs of all kinds; they are centerless, most often not even linear.

Our science has at yet no opinion about whether there are gods or not, or ways to make contact with them; given the despotic excesses of recent priesthoods and the fabled tyrannies of gods in the past, those that have made the claim they have such knowledge are viewed skeptically by both materialistic savants and a populace tilted against such a frocked and unfrocked surmise.

The ancient's perceived universe, as many saw it before the last half-millennium, is probably around the size of a large planet like Jupiter; like the ancient's, it does postulate both many previous creations and one or many to come, perhaps an infinite series of them. It never advances, as Milton did, any explanations of a teleological sort we can all fathom over bad wine and cheese that justifies the existence of our multi-dimensional envelope in some Walt Disney moral terms, easy or involute.

Though it isn't likely to say so openly, our physics assumes that the universe is complicated to the point where most of it is beyond our ken, much as God told Job; it agrees with God that we need machines, like computers, even to think at least a little better about what is at once unknown and in front of us.

We can't imagine, if we are not of a great age, the resonances of the shift in ordinary life as well as metaphysical perceptions of polymaths that occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries as a result of a science that began to erode certain notions of human singularity and importance with the advent of Copernicus. The ancient world didn't feel that human beings were all that important though they weren't trivial either; they were sure that the gods were masters of a universe that was their Creation, to do with as they chose. Humans were at least significant enough to them to maneuver like animate chess pieces.

Homer isn't being metaphorical, as Milton is later, when he talks of revels, clans, humanoid gods, wars they ran invisibly and so on. The ineluctable and mysterious entities or deity of Sophocles, or the *Book of Job* much later, at least claims the nature of the cosmos is unknown and unknowable; it doesn't make human beings unimportant or accidental. It's a kind of left-handed honor to be personally punished by God or gods for no reason at all, that we are not consciously given these days, any more than we are

crowned with thorns or laurel on television.

Plainly somebody is at work muscling Oedipus in spite of all his virtues and resources, just as Poseidon and Athena were inventing rewards and punishments for Odysseus; The *Book of Job* mentions a wager between God and Satan, both of whom are very aware of Job. If one perhaps didn't like who or what was involved in human life, at least somebody was there to be mean or inscrutable.

Gore Vidal says that modern life finds it intolerable to presume, though the evidence to him is clear enough, that the universe is indifferent to us. Whether or not this is true, its verity or lack of it is a central question asked by all scientists including Stephen Hawking and implicit in the concerns of science fiction writers.

Certainly it is factual that human beings have had no popular syncretic thought or cult since Teddy Roosevelt that embraces a world in which they are unimportant. Every politics and religion we know about in the modern world asserts we are not trivial, or worse, though there are Indian systems which assert we are minor beings even among the minor residents of Creation.

Teddy Roosevelt is a kind of polarity to Sartre; the last ontological stand of those who previously were sure their soul, their land, their tribe, their cult and perhaps even their dog were of special interest to metaphysical entities, themselves also not trivial. The obverse side of TR's optimism and stance, while he suffered much triumph as well as great loss, is that the world is indifferent; he is free to make it all important himself. I'm surprised Vidal, who seems to know all the dope on everybody in American politics and wrote very interestingly about the Adamses, didn't write about TR. Or did he?

In a sense not only Jack Vance's tales but all science fiction and fantasy has that covert whistling-in-the-dark TR flavor. When the posture becomes grandiose, as it often does in Vance, it turns comic.

In an equally odd way science fiction and modern fantasy has dabbled in postulating metaphysical systems to fill this emptiness in our fashionable materialism. Some of them have more involutions than one might immediately think. If we are clumsy accidents, the universe is a mirror of our own triviality; does it matter, as Isaac Asimov thinks it does, whether or not we are efficient or inefficient inhabitants of the cosmos?

Why would a world of robots be any more moral, or even more graceful, than we are, if everything including those qualities is either an illusion or a reality of no significance? There might be a satanic consolation in being both perverse and inept, when one might be virtuous and graceful, if one's absolute reality didn't exist.

2

I say all this to place Jack Vance as an intellect as well as a novelist in his time, as we do Homer or Dante. We are liable, since we want to accept both Homer and Dante for their virtues, to see their notions as poetry, whatever that means, as vagueness or mendacity, previous views of cosmic and metaphysical patterns generally in our vicinity, colorful but metaphorical.

Someday we might feel the same about the mechanistic science that we, in this season, call reality, one that Vance and his readers presume is an apt point of departure for his tales of character and action. It may be one day that science will disappear and turn out to be as much perceived fiction as the world of Homer and Dante, but the Art of Jack Vance will survive that shift in presumptive axioms. We are all in danger, even in the present, of being covert fantasy artificers in spite of ourselves.

Being a fossil is something all intelligent writers hope for. Many collect them. We don't all want to be wedded that closely, even if we aren't writers, to the banalities of our age. Nothing would be more dishonorable to our mortality than the revelation that it was a cliché not even of oneself and one's own definitions but a banal communal lunacy at a given point in history.

Even as science fiction developed during Vance's lifetime, something like half of the axioms of the genre were dismissed by new generations of its younger writers. John von Neumann and game theory not only inspired Isaac Asimov to write his robotics novels but also did-in the previous faith systems of early science fiction rooted in mechanistic causality, problem-solving, imperial-military conquests of galaxies by engineer types spared the niches and crannies of ordinary human psychology as we know it on earth, and so on.

Vance offers us some general physical and even biological principles that animate his satirical fiction. He sees life, substance, reality, as inherently expansive forces that flower into an orchidaceous and sometimes comical diversity. They may explode from an initial nub but the core is both forgettable and forgotten. The tension and joke in a Vance tale is often how crazy and complex a civilization can get and still be tolerably viable.

Vance's selenic cultures take over whole planets, not merely smaller realms of land as do our earthly nations; yet as one gets to know them the capitals are more controlled than the vast hinterlands. Even confined to a mere

planet the systems are volatile, vulnerable to usurpation by rebels, unable to rule those who have escaped from them into the outlands.

Vance sees the cosmos not controlled by gods, not moral, not having a linear purpose but inhabited by often comedic yet sinister realms engaged in blind movements of life outward to a diversity such as one can see less colorfully in ordinary early life by contemplating the varieties of a duck. The lack of importance and indifference of any absolute force is the very goad, anathema to Victorians, tragic to Vidal, that makes him produce his comedy.

The advantage Vance has had as a satirist in the tradition of Cervantes and Voltaire has been that he doesn't ever have to deal with custodians about ultimate reality. The unknowable and its influence on us as garbled message from all powerful entities or even a cabal of enemies was taken up by Philip K. Dick in a way that would have been familiar and even wearing to Sophocles.

It is enough for Vance to center his books on folly, morals and human resources. Since our science tells us as did the ancient savants that most of reality is unknowable he is even consonant in some ways with our long dead classical wise men. Like Cervantes and Voltaire he doesn't advance any theories of reality; he offers us an emetic for illusions. It isn't a negligible guerdon.

Most of us who have read gobs of science fiction have hoped in our hearts that at least one author in this genre will have the murky insights about ultimate reality we occasionally crave. A few like Dick have tried. Vance may have taken up such explorations out of books; they don't much touch his writing except possibly in some passing allusions to a hermetic set of epiphanies in *The Languages of Pao*.

3

Although half of Art can be explained by attributing it to intelligence, craft and cunning and the fortune to be able to live in a time where one can offer it at all, it is the other half that is inexplicable. It not merely escapes the analytics of at least one reader, myself, but engages us if we look for such aesthetic virtues in murky regions which take us far away from science, very close to magic.

Since Jack Vance, his whole life, has been writing about magic or science one assumes he has wondered at least in passing why he can chondrocyte an elegant beautiful sentence and some others he knows, despite many virtues, cannot.

I don't know what the answer is myself. In fact I can usually say why art is lousy but not why it's any good. Of course I can translate some of my perplexity into cleverness, sagacious observations, access to models of style and so on; stupid as I am I am not quite fool enough to say as some Marxists do that Art is coded propaganda.

Some of it is. One could imagine easily some *quod erat demonstratum* works as *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* written by authors with no talent at all but with all the known virtues we can easily alchemize into opinion and cognitive power; still we wouldn't read them unless the author also had some talent. I pick Flaubert and Tolstoy because one like Jack Vance wrote or attempted to write perfect sentences all his life,

Vance has a style. It is almost his signature. Tolstoy, on the other hand, at the end was so worried that he had a style that he took out any passages that seemed to him beautiful from any of his writings. Of course the author of *What Is Art* who felt that all of Shakespeare's writings should be thrown out because it had royalist sentiments would have done something like that, wouldn't he?

I don't think Tolstoy succeeded in rupturing his sense from a style. I don't read Russian; I know there is more to style than the music of words and sentences. Tolstoy and Dreiser have a kind of compassion imbuing their books that is separate from their engines of fact, substance, observation and power of construction. Tolstoy's books without compassion would be very different novels, not by Tolstoy. Can words carry such emotions? The mechanics, if any, that flood his writing with certain feelings which are foaled from his character are not always mirrored in style, a realm unknown to us as it was presumably to Tolstoy. If, as Flaubert says, style is the man, Tolstoy couldn't escape himself. Vance revels in style.

Jack Vance is definitely one of those writers like Flaubert centrally concerned with pure style. Vance certainly has plenty of opinions strewn throughout his many books one can pick up easily enough in passing. Can one say that Vance's novels therefore are a kind of murky coded philosophic system? I don't think so. It's interesting when Vance suggests in one series he doesn't think much of the political abilities of Irish clans or the Vikings in medieval times. It's also rare that he is that specific in his satire.

4

To paraphrase the verse epigram of an Elizabethan wag on treason, satire is an instrument that when successful makes the persuasions of whatever folly it trashes impossible to take seriously again. Cervantes made swag-

gering but dour tales of chivalry impossible to read again without at least a lipless grin. Fielding has altered our perception of the tomes of Samuel Richardson forever in *Abraham Adams* and *Shamela*, politics generally in *Jonathan Wild,* rhetorical nonsense in *Tom Thumb.* One can't listen to talk of progress without an inner grin after reading *Madame Bovary*. Sometimes we know the sources of the ire of satirists, occasionally we don't. It doesn't matter.

We might not pick up, in Bertrand Russell's satirical tale of a utopia, that his dietary maxim about the venomous effects of green peas to the spirit comes from a similar maxim of Pythagoras. Russell assumes a kind of internal set of references many of his readers don't have.

We certainly don't read at all the trashy chivalric books that provoked Cervantes' ire; we might at most read the excellent Ariosto. We as well don't look upon *The Sun Also Rises* as an implied sermon and dry (sic) satire against Prohibition; yet it was in its time all of that. We have to guess what personal qualities in a philosopher we do not and cannot read inspired Plato's *Gorgias*. Yet it's built into the hope for long life for any book at all that it will survive all the truths as well as the follies and personal virtues of its time entirely. It can never be read even after five years as the author had intended it to be savored when he wrote it in a series of sittings.

Outside of *Space Opera*, which is in one sense a sort of broad but generic trashing of grandiose vanities of 40s imperial science fiction, Jack Vance is a classical satirist, not a parodist with broad humor as Fielding is. Vance is a moralist out not after the individual folly of one or more authors but more like Juvenal, offering a corrective to illusion and vanity generally.

Do we know or can we guess, even though Vance is still around to tell us, what set him off to adorn our lives with such generosity? Does it matter since we enjoy his work without any of the analogues in life that provoked him to fashion his tales, narrative that for us admonished our follies, not his own or those whom he has known to be enmeshed in illusions that are exotic to us, and might astonish us if we were to know about them. More likely they are ordinary as groats. It is one of the verities of Art that both the pain and delight of the Artist dies with him; it is also true of churls who are not Artists and consequently less memorable. They don't leave behind them any Art or anything at all but vapor and ashes. When secrecy about one's vice fails, its rendezvous with oblivion may justify everything.

We don't really need to know, even with geniuses like Vance, what inspired him to write or not write anything. His sources are ancillary concerns perhaps even for him. Certainly, no matter what they are, others with the same sources haven't done what he's done.

I know for example that Homer at some time in his life must have been a carpenter. There are too many detailed and focused descriptions in his epics, that aren't generic to them and hold up the action, of building boats, doors, beds, houses, how to cut wood, and so on, for Homer not to have been at least a tyro at this craft along with his poetic skills. Does it matter? It doesn't.

There have been many carpenters. There is only one Homer.

5

Any science fiction writer like Vance contracts to tell us tales that, no matter what their roots might be — certainly not in observation since they are talking about the future and other planets — are often in some sense a coded parable, if they are comical they are in some way satire or even focused parody of what we do know.

We would be mad to value Homer for his skill at making tables and not read his epics. Similarly Vance's life is marginal or irrelevant to us; it is only his books we value. I'm sure nothing happened to him that any one of us could assert infallibly would have had to have happened to produce any one of his fantastical books. If so, an army of others would have written the same tale. So much for those sorts of theories.

If a science fiction novel described a civilization that was singular and original to the point of resonating not at all with our banalities on Earth, nobody would read it. We have enough trouble avoiding illusion and lies in our life and age without searching for them as well in Art.

Fiction has to offer some shard of truth in coded form or it has no utility for us. Some fiction is refined and distilled reductive fact, and unfortunately, vice versa. No matter how alien the aliens get in Vance or science fiction generally they are always recognizable variants of earthly life forms. No matter how strange the civilizations of aliens or monsters seem to us on the surface, they are and must be the ordinary, disguised as the exotic. If they weren't we would dismiss them as irrelevant to us even though they are fiction.

In most Vance novels the sermons and satires are plain enough. *The Brave Free Men* even in its title is an almost pure moral discourse.

6

Perhaps it's more imprudent to note in the *Tschai* series that Vance states rather explicitly that human beings, who are free of the strangling skews of cultures that are most often a communal madness, are capable not only of honor and resource but optimally suited to take vigorous action in a way unimaginable to those trapped in institutional envelopes. That is very American. It is both Jeffersonian and Jacksonian. Yet the same ideas, without the suave elegance and beauty of Vance's work, might offer such subtle sermons and put us to sleep.

Since I like comedy, perhaps what is most valuable to me about Vance is his satirical sense. Mocking footnotes, references to books that don't exist that might remind one of Borges; Vance did it before Borges. The Cervantes-like stance regarding the vanity and hopes of human beings as an absurdity unless they have some personal obligation of honor has a resonance beyond materials that since Vance writes about worlds that presumably don't exist are liable to be at most data not easily provable.

I knew one great master of style personally, Irwin Shaw, who said to me: "Matty, I may have written some lousy books; I never wrote a bad sentence." That is a fair description I think of Vance; one might argue about whether or not any of his book could really be said it to be lousy.

I didn't think much of *Space Opera,* a farce with a bumptious style Vance only did once; certainly a few of the books generally have very loose connections that don't seem to go anywhere, but none of them have a single sentence that isn't beautiful and elegant.

Style distinguishes us in a way reductive focus on facts does not. If one is like Vance, aiming for a musicality moment by moment, one has to have the high melodies within one's spirit; there is always inherent in bad style, in the description of anything or anybody, an intractable note of fluff and vapor.

Vance makes this situation into a strength by the very ontological intensity of his satire. He writes of great hungers, revengers, immense civilizations and vast near metaphysical entities that, if we are severe in the faith that books are information, are of no use to us as maps to what we are sure are imaginary realms.

Powerful as we are in our technology we cannot yet survey something which does not exist and has never existed. Only an author can offer us that; he does this for reasons that are far from making one's way through New Jersey on three dollars a day. Implicitly he asks us, if we read him at all, whether we think he had nothing to tell us but marvelous lies.

Not only Vance's awesome work but science fiction in general has been mostly produced by bottom class born Americans and lower middle class Englishmen; they represent the tidal force of a centrifugal explosive movement that has loosened the West generally from perceptions of their own nature and place in the universe connected with physical land, kings, courts, local priests and some solar vision of Creation.

Vance's world is the opposite of this. It is without a center. It is a shard of a mirror of an explosion. It describes a coreless infinity. This is a quintessential American idea. The New World and its settlers is a realm of those who have traveled, if not in outer space, beyond the borders of the known Old World to lands they have settled in strange ways—if they have not like some of Vance's characters become the dominant life of remote planets.

7

European novels about men pursuing higher station are usually interesting because we all, no matter how much we are outlanders, are scions of a culture that can at least remember albeit vaguely the days of courts, capitals, and the ascents and declines of diverse national politics.

This shift in American novels is because their protagonists are heroes beyond the class system; in America such novels are often good when the heroes are wonderfully crude beneath their elegance, like Jay Gatsby, or powerfully ethnic or curiously empty philosophers like Frank Cowperwood. Gatsby and Cowperwood are still more Balzacians, more Old World than anybody in Jack Vance's books.

They aim for a refuge in great capitals if they have no belief in the redemptive balms offered to them by mandarins and aristocrats in their purely pecuniary ascents. Vance's characters often have an irritability about them whenever they are in a vast and unorganized outland of the culturally mad but physical amusing cosmos.

It's not that they are narrowly urbane; they are not notably reflective. They suffer the lack of the goad of action, and the arena to be active in, without those gaudy theaters light years away. They are always planning to go somewhere else or achieve something that will change or resolve their existence to the point where they will be living in a different way than we experience them.

His characters and their adventures are living in an open-ended universe; they view their world with a kind

of mild pique at times, as they note its mortal phenomena in passing.

8

While writing this essay about Vance I made a list of attributes of much of American writing; while they described Mark Twain very well they also were the qualities one meets equally in Vance. Our authors tend to be travelers often notable for their sea voyages: one thinks of Freneau, Melville, London, Hemingway.

We have neither courts nor religious spas offering selective praise of new prophets of the Unnamable; American writing consequently often comes from a folk culture, not a class system in which the warriors and priests are more comfortable, have the leisure to enjoy books while the untouchable clean their psychic latrines. Such employment inspires people to be authors. It is a step up.

Virtue in the United States can sometimes be the ability to survive gracefully over decades, as Lord Dunsany implied about marriage; good form is not one of those American qualities valuable in themselves. We are very comfortable with tolerance even of moderate clumsiness; we don't have to be elegant. With all the gorgeous beauty of his language Vance's characters very often have an American mechanical nature though they aren't certified engineers. They learn on the job.

As they react to fey folly with their limited powers they can construct odd but workable machines to accomplish what they need. It's rarely done with style. In Europe survival without dignity is no worse than survival with it, much less preferable than death with dignity. America is about waking up in the morning any way one can. One gets dignity externally and only where one can find it.

There are many plot lines in Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo* in particular that may remind one of Vance's characters scheming or merely residing by benefit of local gravity on some strange planet that seems in its odd folkways a kind of almost comic nightmare of human culture gone bonkers. Vance's own experience in the Merchant Marine may have offered him the same kind of detachment that Melville had in his South Sea adventures. It seems at least possible that had Melville lived long enough he would have written science fiction. Star Trek after all was described by its maker as a redo of a Western. Making the old into the new is divine work. The operating metaphor in Melville and Vance is a tale about an American entering an unknown wilderness.

In America pragmatic work and industry are admired; until the rise of the media world in the United States after 1960 or so, looks and style always seemed comic. In fact the voters of America usually seemed to pick their leaders for their ugliness and lack of charm. Vance doesn't often give us his insights into the top ranks of power; as Henry James said of Zola; he may not know "society". We don't have "society". Perhaps we once did have it a century ago in the East.

Vance is a Californian; in a state in which nearly everybody is a recent settler or the son of some society he has departed from for good reason, society simply hasn't got the meaning for Vance, or anybody else in California, it had for James in France and England. Society for Americans in those places is fools or prey. That's pretty much the substance in the satire of the Duke chapters in *Huckleberry Finn*. We want, in this country, resourceful people who can scramble and work with whatever is available. Style in such bottom soldiers is often a sign of irrelevance or corruption.

That is a pretty good description of the protagonists, admirable or less so, in nearly any Jack Vance novel. Their pragmatic view is oddly juxtaposed by one of the great literary styles in English of the century.

In America fearless science and craft are virtues we hunger for in ourselves and our neighborhood, or we die. We haven't got much tolerance for airs or braggadocio. As John W. Campbell says, panic itself can have a utility; it produces audacity and subsequent success. We see nobles as slackers. When Americans are authors very often their comedic language is idiosyncratic whether in the elevated folk idiom of a Twain or the weirdly mannerist style of Lafcadio Hearn, James, Clark Ashton Smith, Melville, Cabell or even Jack Vance.

The sheer flamboyance and grandeur of some American writing inherently has to be comedic. One has to be French and be either a Bourbon or Charles de Gaulle to produce such noble rhetoric seriously. Ben Hecht, Damon Runyon, Maxwell Bodenheim and Gene Fowler have to be comedians; they are using baroque rhetoric to describe an outland life that is always not far from coarse worlds and fortune at least slightly uncomfortable.

Vance is that kind of American wordslinger.

9

It is not merely the rough and tumble humor of Harte but the subtle humor in most of James that adorns humor that is both high and low. Vance's high language is in a way

protective of us as the lace curtain fustian of these other authors from the gritty realities of the same worlds he comes from. We never get too close to them; his musical abilities sheathe us like a beautiful cosmetic, if it may stand between us and a monstrous and yet jocosely absurd hellhole.

Tragedy is not much in vogue in America; nobody in the country is thought of such noble mein to merit a properly grand fall. When people in American novels are dispatched they are done away with, as Kafka put it, like a dog, anonymously. Vance's protagonists almost always survive novels and even tetralogies; yet they are never far from an anonymous death in a ditch somewhere, forgotten in a vast infinity that waits for everyone in a universe that has no center, capitals, sacred directions and notions of easily distinguishable aristocrats who are different from scurvy oceans of human cattle. In fact Vance often makes fun of the vanity of his villains who claim to be other than humans one step from being left in a dank and sour scented puddle in a bog.

10

Life and literature are both events that occur in time; they are tales of people apparently motivated by something; one of the sources of satire, inherent in such arenas, is that actions and thoughts are skiffs on an sea of rampant unknowability. Such opinions push many authors to satire. One doesn't have to write about anything but illusion—a subject one knows well enough and ruefully enough. Whether or not there is reality beyond these common deceits doesn't have to be taken up.

Vance's characters when they are admirable respond to some external goad. Often they are forced to act to correct some folly or injury. They are as far from excesses of will as the villains are immersed in it. They almost always succeed in their reactive quests; the folly they joust with is inherently frail in a way often not obvious at the beginning of the story. Gossamer has that quality even when it looks like iron.

Vance's descriptions of the universe emphasizes the florid and infinite character of the cosmos. For a genre supposed to be escapist fiction, according to some, Vance manages to introduce ideas that are central to our time's scientific presumptions, true or not.

The past had a notion of the economy of nature that ruled its science from the hoary principle of Occam's Razor to Newton's four principles of thermodynamics. The assumption of old was that one could generalize from the particular and find identifiable repetitive substances and actions that, like the Periodic Table, could be applied to any reality. Indeterminacy and chaos theory was happily unknown to medieval times.

In the 19th and 20th centuries some mischievous scientists in spite of their sacred received ideas began to advocate the opposite view. They perceived a universe in which no substance or action had the kind of hard-edged integrity their ancestors had postulated. Everything in their vision of cosmic-intimates influences everything else. Einstein's relativity theories and super string theory are all notions that come out of a vision that Aristotle would have appreciated: one in which the parts were at once mechanisms of the whole and the whole itself.

It's not unlike sympathetic magic, and voodoo as well.

Since we no longer think the world has one planet supporting life, our savants tell us we reside in a chamber theatre watched over not in particular by even a minor demon; it is hardly central to some universal diversity. Our proofs are oddly Newtonian or medieval; we affirm scientific ideas because they are elegant and we can savor their beauty, and like our own earthly parallel evolutions, one of heat not light, they seem to do the same things in the same situations more or less. We have no proofs about the ubiquity of design or chaos one way or another.

Thinking in the manner of Newton or Nietzsche it seems improbable that we are the most intelligent, reasonable and most beautiful species in the universe. We probably aren't the most brainless, perverse and ugly ones either; the odds are we are somewhere in the middle. We might merit some passing attention from what deities, if any, preside over our cosmos; we almost certainly aren't as important to them as an infinite run of other more intriguing beings. If we aren't competitive we can't blame such indifferent angels.

This is at the core of the comedy in Vance's tales. The floridity and diversity of nature is what saves his characters from being even more absurd than they are. They have an infinite set of neighbors in all directions who are hardly less lunatic than they are.

Science, right up through the heyday of John W. Campbell, always assumed the economy of nature. Such a neat axiom was always a faith system. There never was much evidence for it; it was merely comforting. We live on apparently the only planet currently bearing life in our solar system in a world in which 99% of the species have become extinct. Perhaps their gods are defunct too or, as Epicurus said, have decided to sojourn elsewhere. If the brontosaurus were a gnostic, what else could have happened?

If we don't read a Vance novel, we can see by having a fruit tree in our back yard how prodigal nature is. One day one has thousand of apricots. They can't all be eaten or grow into other apricot trees. Not one apricot is special. Vance's universe is like that apricot tree. Some of his apricots get very pickled.

Vance's ultimate reality is either unknowable or half known. If one knows it enough to effect an action that is better than not being able to achieve the same thing. One has the sense reading many Vance books that the universe they operate in is infinite, eternal, armored with the hydra-headed capacity to produce folly and excess in all directions at once.

11

When I apply, as I do, prodigality, not economy, to nature to Vance's fiction, I know how much I don't know. I can't identify what made Vance what and who he is, why he wrote any of his stories, or what may or may not have influenced him along the way. There are easier ways to make money.

I presume without any evidence that he regularly read the pulp fecund of his day: *Weird Tales, Amazing Stories, EQMM* and so on. I know who was in those magazines; I read them myself. Some of the tales might have resonated with him or not; the enigma of his own character and engine of creative action is of necessity left out of any such elusive and slippery speculation. I don't believe in any kind of accretive science of literary influence. We are not coral. Otherwise we would have tens of thousands of *Odes On a Grecian Urn* or tens of thousands of *The Languages Of Pao*. The world is weaker in influence as well as reductively simpler than the people walking on it. Milton says in *Lycidas;* fame is the spur to goad humans to produce anything of virtue. He might have added vice as another spur. Milton would still be wrong. We have no idea what the spur for anything including ourselves is.

It's hard for me to believe, though it is possible, that Jack Vance was never much struck by the tales of Clark Ashton Smith. According to Paul Rhoads he never mentions Smith or his stories at all. I am sure Vance read them. Back in the first half of the 20th century one repaired all over the United States to drugstores or candy stores, if one were there only to buy stacks of chewing gum, and saw on a series of shelves *Weird Tales*, *The Police Gazette*, *True Romances*, *Astounding Science Fiction*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *The Black Mask*, and so on. These monthly pulp fiction effusions were published on coarse paper that darkened almost within a week of one's purchase, ink that blotched at times as it sunk into the crude fibers, lurid covers offering glazed and pellucid female flesh of an astonishing lubricity to net the acne-faced and puerile, feral customers of such low fare. Sometimes even cages of half naked wenches about to assent however unhappily in the whims of some wizard, monster or erectile hero. They were shelved next to the comic books and a shelf of what were called realistic novels also adorned with salacious and erotic cover art in which the portraits of carnality shifted to the revels of working class human beasts, many of them smiling nymphomaniacs, prostitutes or crazed teenagers ruled by strange lusts.

If this was reality we would have all been exhausted by the lives of such characters in these tomes, if they ever existed on Earth, merely to be in the room while they spent an ordinary day. Nothing was more escapist than realism. None of these etudes in bestial lowdown truth ever talked about anybody working or the stale torpor of normal domesticity. Women were always available to anyone, beautiful, ready to do such nameless carnal atrocities, out of swagger and perversity, as not even the Marquis de Sade would have found improper.

There were always men around of virile mein looking at them with a knowing smile. What they knew we all wanted to know.

Of course if one went to the library and read great modern literature as identified by our colleges they were often about dour over-reflective spirits feeling sorry for themselves while living in the suburbs and not enjoying their money. They were all either real or fake Episcopalians.

This high and low style of pitching magazines and books was a commerce that supported Vance over a lifetime; it didn't change till the 70s. My own first novel had had such an absurd tempestuous cover. Since I wrote it I wondered in passing who the characters were in this licentious art work; they certainly, sad to say, weren't in my book.

I'm sure Vance has had the same grim smile as he surveyed his offerings on the shelves from his years with DAW books. Many of Vance's novels generally were published in the late 50s and early 70s only in paperback. I own some of their first editions by DAW Books in authentic cheap editions; as far as I know the DAW folk have never been acknowledged as the publishers of two of the great epics of the American twentieth century. Vance's ambitious work, done by DAW in their stellar way, were as extraordinary as Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* The last pages of the

Tschai series have the haunting, dying fall into nothingness one finds as well at the end of *Studs Lonigan*.

I doubt whether Vance made much money on his series; at least it seems as if the DAW people, though named after a carrion bird, left him alone to do what he wanted. Vance has had few hard cover books at all over a long career; he certainly hasn't had the serious look, outside the genre, some have given Philip K. Dick, Stanislaw Lem and even Samuel Delaney.

12

Vance was never a courtier; he had in fact always perplexed people. He didn't really write hard-core science fiction, his sword and sorcery tales were more comic and satirical in a Cabell-like way than the pure if dark farce of Fritz Leiber's Gray Mouser series; most of all, his perfect sentences, in a field in which nearly everybody worked in enormous haste to fill pages while they were planning new books at the same time, baffled writers as well as readers who knew that producing this kind of high music in prose wasn't done all that well with speed.

Vance himself never promoted his ambitions, if he had them, the way, let us say, Harlan Ellison did at the same time. Vance was capable of saying: "I did it for money" when asked why he wrote certain books.

Harlan Ellison on the other hand might have produced half or all his books purely for money; that wasn't his selling pitch as an author. Vance's attitude, in and out of books, suggested to all that he didn't care what anybody thought of his work, he wasn't aiming for the Nobel Prize; people could make of his art whatever they could.

For many reasons, not the least of which was that science-fiction was not supposed to be in the Establishment what it was; the intellectual pulpit of the time and arena of the epics of the age, Homeric books like *City of the Chasch, Servant of the Wankh, The Dirdir* and *The Pnume* were sold in drugstores and airports for several months, then disappeared without the world noticing that they had ever been commercially more viable.

Some of Vance's range has escaped me. I've never read any mystery novels by Vance because I couldn't find them. They were all apparently given a brief life, like the crocus or butterfly, by hardback or paperback publishers and then vanished forever. Moreover, given his talent, I will never know whether or not he wrote books that seem to me to be audacious when he could have been banal merely for money.

My guess is that Vance was lucky to have the niche he did. DAW Books were edited by Donald Wollheim, himself a fine writer and editor going back to the golden days of the 1940s. Wollheim didn't pay much but he was a hagiographic character in the science fiction world who had a great stable of writers because he was of their ilk and they felt comfortable with him. If one read quality science fiction in those days one had a large collection of DAW books.

DAW books made it by publishing large editions on cheap paper in volume with a shelf life of a few months in a market in which people seemed to buy books irrespective of their worth or lack of it, perhaps as wallpaper. Lem leaves out of his critique of this world that if editors were sometimes cruel to authors, Wollheim and a few others weren't; there were several honorable editors who were at once authors and advocates for high quality work in those days. Other authors like Robert Heinlein got cut to pieces by their editors; it was pretty random, and varied from editor to editor who was going to do what to whom.

My guess is that Vance was able to get brave, even for him, from the late 60s and early 70s partially because of the influence on American science fiction of the English New Worlds movement under Michael Moorcock. England, generally in the 60s, had that effect on America in rock and roll. Pop culture was first honored in Britain. It's not that Vance had any direct relation with that crew but that they, like the Beatles and Rolling Stones in England, had picked up American popular forms and elevated them to levels the American commercial world never has allowed to its literary stallions.

It became possible for writers much more in harness at the time, like Dick, Zelazny and Farmer, to get very intrepid as well as courageous. Vance's early work doesn't have the epic quality or darkness in its vision of his novels of that vintage period. In a freer time he took up other chances.

After 1980 the big cheap editions were no longer printed, the drugstores didn't offer the publishers shelf space, the public was apparently talking a simple inferential street-English and didn't have much taste for word-slingers like Vance. The 'California writers', derisively so-called by editors who thought Hollywood authors like Harlan Ellison as well as more arcane types like Rudolph Wurlitzer represented these wild ones, were told to go back into second gear in science fiction; don't do anything that hadn't been sold before and made money under a slightly different guise. One editor told me she wanted only upbeat science fiction. Nobody said that even in the

golden age. Much of John W. Campbell's stable as well as he himself wrote a lot of cosmic tragedy.

If one is in the middle of such a situation it can inspire rage. It is not pleasant for an external force, either in politics or art, to take away one's freedom. Since we have survived both the flowering of those days of liberty and license, and its demise in a lake of its excesses, we might also feel a gratitude, as Henry James says about Venice in *The Princess Casamassima*, that it ever existed at all.

As a result of this polyangular commercial variety Stanislaw Lem talks about in his essays on American science fiction, swashbuckling revenge novels such as the Demon Princes series, managed to astound Vance's audience who knew what he was and what he had done without even surfacing as a legend beyond science-fiction. He had an audacity in a way Philip K. Dick, and even Stanislaw Lem himself, did not have.

13

In any case only a few upthrusts of the pulp fiction scene ever had whole books in print during its heyday. Clark Ashton Smith was one of those. I reckon Vance must have read many of the twenty or so stories Smith published in the 20s and 30s including the masterful and aptly named: *The Abominations of Yondo*. Smith, any more than the Bible, never quite tells us what these abominations were. Half of fantasy literature occurs in what one doesn't say.

Smith might also have been known, at least in passing to Vance, as the author of the magnificently feral *The Hashish Eater*. Smith could be very funny but wasn't known as a satirist. Maybe that's why Vance didn't notice him much. Still it seems like a wonderful coincidence, if true, that two California writers who were a duo of the most baroque wordsmiths of their age had produced sword and sorcery tales they sold to the same conduits and yet were not aware of each other.

Smith lived until 1960; I would guess he had read much of Vance's early satirical material including *Big Planet*. Like Vance he wrote his later stories in science fiction mode rather than sticking to narratives of wizardry.

Smith was a much more narrow ranged artificer than Vance. He didn't have any social theories, metaphysics or large ideas about politics lurking in the background. In his science fiction Smith doesn't go beyond Mars to find his outlands. His realms are all theocracies run by either wizards or scientists. A Bohemian, much as his California peers George Sterling and Ambrose Bierce had been, Smith wasn't concerned with politics, at least in his writing.

Smith's fantasy stories had uncanny access to some notion of a thaumaturgic class system with a vertical line from that bottom bog of foul and tepid pools to what Auden called the autumnal sadness of men who have the character of minor gods but must die. The sense of the analogue between wizardry and making literature didn't pass by Smith as I'm sure it occurred to Vance.

Yet California is a strange place to be thinking about magic and theocracy. At least Southern writing, with its aristocratic bias, has the presumptive machine to produce tragedy; whether it did or not one may argue about, preferably after reading *Absalom, Absalom* or some comparable Faulkner novel.

Certainly Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind* is a novel about a mutable class system. California writers don't have those presumptive resources or lack of them. It is for better or worse an egalitarian world. Vance is for all his initial resemblance in picaresque comedy to the Southern aristocrat James Cabell, not much in his novels a champion of a leisure class. His characters are always working hard; one can't imagine them without their labors.

Though he seems to be a republican I don't think I ever read as single Vance novel or even a short story that was set in anything like a democracy. Often, as in *The Languages Of Pao*, they are haunted by a sort of monkish inclination to take up a purely cognitive life in a Byzantium of some vast refuge. Yet most of Vance's characters aren't all that different from the rich and poor in a country where even its super-rich seem at least publicly to be merely affluent engineers, managers, bankers.

The idea of doing nothing and enjoying it, or enjoying prodigality familiar to nobles and nature, may be good enough to die for in Naples; it is not often an admirable motivation in a Vance novel.

14

American writing tends to be either very physical, or to be metaphysical wit, not much in between; some even subtly ask uncomfortable questions about the dark niches in low physical reality. We may be living among physicists who tell us from evidence just out of view that we are residing in a ten dimensional universe that has collapsed a while ago from a twenty six dimensional but more unstable one, which is now fairly safe from such volatility, yet lamentably we can only perceive three of the ten dimensions and must infer the fourth cognitively. One might think there was a physical basis for metaphysical writing in that.

America writers in science fiction have been content to make such astral midnight journeys as physical as a walk around the block. Poe takes Pym to the South Pole; it is a real South Pole. Lovecraft takes a character, not a native Antarctican, into a world of perhaps pre-Devonian arthropods for lack of a better phrase; they are substantial beings like ourselves, not gods or vaporous spirits from other dimensions. Vance seems to have started in fantasy and moved to science fiction thus recapitulating a movement in Western literature in which the sense of the awesome and sublime at the vastness of the cosmos remains the same.

No matter what planet one happens to fix upon in Vance's tales, adorned as they all are, when habitable, with nearly as much folly, wickedness and excess as any other one, different only in the details of their lunacy, one escapes from one only to land on another, no less populated by common and eccentric varieties of selenic acts and thoughts. There are wise men in Vance's novels like *The Languages of Pao;* they tend to be hermetic characters. They are almost never the protagonists of the book.

In America though some have more money than others social relations are roughly equal since there are no easy master and servant classes and amusing or bellicose dialogues between the top and bottom. In America Sancho Panza has rid himself of Don Quixote; Figaro can be a ruler.

One much of the time in America would prefer Figaro to the alternatives. Figaro never expects to be the count; even a private world of counts without Figaros might be hard for an honest nobility. Some of this comedy of excess and imbalance among covert equals in vanity is apparently very amusing to Vance. Stability of course isn't valued in such a world; volatility is a preferable mode of inviting each spirit to his place, as long as the local galactic spas for itinerants aren't notably populated with roguish characters who are overly coarse or truculent.

15

Our national literature, such as it is, tends to react radically against the pollyanna optimism of its redemptive cults, but science fiction writers somehow embrace it through a back door. Most of them, like Vance, are people without a Bourbon pedigree who have been honored, if at all, through their personal talents. Perhaps as a cosmic balance most American writers tend to be wildly pessimistic, nihilistic or utterly ironical. Vance's general tone of satire is oddly proper for a reflective intelligence in the middle of such a hopeful culture. Satire takes up pessimism from a civil distance.

Yet science fiction tales tend to have presumptively some degree of faith that, of all the species that probably exist through infinity, the human race of our planet will have some sort of vast imperial reign over much of the galaxies in our ken. There is absolutely no evidence of this destiny in our present lives. We do rule over the wolf, tiger, bear and other species; they are currently not much competition. What would we do if we had worthy antagonists? Thomas Disch wrote a novel in which the human race was wiped out by enormous redwoods with bark too hard to cut down. We don't have to face intelligent aliens to be dispatched. Luckily intelligence is one of the minor survival qualities on our planet.

If we have a hunger for galactic empire, when we are fortunate to stay out of the rain, we can find such fantasy in some science fiction stories, but not Vance's. In fact most empires in our experience on Earth are lucky to run a latrine well, or tolerably. One would have to postulate that the cosmos is filled with species inferior to ours to maintain that the future is waiting for our astral dominance as they have been avid for the rule of no other form of life.

Vance makes fun of this old Ptolemaic idea in passing many times. He has planets in which other species than humans have taken up an evolutionary direction oddly parallel to our own. Some are cultural eccentrics. My favorite is the planet of poisoners. Vance imagines a whole globe whose residents are dedicated to fashioning venoms that bring death in bizarre ways to the unwary. At present on Earth we have no such specialization. Yet the direction for it is there. Some of us are able to be more narrow in action than pandas who eat only bamboo.

One does wonder what was living on certain planets Vance writes about before humans came there. Plainly they had to be suicidal, stupid and perverse beyond the power of language.

16

In America novels' plots tend to describe long treks or voyages. It's a proper plot for a nation of emigrants. Some of them aren't as obvious as Vance's novels or the journeys in *Omoo* and *Typee*. *Huckleberry Finn* is a voyage novel down a large river. James and Hemingway present the voyage going across the Atlantic Ocean the other way.

Vance really doesn't share an interest of some in Europe or even Western jingoism; he dismisses it all as

parochial nonsense. The colorful assertions of Old World religions have produced many scoffers in literature; they have also, since the time of Gilgamesh, inspired narratives of travel. Intrepid exploration is a heroic theme present in plots, whether it is Americans going to Europe, or reading that quintessential American product: science-fiction. These qualities all lurk beneath the apparent pure fantasy of Jack Vance's work.

Scientists may be magicians; when they are capable they are usually without the ancient necromantic flair; what is science, as Aleister Crowley might say, but a kind of materialist magic? If one has traveled oneself, Vance's stellar worlds, bizarre cultures and people struggling to realize themselves under theocratic or oligarchical slavery and the gossamer of priestly illusions, are things he must have seen in many ports as a Merchant Marine.

His politics, that free men can work and entertain an alertness that will lift such yokes from them, is ur-American. His deliciously idiosyncratic language of invented lords, his fanciful footnotes in pseudo-Academic style, are a sort of Cheshire emptiness lurking beneath the studded style, variants of Twain's satire and irony. He is not copying Twain; he is from the same culture.

We can recognize in Vance's great *Tschai* series the saga of Cortez or Pizarro, or its analogue in most books of Joseph Conrad, an author Vance has perhaps looked at among many books of literary seafarers. Vance's comical magicians that inhabit his *Dying Earth* series are clearly close relatives of the equally comical citizens of technology of this century. A wizard with garbled spells calling down the wrong demons is as baffled by his own actions as a realtor trying to fix an errant desk lamp in his office.

17

I suspect that most 60s writers thought that anybody who wrote as Vance did must be some kind of wild flake. In America we tend to confuse our sense of authors, gathering from what they write that they get up from their desk and live more or less as people do in their fictions. It's a good way to pitch one's books; it usually isn't true. Oscar Wilde, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, who pioneered this sell of authors as celebrities and adventurers almost certainly spent most their life alone in a room filling blank pieces of paper with words. They lived like monks, not rabid explorers of the Hottentot outlands or consorting in hellholes with feverish sensual degenerates.

One can't write a novel without staying sober. I don't know whether Vance has practiced magic like Aleister Crowley; I doubt whether he has visited other planets. Of all people other authors shouldn't have expected anything from Vance but, like themselves, spending a good deal of time like one of Yeats' Byzantine artisans fashioning works of lapidary beauty in a quiet place.

Art is making something from nothing, or design from chaos. It is a cousin of necromancy. Magic from first to last is Vance's central occupation in many novels, hardly for frivolous reasons. Vance sees magic as a search for ultimate power; all his magicians, no matter how broad the farces they act in, are Fausts. Wizardry becomes a kind of comedy in stories that Goethe and various European bards treated as awesome and earnest near-theology.

Science fiction may have appeared to Vance as a way of grounding his studies of human power in a language more persuasively material and realistic than the argot of necromancy. Vance is a moralist who tirelessly shows that power leads to terror, perversion, decadence and ultimate confusion. His magicians are vain, flamboyant, unable to love and trust anybody. They have servants, familiars, daemons and slaves; they tire of all things, are pathetic and alone.

Vance seems in these novels to see all organized human politics as a kind of large ineffectual magic that distorts the basic and natural healthy tendency of people to love, amiability and morals. A republican who speaks for risk, bravery, individual action and resource. The rulers of his decadent empires are sometimes hacks, rarely masters of power touched with a brainless genius for rule. His magicians tend to be corrupted by their own power to embrace vanity, hopes and tastes from which lesser resources would have protected them.

As one enters Vance's later worlds an inner sense of triviality of all pursuits seems to enter into these feints of science or magic with a more broad humor. The earlier work has more awe and sadness. The interest of men in magic, in and out of Art, is a tale.

Gilgamesh records a hunt for magic in which the gods are superhuman mortals rendered immortal; yet mortals do well to understand their genius in human growth and the possible. The Bible, among other memories, records the magic of the Egyptian wizards. Nowadays science, philosophy and modern materialism are still rooted in the philosophy of the power garnered by magicians. Perhaps it is a strength one can take up when all else fails personally. Moses, Elijah, Jesus and Abolafia were known magicians. Chasids were mostly miracle workers as well as moralists; the connection between magicians and doctors is rather obvious. Vance seems to find institutional reli-

gions where magic is banal as well as ineffectual, bizarre, particularly odious and treacherous.

His late trilogy on Aquitane is not only most like Cabell in subject; it marks a stellar point that is one of Vance's central qualities: a conscious eclecticism that has some of the advantages of neo-classic writing. It isn't that Vance is not wildly original. Nobody could mistake a few sentences of his prose for anybody else's work. At the same time the style constantly calls attention to models, archetypes, the retelling of classical themes. We do not know the details of the plots in Vance but we can guess how they will come out.

For all of the superficial connections between Cabell and Vance, the heart of Vance is very different than the whimsical and cynical Cabell. Cabell is principally a critique of human politics by way of making men, of power and politics, wizards whose illusions have strange and capricious consequences.

Vance is no aristocrat, he is a hardheaded moralist. His books, and there are enormous amounts of pages to his credit, are very inventive, yet they revolve around moral themes that are simple. The tack of putting a world in the far future, on another planet or in a forgotten past gives a distance to his materials that allows the reader to pretend he is not processing materials at the nut of his own age and its present.

For this reason, the politics of Vance, and other genre writers, tends to be more free than in the novel attending in a direct way to such issues. They have access to the Unconscious, where all things may be examined away from the fetters of the conventions of political inquiry.

Vance reminds me most of all in his concerns of Mark Twain. Both have a fear and scorn for priests, for the airs and caprices of nobles, for humbuggery and pious malice. Both preach all the time while seeming merely to entertain. Both are comedians and have been resourceful enough in their own situation in life to find ways to make their most unpopular opinions known without seemingly to have offended anyone. Twain's book on Christian Science and Mary Baker Eddy is squarely in the Vance geography of themes. So is the picaresque Huckleberry Finn.

Vance is one of the great masters of English prose; yet his characters speak in an ironic fustian peculiar to the author. Vance seems to regard speech as a crude and inherently comedic human action. Inventor of words, footnotes of ideas and facts that do not exist, Vance implies a world or two that is not describable in mere prose. As varicolored as his fictions are, they are stumbling in the dark ultimately.

Nearing 70 Vance took up a great trilogy of *Lyonesse* that seems to look both backward to James Branch Cabell and forward to themes explored by Tanith Lee. *Lyonesse* resembles Cabell in its rambling journeys, mordant but gentle humor about sex and ambition, its fallible wizards. Cabell wrote an Aquitane series which was of this ilk and seemingly the model for *Lyonesse*.

Vance is much more swashbuckling than Cabell. His duels, hangings, tortures, cannibalistic ogres and saturnine political concoctions bring the reader much closer to the violence of the world than the milder aristocratic Cabell. *Lyonesse* takes up sexuality in a style unprecedented in Vance, and reminiscent of another magician of prose: Tanith Lee. The women in *Lyonesse* face dark dooms, rape and the sexual crudity of men in a graphic way unknown to such fantastical tomes until Tanith Lee.

Even the casual bi-sexuality of the villains in Aquitaine suggests not Vance's usual dismissal of such personal tastes but the feral carnality of Lee. None of these characters are notable for family values. Vance does not cede to his villains such power and triumph though his hero is the equal of any antagonist. He is forced to take up kingship by outward events, while having a character and inward life beyond any of the violent acts he must assay in his barbaric world.

Vance has always been a genial and amused critic in the style of Anatole France on institutional religion, and in *Lyonesse* vents his ire against the excesses and follies of priestly cults.

18

In his time Vance has never had serious attention such as Asimov; his books are dismissed by churls as fantastical entertainment. They are indeed both fantastical and entertaining; they do not lack strong political opinions or metaphysical speculations either. The writer of fantasy never worries that his themes will date. His talent is committed to timeless matters that do not flit in and out of morning journals.

Yet Wells in his *The Time Machine, First Men On The Moon, Island Of Dr. Moreau* and many other fantasies was writing political satire. Both socialists and conservatives have had much to say in fantasy; rupturing their imagined worlds from the present they have had a chance to say it well. One can get a classical political education from Vance and Robert E. Howard, even be challenged politically by masters of perversion like John Norman. Fantasy without metaphysical speculation is unthinkable; perhaps the

great religious thinkers of our age are makers of such apparent fluff.

History offers us many such spirits, in their time viewed as flakes, loons or avatars of scurvy treason. Notions of magic among Hebrews is ubiquitous if not always profound. Hebrew words like *kadosh* and *baruch* are descriptions of things or life charged with divine energy. The Arab world as well is amply populated by wizards. The Druids were necromancers. Teutonic lore is filled with warlocks and witches. Tibet is nothing other than a culture built on magic.

Interest in magic is not a marginal or frivolous pursuit but a central concern, either as reality or metaphor. Modern magicians like Eliphas Levi, Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa, Newton, Yeats, Crowley and contemporary thaumaturges have a wondrous past tradition. Which will offer us truth couched in lies? We don't know really; in eternity the evidence is never in.

The interest in magic of the *Weird Tales* crew and Cabell, had powerful literary antecedents in Ariosto, Spenser, Goethe and the oral lore of England and Germany. It escaped the local bishops in their sweet-scented heavens and sometimes even more unpleasant hells. It spoke of a pagan world in which judgment was immediate, character brought on fate imminently, power invoked the glum austerities and loneliness most dramatically explored by Clark Ashton Smith. Unlike Smith's dour magicians, Vance's less saturnine necromancers don't seem prone or even partial to the languorous and nacral perversities of Smith's awesome Poesque magicians.

Yet Vance's action is usually about some industrious hero, not overly stylish, taking freedom, not by writing a constitution, but by franchising himself in nature by direct and sometimes necessarily violent and nasty action.

Of course one sees generally very little democracy or, for that matter, less rich diversity of character in either fantasy of science-fiction. There is hardly much erotic passion in these realms either. Neither George Washington nor Hugh Hefner have reached these fictional stellar fiefdoms with their message.

Vance, for all his awesome effects, never produces any tragic and formidable women such as Arisoto's Armida. There are no queens, Turandots, Shes, ultimate Astartes or Kalis who figure in Vance. He writes of a male world. No Vance character thirsts like Faust for Gretchen or Helen. The center of Vance's realms is not passion but action, how men will react to its reverberations if some evils offer them some distressing problem.

19

The central criticism of fantasy, to the degree that anyone has bothered to legitimize it as trash by noticing its existence, is that the form is frivolous. Yet seemingly superficial entertainment has a way — as Freud, and Moe, Curly and Larry noted — of becoming covertly the most profound statements of a culture once the future has a chance to examine the relics of the past. The fantasy world has an intimate connection with the conservative reality of Mencken, Dreiser, Nathan, Hemingway and even Theodore Roosevelt. Very few fantasy writers are Bolsheviks.

These bards are suspicious of institutional life, large empires, and governments; in Hemingway's words any place larger than a small village is liable to acquire the grotesque forms of most civilizations. Readers of fantasy seek out savage areas where they can escape such diseases with the impunity of voyeurs. The popular oriental fantasy of brigands and wizards whose follies amused the literate rabble was popularized by Byron — lord of poetic genius and champion of the murky borderlands of humanism not in Araby but Albania. Sometimes Albania is good enough.

Byron was the first to make legitimate and popular the role of the lonely eccentric who attempts to make his life as glamorous and profound as his Art. Such a luminary has a scorn and hatred for all. He has dared to spend a night in fabled unholy cities and lived. It isn't too far from them, to worlds in the stars.

Vance wrote lots of science-fiction; yet besides a goodly set of futuristic guns and spaceships Vance has little interest in technology. He is the anthropologist of an imaginary future. His endless joke is that people function with irony within a set of manners and cultures that do not articulate their interests and purposes directly. It is part of the genius of genre fiction that it takes up the most important themes of the culture while the audience pretends it is merely diverting them from their real difficulties.

Vance's heroes are alone but rarely lonely; they are too busy. They live in a world of violence that keeps them alert enough to act to perpetuate their lives; in that realm they do not gratuitously seek mayhem but they cannot avoid it either, no matter where they set themselves in the spectre of Creation.

They do not exalt violence; they also never think they will live remote from it or give up their own skills for murder. The leaders of any state are experts at piety that conceals manipulative skill of enslaving people. They are no less violent than champions battling on some alien planet to the death.

20

Love is rarely a Vance theme; when it occurs it is always mocked, called trivial. Work and integrity is at the core of Vance's sense of ontology. Governments are at the caprice of magicians or some priesthood they educated people to do their whims freely. Vance evidently believes that the political institutions of the West are a sport and will not survive our time; yet when he takes up preferable modes of rule he always stands for small republics.

One suspects he has an outlander's cynicism about all rulers and governments. Central to Vance's vision is the fear and awe of how human minds can be trained to embrace lethal illusions and to give up one's own capacity for life and courage.

21

There's another rather intriguing way in which some future scholar of Vance's invention might look upon Vance's fiction. As the world was struggling to escape from colonialism, though the leaders of such liberation were in the West busily trying to invent new forms of empire from fascism to Communism to hold their empires together, many of the readers on our planet looked to the United States and their literature for hints on how to guide their own private life and communities into some sort of loose and free society.

When one traveled in the outlands of the Western imperium one never heard, as one did among atheistic hierophants within them, of the virtues of Henry James or T.S. Eliot. Yet how was one was going to lead a life of reflective exquisite consciousness, such as philosophy itself recommends, and also bring to one's hearth all the libertarian delights the American revolution had achieved for its billionaires and more frugal faithful?

The Hottentots world read books by Jack London, Twain, and Whitman with an eye to how they might themselves take up lives of relative liberty. It wasn't much of a step to turn from such intrepid earthly explorers to reading science fiction or fantasy as rites or manuals of the practice of freedom.

If they were reading science fiction in the 30s, 40s and 50s they would have been not happy with the quasi-military future of most science fiction tales of that era. They were all about expeditions under military command or encampments of soldiers who were not far from operating in a war zone.

22

Editors used to say that only bards familiar with the conventions could write science fiction given the narrow and repetitive themes, characters and plots of pulp fiction. They were half right. Probably their justification for this self-fulfilling policy was that, so they claimed, only nerdy adolescents read science fiction; these were not able to handle anything in their acned puerility more than these simple tales.

Some adults must have been reading science fiction. A few of them investigated John W. Campbell's people for writing about the atom bomb in the early 40s.

In fact, if one remembers one's adolescence at all, tales of the involute passions and fervor of adult life might have given them a better market had they placed a bunch of nihilistic and violent Dostoyevskian loons on Mars.

Vance never went along with many of these hack axioms. He was often funny; most science fiction and fantasy is very earnest. His characters are mostly fey flakes or durable drones. If there were few rounded characters in most pulp fiction stories, the military theatre in which they and many of their readers operated made their personalities, if they had any, eccentric burdens.

The tales were nevertheless often interesting beyond their sermons about science because they contained large and seemingly exaggerated visions of the power and comforts of technology.

One read them feeling that perhaps, the day after tomorrow, one might be empowered with such weaponry and bizarre machines, to become a galactic epicure.

Somehow bards like Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, among Campbell's disciples, managed to create recognizable characters in the midst of all this machinery. Very few science fiction authors were able to do it.

Then, around the early 60s, authors that had already made their reputation in this iron-cast genre, like Dick, Zelazny and Farmer, produced intrepid stories in imaginary worlds with real characters; afterwards new writers, like Norman Spinrad, Harlan Ellison and even John Gor, turned out work that exploded the military envelope of the genre.

Michael Moorcock and his New Worlds cabal, including Jim Ballard, took science fiction into the 60s with a fearless pessimism not seen often in American commerce. It was all part of a pop Art renaissance. If the nobles and the army hadn't failed its readers, science fiction would have gone in another direction.

23

What was Jack Vance doing during the military phase of science fiction going back to Stanley G. Weinbaum and the eccentric flaky 60s or, for that matter, in the later indigo worlds of Samuel Delany, Orson Scott Card and William Gibson later? It seems to be true, at least superficially, that he was selling his very singular books pretty much oblivious to any of this history. Occasionally Vance wrote an old time military space story; even Space Opera has something of that tone though as a parody it mocks authority and action by men in groups. World War Two models of command and soldiers clearly weren't his métier.

As one moves from early to late Vance, one sees a deepening of reflective ability, an expansion of wisdom about the real, as well as the imaginary world with, occasionally in the 70s, some passing exegeses on recondite carnal amusements he would not have put into his youthful fictions. As elegant and beautiful as the style is, the stories, like all science fiction at all times, even Farmer's erotica, do not make any case at all for the virtues of amorous entertainment.

Vance seems to have been an author who surveyed a personal geography where he could operate and thrive, and then spent a lifetime doing so, irrespective of fashion. For that reason Vance has escaped the adulation of the *au courant*, though I've never heard anybody trash him as less than a great master. I would guess that editors and publishers saw him a little differently. Vance had invented a product; enough people wanted his genius to make him profitable.

24

Vance doesn't live in a world that believes much in magic but one which is embroiled in a passionate affair with science. Writing about magic, when he does so, gives Vance a fulcrum of irony to write about personal power in a way that might be more blurry were he to write a realistic novel about people involved in air conditioning, taking prozac and viagra for their passing metaphysical and erotic woes, flying to strange citadels while savoring pictures of Martian landscapes on television, repairing to grey and dour therapists of some new cult of alchemical redemption in fifty intense infantilizing minutes, practicing necromancy by watching movies and listening to recordings of the dead, prolonging their life, if not always their virtue or character, by viewing leisure alone as a central boon, doing nothing as a kind of banal rapture.

It's no wonder that Cabell, Smith and Vance carried the language of wizards into a time when we are all Doktor Faustus with some of the puerile concerns of Goethe's explorer of earthy life and beauty as an icon of the divine—before he more sensibly took up his dutiful gritty canal work.

Certainly comic collections of related tales and picturesque explorations like *The Dying Earth* and *Big Planet* have that satiric intent. As amusing as Vance can be his talent rarely moves far from the comedic, no matter how dark the materials are, either in his 60s *Planet of Adventure* and *Demon Princes* teratology. *The Languages of Pao*, or tales like the *Moon Moth* vary the focus on the diverse skews of culture. The *Demon Princes* series is an elaborate mega-novel about an efficient engineer killing five formidable aristocrats whose causal venomousness leads to their lamentable end. Needless to say voyages through the stars are implicitly or even explicitly metaphysical. Though darker than most of his novels this multiple revenge tale is in passing quite funny. Even Vance's most swashbuckling plots are filled with comedy; the irony is never absent for a sentence. This humor distances us from the action until it almost becomes a static sanguine ritual.

25

As far as I know Vance has never written or tried to write a tragedy. Olaf Stapledon, Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke wrote several tragedies. Of course there are tragedies and there are tragedies. Aeschylus can't help breaking out into witty comedy in his tragedies. Perhaps his tragedy was that he didn't write a comedy. Euripides sees complexities that intrigue him but makes several of his tragedies more comic than anything else.

The essence of tragedy is pity and terror at the plight and character of the hero. Vance offers such emotions about his villains, but at a great distance. Even his more Gothic villains turn out to be comic at some level, characters whose vanity makes them not worthy of a serious formal funeral.

Sometimes Vance will comment on a gourmet offered a plate of lentils instead of some delicious repast; it's this clownish sort of American humor, *à la* Twain if more seemingly erudite, which precludes any feeling in Vance that there exists on this planet, or other orbs, anybody at all who can't be brought down to subsidence level, beggary and gutter humiliation instantly enough.

Vance doesn't have any of these ancient notions in his books. Perversity to him is usually the venom of an

eternal folly, usually spawned by a culture that skews the brain in some conventionally mischievous way. He doesn't think human beings don't have freedom.

He asserts the opposite: if humans are focused, industrious, willing to endure many privations, they can achieve almost anything, including sanity and reason.

There certainly is a vertically ascendant discipline of wisdom and consciousness in *The Languages Of Pao;* it is achieved by disciplines that involve, among other things, the ability to endure pain, to entertain a cosmic patience and measure.

Yet Vance's characters, except for a few wizards, are not overly bothered by ill luck from a plethora of baleful demons; they don't even notice armies of spirits or gods if they are in the vicinity. Their contracts with entities are private. Vance's republican world, a physical machine in spite of all the magic and occasional Gothic apparatus in some of his novels, is one in which human beings, not gods, are the main actors and protagonists in the cosmos.

Vance's implied jokes about those sober, free human choices are too diverse to be enumerated, too central to his vision to be other than variations on a theme. Even his scholars adding footnotes to his works have chosen freely to make books about what Vance and the reader knows are in the end imaginary facts. We have such scholars here but they aren't kidding. Perhaps Vance is making fun of himself. Certainly most American novels are satires on themselves of some sort, since they are fiction. Even if we are not laughing at Hemingway's or Fitzgerald's novels they are about protagonists who are in some way at once mirrors of ourselves and fools.

One might argue that *The Ambassadors* or *The Beast In the Jungle* are tragedies because Lambert Strether and Marcher have chosen a life in the shadows; yet even such sober productions with not a laugh in them tend to be the tale of an earnest fool. Yet, if one remembers, Nietzsche felt that one could not, after Hellenic days, produce tragedy; the essential conditions for tragedy weren't present in subsequent heydays of cultures after the Greeks. One must agree: the resident ontological triviality of materialism makes tragedy difficult if not entirely impossible.

26

There's nothing of escape literature in fantasy and science fiction; suburban straight fiction is escape fact, not fiction. What sort of life for a hero, or one not ultimately trivial, is the porcine existence in most suburbs?

All the escapism in that all too real maze is a society of exiles taking refuge from a much more terrifying universe; an island of unliving robots, analytic data and the other instruments of faith in mineral materialism. To mimic beasts is vice enough; to mimic minerals is beyond even our capacity for normative crime against ourselves.

All great authors in mysteries, science-fiction and French Symbolism are explorers, like Perry and Sir Richard Burton, who were expanding the theatre of reality and human consciousness, stretching out into some of the ten dimensional and biracial complexities of the universe our physicists are now telling us were always there in the first place, which our ancient writers, in a slightly different language, from the Mayans to the Hellenes, with their three worlds, were telling us was the real universe we lived in if, like eyeless worms, we could only perceive a fragment of its totality.

27

Just as most fact turns out to be fiction if one is patient, some of the best fiction turns out to be fact if we are long lived and still know how to read. Vance's novels pay homage to old ideas of wizards and new ones of scientists with the power to do marvels in a vast universe of largely inexplicable but ordinary phenomena. In this science fiction mode men of resource aren't in league with gods; they are working in harmony with physical laws with a kind of cunning rather than killing cats to invoke demiurges.

I don't think there is one Vance novel in which one feels any awe or even much respect for a dominant magical spirit or an imperial adventurer with merely physical means of taking up large, if not quite metaphysical, ends.

Utter lack of homage to one's own triviality is often a folly for Vance. The gods are more comical at times than the men who conjure them. Vance finds them all pretentious and vain as most American republicans would.

Vance takes the explorations into the irrational and exotic cultural skew of Poe and Baudelaire further than they did. Yet such inquiries may lead to a kind of Phyrronian skepticism. Sometimes authors are born before the language or the concepts they want to offer the world are accessible to them or their readers. They cannot speak of what they know any more than Ezekiel could when he was describing angels.

In the end Vance honors what is known, which isn't much, and mocks those who claim they have access to the unknown, which for all we know isn't much either.

Satire often does this. As a result the world has to catch up to certain authors, the way occult augurs feel they have

a murky mirror of the future in the fogs of the verses of Nostradamus or in an enigma, on the surface ordinary and identifiable as a hydrogen atom.

In another way, since our perceived universe is more an invisible Leviathan in which we inhabit one rather uncomfortable niche in the starry riddle rather than another one, we certainly don't have anything like the sense of tragedy backed by interested entities of any gnostical cult of the past.

Vance's work is not any less inexplicable than anything else; that is part of its charm and absurd humor. Yet it has within its scientific diction, like all science fiction, an impersonality about it that would have been very foreign to the Old World, though it is very familiar and even natural to those who built America or who lived in the lonely and indifferent prairies.

Riddles without answers beget both annoyance and a covert awe. It means that Vance's palette is one of awe and sublimity as well as satire. It is another angle, of more sobriety, on actions which in another guise provoke giddy laughter.

We can be amused at the actions of a fool in a comedy; if more cosmic scope is given to the geography of his folly we can also experience a kind of large and puissant awe at both his own existence, and the even more vast miracle of the topography in which he engages, with all his pride and vanity, in his eerie antics. One may feel he and his aims are trivial but one doesn't dismiss the comic future around him with the same casual scorn. Only the worst universes are contemptible.

27

Vance doesn't suggest in any coarse mechanical way that there is any psychogenic or sociogenic connection between the aims, character, vision and tastes of any individuals with the putative evolution of a community or state; far from it.

The sometime bellicosity of the dissenters, in all ages and times, when they can be recluses and not cadavers, are checks on the communal madness of a loose society such as the current or past United States.

We are a country founded by revolutionaries who often stated they could not imagine anything more dishonorable to be part of than a national elevation of a culture like a great whale that had its own apparent vaporous reality. Yet I wouldn't say that Vance's career as a writer is an accident either.

Vance's heroes, when he admires them, have the organizational ability of businessmen if they are almost never looking for profit. They are careful planners, coldly statue in their assessment of institutions, not above ridding themselves of any quality or person that might distract them from their focus or their enterprises. I would guess Vance equates the mentality of such men with as much virtue as human beings can muster.

His protagonists tend to be people of general skill. They are all handy. They may not be great at doing many things, but they are competent generalists. Nothing seems to horrify or amuse Vance in humanity more than somebody who has become such a specialist that, like the panda who lamentably can only eat bamboo, they are either incapable of other actions to survive or, when alternative directions are physically possible, they are nevertheless ineluctable or unthinkable.

28

Much like masters of the rumba Vance's books preach a republican rough equality. In the United States that isn't a treasonous idea.

If all realities are possible in our faith system of random absolute nature, Vance as a novelist takes a different direction than Isaac Asimov whose thoughts are circa 1940. The table talk of John von Neumann and Game Theory currently rule our technology; Philip K. Dick, whose ventures into illusion and reality speak for another side of our scientific skepticism, pushes the notion in a third path. All suggest that if some of our most felicitous truths, cultures and sciences are imaginary, they aren't negligible either.

Some of Vance's republican politics can be savored by comparing him to the sort of cosmic empire presumptions of the hard science fiction of others who were his contemporaries. Vance assumes in his novels that there is no empire at all in Creation, but planets of isolated diverse folk that may or may not trade with resident loons on other orbs.

Transportation between these infinitely diverse spas of life is loose and apparently not taken up often. Vance's specialty is tracing the folly of some planet left to its autonomy like a maniac in a solitary cell, and taking up its excesses with a charming impunity. There is no center, no purpose, no direction to history in this view; it is explosive and flowers expansively but not to embrace some large and grand end.

One of the reasons for Vance's lack of general popularity in science fiction, much as he is admired, is that he

obviously does not subscribe to one of the tenets of the genre since Verne and H.G. Wells: that scientists, engineers and men of cognitive genius, armed with technology, can create with their practical applications of their audacious ideas the natural elite of an inevitable future.

Vance also doesn't affirm that applied power of any kind, technological or magical, can elevate one to felicities and comforts that are augustly redemptive at least to the degree of making one a minor manager or satrap, if not a necromancer and potentate. Vance's characters put up with all sorts of limitations in others, make the best of it like those trained in happy domestic life. They are often annoyed by trivia that would irritate any of us. Some are more enduring and resourceful than others. Few are enlightened. Beneath the wit Vance makes his readers as uncomfortable as Dick's more earnest books do.

29

It's interesting to look at Spinrad and Malzberg's appreciation of Vance in a time when one would think Vance would have been the apogee of critical caviar for brilliant men like these. Malzberg mentions Vance not once in his extraordinary critical work *Engines Of The Night*. Whatever virtues Vance has, they haven't been communicated to Malzberg as worthy of his reflection. Like the dog not barking in Sherlock Holmes' tale, that should tell us something about how elusive an appreciation of Jack Vance can be.

Spinrad, whose audacious mind is closer to Vance's intrepid thinking, mentions Vance only a few times in his incandescent essays. It's worth looking at the text to see where he places him. Here's what he says:

If the paintings of Chesley Bonestell are the visual cognates of the hard SF school of Clarke and Caiden and Benford, the graphic novels of Philippe Druillet are the visual cognates of the school of Leigh Brackett, Jack Vance, Ray Bradbury — the SF of the baroque.

Again:

'The Memory of Whiteness' presents a more positive and prosperous vision, economically and especially aesthetical, a richly complex and baroque version of solar man, more like the worlds of Jack Vance or the Second Starfaring Age of 'The Old Captains Tale' and 'Child of Fortune' than the decaying space city of Shirley or Gibson's corporate social Darwinism, perfectly epitomized by the baroque musical style at the thematic core of 'The Memory of Whiteness'.

Further:

Way back when the Soviet and American space programs were only gleams in SF's collective eye, in the days of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Leigh Brackett, Jack Vance, Ray Bradbury, C.L. Moore, & Co., the solar system was an Arabian Nights fantasy, replete with dying Martian civilizations, Venusian jungles, space pirates, EIder Races, open-ended sense of wonder, and the promise of the infinite possible in our own stellar backyard.

The pictures and data from real planetary probes banished all these baroque possibilities from our solar system in terms of science fictional plausibility and relegated the wonderful worlds just beyond our gravity well to the far stars, to a literary dreamworld not even our children were likely to reach.

Spinrad obviously associates Vance with the baroque. By this he means not early 18th century music; he does mean an open-ended visual Art with the design of the painting extending infinitely beyond the visible confines of the canvas. At its worst it implies the grandiose.

He sees Vance as a great stylist who has offered us the sublime in a Creation whose infinite reaches aren't fiction at all but the physical truth. In fact our current physics is much more baroque than any science fiction writer's vision of the cosmos, including Vance's.

Though Spinrad was writing his fiction books at the same time as Vance's apogee as a writer, he sees Vance as a kind of throwback to Lovecraft and Smith and even Edgar Rice Burroughs, a bearer of effects more comfortable in *Weird Tales* or *Under the Moons Of Mars*.

I don't want to suggest Spinrad's audacious critical abilities are less than first rate. I think Spinrad, and obviously Malzberg, have missed that Vance's characterizations, from the first and certainly during the artistic careers of both men, were very much set against the grandiose and baroque, were focused much more on heroes who were closer to the ordinary and merely competent, if they didn't have the personal angst of anyone in the pages of science fiction's New Wave of the time. Vance writes in a style that is more clear and pellucid than baroque, in spite of his footnotes and other buttresses that may remind one of Borges, than other writers of that time.

Some of his resonances with the tradition Spinrad refers to are only partially true. Vance was alive in the 60s and 70s when something jocose in style, like American comic books, might have concealed for Spinrad's time that, before the New Wave, Vance also had been very much in comedic rebellion against the quasi-military grandiosity in science fiction and fantasy that Spinrad finds implicitly Jurassic.

It's worth asking ourselves, as we savor the categories of Spinrad, about older science fiction and the implied

rejection of that tradition by Malzberg, what some of these underlying matters in genre fiction were all about.

Science fiction from its first emanations, like the early tales of H.G. Wells even when lousy, has always offered the reader some attempt at evoking the sublime and even metaphysical in a universe defined by modern science, from Francis Bacon on, as a centerless spatial infinity and eternity of probably Aristotelian, Spenglerian or Viconian seasons without beginning or end. Vance certainly offers that vision in nearly every tale or novel.

It's why Spinrad sees Vance as "baroque". You don't get any more baroque that our science's view of the physical universe. Spinrad means something else. He is probably thinking of vast sensational paintings with open-ended compositions by Rubens and the complex architecture of some religious edifices in Europe built in another day. The word defines Vance as one who is not at all a personal and psychological writer like the New Wave science fiction authors of the late 60s.

I could suggest again that this assessment of Vance is only partially true. Like Clark Ashton Smith Vance certainly has a baroque style. Like Smith he seems familiar with French antecedents in the use of ornate and gorgeous language like some of the prose of Flaubert. Of course Flaubert, Smith and Vance are all satirists. On a certain subterranean level all of Flaubert's writings, no matter how gory and dark, are comic like Vance's. Yet even in this baroque aspect Vance never revels in huge complex sentences seemingly fashioned to be performed like the much more baroque Carlyle.

Vance does set his novels in the vast physical universe with which we are familiar in our time as the much smaller cosmos seemed self-evident to people in the ancient past. Vance does amusing scholarly bits of exegesis to imply he has access to a galactic Alexandrian library of scribes poring over the crannies of an infinitely large history.

Yet Vance's comedy is centered on the triviality of his earnest characters and sober enterprises, even that library, in a way that is most reminiscent of Voltaire's *Micromegas*, *Zadig* or *Candide*. The humor comes from the large means, or lack of means, which his characters have garnered, to act out their will, and dramatize the inherent triviality of their purposes.

Sometimes his villains cannot remember the deeds of which they are being dispatched by a revenger. When they do they are astonished that they could be done away for the harvests of a deed to them no more significant than stepping accidentally on an unlucky insect.

There is almost no sex in Vance's fiction. When men and woman have intimacies at all they are mentioned in a single allusive sentence. One has the feeling that erotic actions out of view are ceremonial, as if the rite might be impressive in a sober way. His novels of manners imply relations that don't deserve more than a remote but civil diplomacy.

30

Vance's pitch as a pulp writer was really only that he did have the cosmic view, and could deliver the basic sell of science fiction: sublimity. Even there he did not offer any of the magical eroticism of people Spinrad probably thinks of as Vance's spiritual peers; Robert E. Howard and Clark Ashton Smith.

If Howard's heroes and regal heroines and Smith's wizards didn't perform the ultimate amorous abominations and carnal abandonment in front of one — perhaps out of a covert decorousness — they were on their way to doing it or had just left it, they were fully capable of the most outrageously libidinous acts, and more, and were doubtlessly, as the reader snoozed, cavorting in such antic and grave ceremonies just out of view. It was plain that the author was privy to these low liaisons, but declined to report them, or on his private habits, out of circumspection, fear of arrest or even a priggish retrospective repugnance.

31

Vance isn't conspicuous among pulp writers in his discretion about the carnal. Our literature is Manichean in its language though it intrigues us often with promises of the carnal. One never sees the sensations that have paraded through the pages and theaters of the modern world, since Tamberlaine and Faust, beyond a tavern scene or two; one assumes the transports of these protagonists are enough to give most of us either terminal weariness in a half hour or a full and deserved nervous breakdown. It is the tension between the said and the unsaid in Western languages that often defines the country of imagination in which the reader is king.

One feels none of these Gothic intents in Vance. He does have violent, feverish and libidinous characters but they are always fools, boring degenerates or villains. Since most of the readers of pulp fiction, like most of the readers who do not read pulp fiction or those who do not read at all, have been not entirely sexually sated, some of them even puerile or senile, Vance gives up, even before he

writes a sentence, half of the suggestive subjects editors of the day were looking for.

Sublimity and comedy rarely are easy partners; Vance offers that ungainly pair as if they are an inevitable duo.

32

Lin Carter, the great editor of Clark Ashton Smith and others, has been quoted as saying that the making of universes form one's brain in a kind of god-like play which is at once amusing and a powerful drug to the creative spirit. Yet sometimes, as with Asimov's robotics theories, we must acknowledge that science fiction has become not merely a chamber parody of divine amusement but practical prophecy.

We are probably less aware that Vance's historical principles in his novels have a real if different application to our world, as do Asimov's. After all, we are living on a planet of countries and faiths distinguished by their idiosyncratic follies and excesses as much as Vance's imaginary future.

Thucydides says about testimony from the past that all poets lie; he didn't comment on any of them who had predictions of the future though he was a contemporary of Aeschylus. If poets really do lie we should take them as ultimately trivial; we don't. If Vance and Asimov are lying about the future we should be able to dismiss their prophecies; we can't.

Carter's comment, that one makes up universes wholly, might be true for him or even for Stephen Hawking who speaks of degrees of chance, causality, chaos and predictability as a central determinant in whether or not universes have any design or not. Hawking's postulate of infinite universes is in alliance, true or not, with the general prodigality of the universe we know. He might be a prophet too. With Vance and Asimov we are dealing with much more practical stuff. Vance is a kind of Aristotelian or Viconian in his cyclical historical thinking.

Paul Rhoads has told me that Vance advocates "the middle way" in most things, a phrase which comes from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle's point is that the middle avoids the excesses of the bottom or top. In a different form Vance's worlds and characters at their best occupy that middle with the bottom and top always prey to his laughter and scorn. Worlds, by their expansive follies, turn into other worlds; then are replaced at their ultimate level of folly by subsequent amalgams of the same sort.

In an infinite universe there is room for any direction and excess or virtue we can think of and a truckload more that are utterly unimaginable to us. If Asimov's scenario dialectics are now part of our ordinary thinking, possibly because they are inherently if discreetly progressive in their implications, Vance's seasonal historical principles are less attractive to our age because their conservative critique of universal folly makes most of us very uncomfortable.

It doesn't describe science-fiction much to say it is, as Lin Carter says, 'a universe made up wholly' or that it is our own universe with one or more things changed in it. Some science-fiction, like Voltaire's *Zadig*, all of Wells and Olaf Stapledon's science-fiction tales, and Vance's novels, have *quod erat demonstratum* sub-texts that are hardly as superficial as playing with the materials of Creation with the brainless enthusiasm of children making mud pies.

I've heard both Vance and Farmer compared to anthropologists exploring imaginary hinterlands, but almost every Vance tale has some intellectual point and moral sermon; they aren't merely intriguing initial ideas clearly extended and executed as pellucid aesthetic etudes.

Didactic literature stands apart from those who take delight in making up whole universes, like Mervyn Peake and Eddison. It's not that Vance hasn't got the large and fantastical imagination of these authors; it's that he has sermons that are much more overt than most science-fiction and fantasy writers.

I think it would be rather absurd for anyone to maintain now that comparably straight fiction of that day, about piteous spirits living in affluence in suburbia, were important and science fiction was shallow hack work for children. This thesis could not be maintained without invoking some laughter but, while this era was going on, that was the fashion in thought in which Vance worked.

33

As the 70s moved to the 80s the pop culture honored the market of science fiction adult readers by pointing to authors in it with a tragic sense like Asimov, Dick, Lem, and Clarke. Vance, a satirist with a point of view, more like Cervantes, did not get any play from the brass-gilt legitimization of Hollywood either.

Movies are mostly plots; for all his virtues Vance isn't a notably great plotter. It was how he told the story that made him great. Both Golden Age and New World science fiction was grandiose in a way Vance never was. How does one not write about the cosmos and take up something larger than human folly and vanity? Vance figured it out, did it, is a master at it; it also separated him in its very virtues from any pitch of fashion.

His work didn't seem translatable to movies. Films made from tales of these kinds of authors never fare well in a visual medium of detailed surfaces where style is limited and substance tends to have a refractory quality in a world in which one wants to get even moderately imaginative in the uses of the medium of surfaces. If one imagines a screenplay of any Vance novel or tale one immediately realizes that they don't have the severe story lines as their engine for turning the page.

I don't think Vance has ever had a movie made of his epics, both of them more remarkable than Frank Herbert's *Dune* and in the same vein much more amusing as well as more richly ingenious. The fecund Vance would have disposed of the ideas of *Dune* in one page.

His style often has a light brio sentence by sentence that is delectable; it isn't translatable to film. As a result Vance never got the lift out of marginality that Dick, Asimov and Lem received in their time. Reclame doesn't matter much; it did mean he couldn't command the lucre for his work that those who were elevated to the status of technological savant were. To give an idea of the limits of science fiction fame, if one has it at all, Philip K. Dick couldn't sell his straight novels though he had an audience of millions of readers for anything he wrote. He couldn't convince straight market power brokers of that talent, no matter what the evidence.

Moreover Vance always avoided the grandiose axioms of humanistic jingoism which is one of the selling points of these science fiction films. Even his heroes aren't heroes in the Herculean sense; they are patient, resourceful and enduring masters of thousands of degrees of alacrity. Although Vance's copy on his books sometimes describes them as swaggering and violent operatic enterprises they are often quite the opposite.

As Alfred Hitchcock said, translating a second rate novel with no style to a film is easy; since the sinews of a masterpiece are usually in the sentence by sentence execution of an initial idea; trying to make a movie from a great book usually offers half of the plot, and some posturing and pretension to be an analogue for the great writing. Obviously Vance is one of the least likely authors to be a source of films. It isn't how he plots but his word-by-word style that gives his talents their singular magic.

34

One might add that Vance as a literary celebrity is invisible. He never aimed for glamour and glitz, the position of mystic of Philip K. Dick or the niche of ultimate genius and savant of the times of Isaac Asimov, even the posh English colonial iconry of Arthur C. Clarke, all admirable authors with more of a flair for inventing themselves by innuendo as possibly even more interesting than their books.

A few publicists in science fiction tried to make him a subtle icon of the eccentric. I remember reading in the late 60s, *entre nous, senor, und sotto voce*, that Vance was a big Bix Beiderbecke fan, dabbled in Dixieland jazz playing himself, collected mountains of bric-a-brac. One imagined a sort of mix of William Randolph Hearst and Leonard Feather. One of the editors I know mentioned that he was a stutterer.

I don't know whether any of this is true; I am quoting the hype to suggest the vagueness of profile Vance had that, let us say Harlan Ellison, always confessing everything all the time as if his persona were a kind of eternally peeling onion, never had.

As a result the awareness of Vance at all, since he was not known as a lover or an assassin, only occurred in the few months his mostly paperback books or pulp magazine fiction stayed in print; then he, and it, disappeared. I have it on the word of Paul Rhoads that some of it reached print in "whitebread" form as editors cut out his idiosyncratic music. All in all none of these factors advance the cause of Vance as a literary master. Had he been a lord Vance would have cudgeled and caned these hacks until they honored both reason and heaven.

Then he was funny. Vance hasn't been singled out in his neglect because he is at bottom a satirist. Other great satirists like Sheckley, Pohl and Kornbluth with many more accessible social agendas have been passed by unrecognized as the masters they were and are.

35

Many critics have spent an enormous amount of prose trying to define science fiction; it's not an unimportant subject. Its masters are experienced by their audience as paying libations to the mute axioms of the world, as they themselves are sometimes honored as writers or philosophers. In evaluating Vance I'd like to make a few speculative assertions about science fiction myself. H. G. Wells said science fiction was a realistic novel in which only one element was entirely fabricated, even if that one factor absolutely defined and dominated the book. That's more or less the definition of all hard science fiction from Verne to the present.

This really describes most of science fiction, including

the books of Farmer, Zelazny, Moorcock, Asimov, Lem, Ellison and Dick. Very rarely is science fiction more than a premise executed competently and clearly with an audacity about some turn of technical ingenuity. One can name a few natural poets like Bradbury and Sturgeon who elude such paradigms but there are few of them.

Vance has all of these scientific virtues; he also has the exquisite musicality of a poet. He also has a huge vocabulary, some of it even invented, that adorns his plots in ways that are not extricable from the general presumptions and its execution. Rather ironically this master of high English has lived into a time when most people speak a much simpler English, aside from losing their taste for reading.

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It's commonly thought in our time that words can be translated into information or even into films. Some books that use words in very simple ways to describe simple phenomena or have no discernible style can offer one something like information. Sometimes one can have a musical style like Asimov's that seems transparent when it is not.

Jack Vance has a musician's ear for language that charges his words with resonances that are not explicable as information. He is a particular master at inventing words and names that have ineluctable primal effects. It's easy to read words, hard if they are used with Vance's dexterity and magic to comprehend them. Vance gives his language a kind of thaumaturgy which is best described by Hebrew words like *kadosh* and *baruch*. They have, as they spin by us in a narrative, not merely information and music but resonances we would find hard to explain. The more words have been described as "text", as we commonly do in computer terminology, the less Vance's skills and genius with them are liable to be understood as something other than a phenomenon which is or should be analyzable, as Aristotle says about reality, as a whole that is also its parts. If I were to confess what I think the power of words comes from I would be locked up.

The last half of Vance's career took place in a time when the definitions of words shifted, an age which blithely called this decline progress and liberation. If one read the wrong books in the first place, it was. Yet the change in the capacity of readers to bring their potential abilities to the table when reading hasn't helped Vance's reputation either.

It took the advent of the 21st century for Vance's readers to have anything like access to all his work in the text he wrote it. Before Paul Rhoads' edition Vance might have glimmered like some phases of the moon, mostly in darkness as his paperback books mostly went in and out of print after some quick airport and drugstore sales.

Some work wasn't collected at all; other pieces were done with less idiosyncratic flair because he was writing for money or only doing imitations of Ellery Queen novels as were Avram Davidson and others, when the brilliant duo who wrote them could no longer produce them.

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It's hard to say, as it is about Poe, Bierce, or almost any science fiction writer in Vance's later time, what is Art and what is commercial journeyman labor. We don't know what decisions he made even within his most important work to go in directions that he knew would not make editors blink, which choices gave them enough of what they wanted.

Vance isn't a writer like Henry James whose work aimed to be of a piece, and was, in the end, as James hoped. Vance has said he wrote for money. Henry James never said that about anything he did. Yet Vance, like Henry James, is much more a novelist of manners and an idiosyncratically expressed psychology than he is a teller of plot-driven tales. It's amazing that a set of libations of such exquisite felicities as Vance brings to the literary banquet table ever happened in the first place.

Nevertheless, as the pulp world goes, Vance has done better in the 21st century, thanks to Paul Rhoads and his legions, than Poe, Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith who never had a representative book of their work in their lifetime. Vance lucked out in his old age; if one waits long enough anything can happen.

Matthew Paris is a writer and Jack Vance fan living in New York City.

Letters to the Editor

I'm a Vance fan from the city of La Coruña, in the northwestern coast of Spain (so please forgive my not-exactly-Shakespearian English). I'm not a VIE volunteer; in fact I wasn't aware of the VIE until very recently. One day I was browsing through the past issues of *Cosmopolis* (very interesting discussions there) when I found the article "Is there life after VIE?" in issue #50 of *Cosmopolis* about the possibility of continuing the project.

The thought that R.A. Lafferty, another of my favor-

ite authors, could deserve a similar consciousness-raising effort instantly popped in my head. He is a brilliant writer now unfairly slipping into oblivion. In a way he is similar to Vance: too eccentric to be fully appreciated in mainstream science fiction, and ignored outside the genre as another hack SF writer.

The lack of response about the idea of continuing the VIE is somewhat understandable, however. You were brought together by your shared taste for Vance, but beyond that to find a common ground might prove difficult.

Daniel Díaz
La Coruña, Spain

I have recently discovered the VIE and I am stunned by the incredible labor that's gone into it and the achievement. It really is the 13th Labor of Hercules! I am trying to figure out a way to subscribe, but that's my business; that's not why I'm writing.

I am curious about whether there is ever going to be a bound, paper edition of *Cosmopolis*? If so, how do I acquire it?

Thanks very much for what you are doing.

Nathan Brand

The question of printing a bound volume of all COSMOPOLIS *issues is being discussed and aggressively pursued. The printer has indicated that an affordable edition is possible. But, it will not occur until Wave 2 printing is completed and shipped. It may not occur even then, as there are serious problems in locating reproducible files containing the images used in the early editions, and the amount of composition work required may make it practically impossible. The discussion and decision will be publicized in upcoming issues of* COSMOPOLIS.

End Note

David Reitsema, Editor, Cosmopolis

Thanks to proofreaders Steve Sherman, Rob Friefeld and Jim Pattison and to Joel Anderson for his composition work.

COSMOPOLIS SUBMISSIONS: when preparing articles for *Cosmopolis*, please refrain from fancy formatting. Send raw text. For *Cosmopolis* 56, please submit articles and letters-to-the-editor to David Reitsema: Editor@vanceintegral.com.

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